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# **“You Can’t Hustle All Your Life”: An Exploratory Investigation of the Exit Process Among Street-Level Prostituted Women**

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## **Abstract**

Between 1998 and 1999, 43 street-level prostituted women were interviewed regarding their developmental experiences, including prostitution entry, maintenance, and exit attempts. Three years later, 18 of the original 43 participants were located and interviewed. This exploratory follow-up investigation focused on the women’s life experiences between the two points of contact, with emphasis on sex-industry exit attempts. Five women had maintained their exit efforts and had not returned to prostitution, nine had returned to both prostitution and drug use, and one had returned to prostitution only. Three additional women had violated parole and been reincarcerated. Themes evident among those who were able to stay out of prostitution and refrain from substance use are compared to those whose exit attempts had not been successful. Suggestions for intervention and outreach are presented, as are directions for future work.

Prostitution activities and the contexts in which prostituted women work and survive are far from homogenous. Compared to other prostitution venues, such as escort services, street-level sex work is much more dangerous, with less monetary return (Maher, 1996; Miller, 1993). The past decade has witnessed an explosion of research documenting why and how women become involved in street-level prostitution. Drug abuse (Potterat, Rothenberg, Muth, Darrow, & Phillips-Plummer, 1998), childhood victimization (Dalla, 2003; Earls, 1990; McClanahan, McClelland, Abram, & Teplin, 1999), runaway behavior (Nandon, Koverola, & Schludermann, 1998; Seng, 1989; Simons & Whitbeck, 1991), and economic necessity (Hardman, 1997) are precursors to prostitution entry. Data have also been garnered exploring the social milieu surrounding the *game*<sup>1</sup> of street-level sex work. Although drug use as an addiction, rather than a recreational activity, often ensues after prostitution entry (Dalla, 2000; Graham & Wish, 1994), chemical dependence typically motivates continued involvement (Flowers, 1998; Inciardi, Lockwood, & Pottieger, 1993).

Leaving the sex industry is a process, not an event (Månsson & Hedin, 1999; Williamson & Folaron, 2003). Understanding reasons for entering and maintaining prostitution involvement, as well as the exit process, is necessary for critically evaluating intervention efforts aimed at this unique population (Månsson & Hedin, 1999). Yet, few studies have directly assessed women's exit attempts. The current investigation was intended to address this gap in the literature by examining developmental processes associated with the entry-exit-re-entry cycle; the study focused on identifying factors that promote and challenge efforts at leaving the game.

Three previous studies have examined sex-industry exit attempts; only one of the three focused exclusively on street-level prostituted women. Williamson and Folaron (2003) interviewed 21 women involved (or formerly involved) in street-level prostitution. They describe a five-stage process model, from prostitution entrance to exit, including enticement into the lifestyle, learning the lifestyle, living the lifestyle and trusting in the game, caught up in the lifestyle, and leaving—or taking stock and getting out. Taking stock and getting out is characterized by cognitive appraisal, emotional adjustment, and behavioral change. The authors write, "It is the sum total of daily hassles, acute traumas, and chronic conditions that precipitate a woman's decision to exit prostitution" (p. 283). Institutional pressure, largely

from law enforcement and child protective services, also influence exit decisions. However, lacking personal desire to quit, "... outside restrictive measures are only temporary" (p. 283). Williamson and Folaron (2003) note further that exiting is not necessarily permanent because reentrance will likely occur in the absence of support. Financial hardship is a primary factor in a woman's decision to reenter the game.

Two other studies offer additional insight. The commercial sex industry in Thailand has recently received considerable attention, largely due to a severe HIV epidemic attributed to prostitution (Schwartzlander, Stanecki, & Brown, 1999). In one such investigation, Manopaiboon and colleagues (2003) interviewed 42 Thai sex workers to determine factors facilitating or inhibiting their ability to leave the industry. Only 1 of the 42 had never quit sex work, 25 had quit and reentered at least once, and 16 quit and never returned. Factors influencing the women's decisions to remain in or leave sex work included the development of new relationships, fear of HIV/AIDS, and economics. Of the three reasons, economics was "... the main reason for initiating, remaining in, or returning to sex work" (Manopaiboon et al., 2003, p. 48). Given that few employment options (e.g., farmer, laborer) exist for women in northern Thailand, the participants' families often supported their daughters' prostitution involvement. "[Participants] did not feel that they would be stigmatized because of their former career as a sex worker... they had done the work out of economic necessity and their community accepted that" (p. 48). Importantly, the sex workers in this study were involved in prostitution venues other than street-level prostitution (e.g., karaoke bars, massage parlors), which may account for the visibly absent mention of either drug use or violent victimization.

Finally, in a Swedish investigation, Månsson and Hedin (1999) interviewed 23 women who were or had been involved in the sex industry. Although many were street-level prostituted women, participants involved in various types of sex work (e.g., escort services) were also included. Månsson and Hedin (1999) identified two types of "break-aways": those that happened quickly by women loosely associated with the sex industry and those that occurred gradually after years of exploitation. Based on the women's break-away experiences, participants were divided into three groups: (a) those who transitioned directly into a new role involving work or study, (b) those who entered structured treatment (e.g., detox), and (c) those who developed

a marginal existence with high risk for prostitution reentry.

Although valuable for beginning dialogue on a particularly vulnerable female population, several limitations are inherent in the prior studies that examined the prostitution exit process. First, two of the three studies (those in Thailand and Sweden) included participants involved in a variety of different types of prostitution. Only the work of Williamson and Folaron (2003) focused exclusively on street-level prostituted women. Street-level sex work is qualitatively different from other forms of prostitution. It is therefore reasonable to assume that different exit strategies exist between women involved in street-level versus other types of sex work.

A second limitation of the previously mentioned studies was that they utilized cross-sectional research methodologies and thus, developmental processes were difficult to examine. For instance, recall that Månsson and Hedin (1999) divided their 23 participants into three groups. Women in the third group (i.e., those who developed a marginal existence) appeared at greatest risk of prostitution reentry, thus requiring special services. However, lacking follow-up data, it would be premature to develop services for one group assumed to be at high risk for reentry, just as it would be premature to assume that the others (i.e., those who transitioned into work or structured treatment) were not at risk of returning to prostitution. Moreover, one might reasonably assume that the primary factors that trigger reentry by women who transition into roles involving work or study or who enter structured treatment would differ from those motivating reentry by women in the marginal existence group. Cross-sectional studies preclude analysis of change over time. Because exiting prostitution often involves numerous entry-exit-reentry cycles, follow-up studies are necessary to understand fully the exit process, including the experiences and events that propel women out of prostitution and back in following exit attempts.

Follow-up data on street-level prostituted women are difficult to obtain, largely because the population is elusive and transient. Maintaining contact with prostituted women across time presents enormous challenges that render quality long-term work very difficult. In the present study, I built on previous work with prostituted women to examine the exit-reentry process. Between 1998 and 1999, intensive interviews were conducted with 43 street-level prostituted women.

This previous research was intended to document developmental processes with particular attention on prostitution entry and continued involvement. Results of this work have been published highlighting intergenerational familial processes (Dalla, 2003), life in the game (Dalla, 2002), and violence associated with street-level prostitution (Dalla, Xia, & Kennedy, 2003). The current study was a follow-up investigation that further explored developmental experiences of street-level prostituted women, with emphases on exit strategies and successes. The goals of the investigation were to: (a) document the street-level entry-exit-reentry process, (b) identify factors which contribute to reentry following exit, and (c) identify factors which promote continued success among women able to remain free of the game for a significant amount of time.

## **Method**

### ***Participant Recruitment***

Eighteen women composed the follow-up sample (representing 42% of the original 43 participants). The 18 women were located between 2001 and 2002, approximately 3 years after the initial interviews of 1998 and 1999. They were located using a variety of strategies similar to those used for participant recruitment during the first wave of data collection. First, the director of the Hope Center,<sup>2</sup> an intervention program designed to assist prostituted individuals, was contacted. She in turn contacted several of the original participants who had maintained communication with the Center; nine individuals interested in participating in the follow-up interview then contacted me. Second, I returned to the maximum-security women's prison where 14 individuals had been interviewed initially (1998 to 1999). Three of the original 14 had been released from prison since they were initially interviewed and then reincarcerated. All 3 agreed to participate. The parole officers of 7 other women were also contacted and 1 additional participant was found. The 5 remaining women were located through word-of-mouth.

At the time of the follow-up interviews, participants ranged in age from 33 to 59 years ( $M = 41$  years). Most were Black ( $n = 10$ ) or

non-Hispanic White ( $n = 5$ ). Many ( $n = 7$ ) were divorced and the majority ( $n = 17$ ) had children. Only 7 of the 49 children lived with their mothers. The average age at which the women had entered the sex industry was 20.7 (range = 11 to 31 years) and all but one reported current or prior chemical addiction. Substance dependence preceded prostitution entry for less than half (41%;  $n = 7$ ).

Statistical comparisons on key demographic variables were made between the 18 women who were located at both data collection points (1998–1999 and 2001–2002) and the 25 women who participated in the initial investigation but who could not be located for a follow-up interview. Chi-square tests were used to examine race, marital status, and use of drugs; Mann Whitney  $t$  tests allowed for comparisons on age, age of entry into prostitution, years involved in the sex industry, number of children, and years of education. Several significant differences emerged. First, the women who participated at both data collection points were significantly more likely to be single ( $\chi^2 = 3.6$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .06$ ) and African American ( $\chi^2 = 3.7$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .05$ ) compared to the others, who were more often married and Euro American. Additionally, those who could not be located for a follow-up interview were younger ( $M = 30.3$  years versus 37.6 years,  $SD = 6.4$ ;  $Z = -3.22$ ;  $p < .001$ ) with fewer years spent in the sex industry ( $M = 8.8$  years versus 15.2 years,  $SD = 7.1$ ;  $Z = -2.24$ ;  $p < .02$ ) compared to the 18 who were located twice. The groups were not significantly different on number of children, years of education, or drug use. **Table 1** provides complete demographic information for the 25 women who were interviewed only once (column one), and for the 18 women available at both the first interview (column two) and at follow-up (column three).

### **Data Collection**

I personally collected all data. The procedures and goals of the investigation were explained to each participant. Participants engaged in an in-depth, audio-recorded interview. The interviews were semi-structured to elicit information across a broad range of issues, including prostitution entry and continued involvement, drug use, relationships with significant others (children, partners, and family members), residence and employment patterns, community services and assistance, and future goals. Interviews were structured to emphasize those

**Table 1.** Demographic Comparisons: Original Sample Time 1 and Subsample Times 1 and 2

|  | <i>Time 1*</i><br>( <i>n</i> = 25) | <i>Time 1 (Subsample)</i><br>( <i>n</i> = 18) | <i>Time 2 (Subsample)</i><br>( <i>n</i> = 18) |
|--|------------------------------------|---|---|
| <b>Age</b>                               |                                    |   |   |
| Mean                                     | 30.3                               | 37.6  | 41  |
| Mode                                     | 21                                 | 34  | 36  |
| Range                                    | 19-42                              | 30-56   | 33-59   |
| <b>Race/ethnicity (<i>n</i>)</b>         |                                    |   |   |
| African American                         | 8                                  | 10  | 10  |
| Euro-American                            | 15                                 | 5   | 5   |
| Native American                          | 2                                  | 3   | 3   |
| <b>Marital status (<i>n</i>)</b>         |                                    |   |   |
| Never married                            | 16                                 | 6   | 5   |
| Married                                  | 5                                  | 5   | 2   |
| Divorced/separated                       | 3/1                                | 6/1   | 7/4   |
| <b>Residence (<i>n</i>)</b>              |                                    |   |   |
| Shelter                                  | 7                                  | 7   | 2   |
| Friends                                  | 2                                  | 1   | 0   |
| Prison/jail                              | 11                                 | 5   | 7   |
| Partner/husband                          | 2                                  | 4   | 3   |
| Alone/with children                      | 3                                  | 1   | 6   |
| <b>Education</b>                         |                                    |   |   |
| Mean                                     | 10 yrs.                            | 11.7 yrs.                                     | 11.7 yrs.                                     |
| Range                                    | 7th - 2 yr. coll.                  | 9th - 2 yr. coll.                             | 9th - 2 yrs. coll.                            |
| GED ( <i>n</i> )                         | 7                                  | 7   | 9   |
| <b>Mothers (<i>n</i>)</b>                |                                    |   |   |
| Total children                           | 56 <sup>a</sup>                    | 49  | 49 <sup>b</sup>                               |
| Mean                                     | 2.7                                | 2.8   | 2.8   |
| Range                                    | 1-5                                | 1-7   | 1-8   |
| <b>Child(ren)'s residence (<i>n</i>)</b> |                                    |   |   |
| Mother                                   | 6                                  | 3   | 7   |
| Father                                   | 7                                  | 12  | 11  |
| Grandparent/aunt                         | 5/8                                | 5/3   | 3/1   |
| Foster Care/adopted                      | 13/8                               | 11/3  | 1/8   |
| On own                                   | 6                                  | 10  | 13  |
| Other <sup>c</sup>                       | 3                                  | 2   | 5   |
| <b>Prostitution, age at entry</b>        |                                    |   |   |
| Mean                                     | 18.4                               | 20.7  | 20.7  |
| Mode                                     | 18                                 | 18  | 18  |
| Range                                    | 13-31                              | 11-31   | 11-31   |
| <b>Time in sex industry<sup>d</sup></b>  |                                    |   |   |
| Mean                                     | 8.8 yrs.                           | 14.8 yrs.                                     | 16.4 yrs.                                     |
| Range                                    | 6 mos. - 25 yrs.                   | 1 yr. - 44 yrs.                               | 2 yrs. - 47 yrs.                              |
| <b>Drugs<sup>e</sup> (<i>n</i>)</b>      |                                    |   |   |
| Drug abuse <sup>f</sup> ( <i>n</i> )     | 23                                 | 17  | 17  |
| Pre-prostitution                         | 8                                  | 7   | 7   |
| Concurrent                               | 5                                  | 3   | 3   |
| Post-prostitution                        | 10                                 | 7   | 7   |

\* These are the 25 women interviewed at Time 1 who could not be located at Time 2.

a. Does not include total number of pregnancies; several reported miscarriages and aborted fetuses.

b. Barb had another child (her eighth) and Talisha lost a child (i.e., murdered) between Times 1 and 2.

Thus, the total number of children remained the same despite the range change.

c. Includes individuals who are living in mental health facilities, incarcerated, or homeless.

d. Includes street-work, nightclub dancing, and other forms of prostitution (e.g., escort services).

e. Drugs of choice include crack cocaine, methamphetamines, alcohol, and heroin.

f. Substance addiction or abuse was determined by the women themselves and not based on clinical criteria.

content areas or themes that emerged as most significant during the initial interviews of 1998 and 1999. A series of open-ended questions within each of these content areas was created prior to data collection. I began each interview by asking participants to describe significant developments in their lives since the initial interview. Further questions were asked regarding what each participant deemed as "significant developments" in her life. As the interviews continued, I asked questions within each content area mentioned above. The list of predetermined questions remained in a folder, so as to keep the interviews as informal as possible throughout the process. As the interviews culminated, the list of questions was scanned to ensure that all content areas had been addressed adequately.

The amount of time spent discussing each content area and the ordering of questions varied depending on each participant's life situation and developmental experiences over the past several years. Interviews were conducted in private locations, such as participants' homes or rooms in shelters. Participants were compensated \$35 for their time, except for the prison inmates, who were restricted from receiving any form of compensation. After all data were collected, the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by trained, graduate-level research assistants (RAs).

### ***Data Analyses***

This investigation was intended to explore the exit process, with attention devoted to experiences and events that promote or inhibit exit success. To this end, the 18 participants were divided based on whether they had remained free of prostitution, drugs, and other criminal activity in the previous 3 years. Two groups emerged. Five women had successfully avoided prostitution, drug use, and other forms of illegality. The remaining 13 women had experienced significant setbacks in their exit attempts. Nine had returned to both prostitution and illicit drug use, one had returned to prostitution only, and three others had violated parole and been reincarcerated after brief returns to the outside world. Thus, at both points of contact, three women were located and interviewed while serving prison terms. All three described extensive involvement with the legal system for a variety of offenses, including prostitution, shoplifting, forgery, assault, and possession and distribution of controlled substances.

Data from the two groups were then analyzed separately using Thematic Analysis (Aronson, 1994; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). The process began with documentation of all patterns of experience (e.g., relationships with significant others). Patterns of experience described by the women, but not initially identified as primary areas of interest, such as religion and mental health, were also catalogued at this stage. The next step involved identifying information related to already classified patterns. This step is critical because individuals frequently elaborate on particular events or issues at multiple points throughout the course of an interview. For instance, nearly all of the participants described the influence of significant others in their lives. Relationships with significant others was identified as a theme and all patterns of experience related to important people in these women's lives were catalogued. Importantly, relationships with significant others were described differently between those whose exit attempts were successful and those whose attempts were not successful. Those whose exits had been successful spoke frequently about relationship renewal; those who had returned to prostitution or drug use emphasized relationship loss. In the next phase of data analyses, related patterns are combined and catalogued into subthemes, or patterns within the larger themes. Several subthemes were identified. For example, women whose exits had not been successful spoke frequently about relationship loss, including loss of both long-term and new or anticipated relationships. These patterns were classified as subthemes within the larger theme. A graduate-level RA and I coded all the data. When coding discrepancies arose, original transcripts were reexamined until coding agreement was reached.

## **Results**

Among the 18 women who completed a follow-up interview, only 5 had remained free of prostitution and drug use. Themes that emerged as prominent in influencing their exit successes are described below, with background information presented first to contextualize their life situations.

## THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

### ***Background***

When originally interviewed in 1998 or 1999, Amy<sup>3</sup>, Kiley, Marlee, Yolanda, and Rachel had not engaged in prostitution activities for an average of 3.1 years (range = 3 months to 8 years). At that point in time, the five indicated that they had entered the sex industry at an average age of 23 years (range = 18 to 31 years); they had been involved in prostitution for an average of 9 years (range = 1 year to 16 years). Four reported having been chemically addicted. Also, at the initial point of contact, Amy, Yolanda, and Kiley were living in shelters, Rachel was imprisoned, and Marlee lived with her husband in a home they owned. Four of the five (all but Marlee) had biological children, but none retained custody. In contrast, Marlee's stepdaughter lived in her home. Only Amy and Marlee were employed.

When interviewed in 2001 or 2002, four reported significant life changes. Amy had completed all state-mandated requirements, regained custody of her two sons, and they lived together in a transitional housing unit. Yolanda had graduated from a treatment program, lived alone in an apartment, and was employed full-time at a dye manufacturing plant. She attended school part-time and had regular contact with her two children. Kiley was employed full-time as a sales coordinator, had recently purchased her first home, had regained custody of her oldest child (her youngest two had been adopted), and was attending school part-time. Rachel was married to her long-time partner, living in an apartment, working full-time, and shared custody of her two children. Among the five women, Marlee's situation had changed the least between the first and second interviews. She was still married, living with her husband, and working full-time. However, her stepdaughter was no longer living in her home.

### ***Decisions to Exit***

The five women described significant events culminating in their decisions to exit the sex industry. Four of the five reported that "hitting bottom" motivated their commitments to the exit process. Yolanda and Kiley hit bottom when they were viciously attacked by clients; neither

thought she would survive. Yolanda sought immediate help through a 12-month residential drug and mental health treatment facility. Although the attack on Kiley did not propel immediate action, it did initiate the exit process. She recalled, "I just got tired. I started going to detox more frequently. Then, the last time [at detox], it just happened like that [snaps fingers]. I just reached out and asked if there was a bed in long-term care."

Amy described hitting bottom when she lost custody of her children due to her addiction to crack cocaine. However, she did not immediately enter treatment; her initial response to losing her children was denial and increased drug use. Still, within 6 months she was participating in an in-house treatment program. "CPS [Child Protective Services] made me," she stated. "They said 'you have to go to treatment to get your kids back.'" Rachel also described hitting bottom. She was sentenced to prison for 4 years on multiple drug and solicitation charges. "As much as I hate to say it," she remarked, "something good comes out of something bad. Prison did save my life. It really did. I was out there killin' myself." At the time of her imprisonment, Rachel had a \$500/day addiction to crack cocaine and had nearly overdosed on three separate occasions.

Unlike the others, Marlee exited largely due to the declining economic viability of street-level prostitution. For years, street-level sex work had been a lucrative endeavor for Marlee and her husband.<sup>4</sup> However, the widespread use of crack cocaine by prostituted women had significantly altered the street-level prostitution economy. Marlee explained:

The girls out there now are not like we used to be. They're out there for drugs. That's why the business is so bad. It's not even worth it. They're crack heads and will do anything for a little bit of money... they're not real ones [prostitutes].

In addition to economic changes, Marlee's stepdaughter moved into her home. The incident impacted many areas of her life. She noted:

I stopped doing a lot of things because of my stepdaughter being here with me. How can I tell a child "you need to go to school, get a good education, go to college, get a good job"

when she's looking at you saying "well you don't work—and we don't live bad," you know? We was showin' her there's another way to do this [make a living].

It is important to note that Amy, Kiley, and Rachel had all attempted to exit at earlier points in their lives. Moreover, it is impossible to say whether any of the five will return to prostitution or use drugs in the future. Nonetheless, they had successfully avoided the sex industry, substance use, and criminal activity for a significant amount of time.<sup>5</sup> Four main themes emerged as significant in their ability to exit.

### ***Formal Support Services***

Formal support services were critical during the initial exit stage. With the exception of Marlee, residential treatment and continued professional services provided necessary support at a crossroads in these women's lives. For instance, after being raped by two men, Yolanda went to great lengths to find residential treatment. Because services were not available in her community, she moved to a city 300 miles away to obtain residential care. She also received group and individual counseling through the Hope Center. She conveyed her belief that "Counseling is key. Counseling teaches you to think for yourself. Your counselor is not there to think for you—but to give you the tools to think for yourself."

Kiley and Amy also entered residential treatment. Kiley's treatment lasted 6 months and Amy's was twice as long. Kiley participated in AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) and NA (Narcotics Anonymous), and both women received individual and group counseling through the Hope Center. In addition, after Amy regained custody of her sons, the three attended family therapy. Like the others, Rachel also took advantage of formal services. While imprisoned, she enrolled in every class that was offered. The teacher of the substance abuse class "... was excellent—she made a big impact on my life... I'd like to thank her, you know?" After her release, Rachel entered a 4-month residential work-release program and excelled in her weekly AA and NA meetings: "It got to where I was talkin' more than anybody else at the meetings ... and they asked me to start chairin' the meetings!" Rachel also reported to a parole officer who played a valuable role in her successful exit. She explained, "He tells you what you need to hear, not what you want to

hear. He told me, 'I didn't ask to be brought into your life, you put me in your life.'" She continued, "He was kinda like a counselor. He was not only a parole officer but a friend. He made a difference in my life."

Formal services, including professional residential treatment, safe housing, and individual and group counseling were described as particularly important during the initial exit phase. Although Marlee did not receive formal services, she and the other four women were in agreement that individuals ultimately determined the outcome of their own exit attempts. Marlee concluded, "If you wanna be nothin' all your life, I guess that's what you're gonna be." In addition to formal support and personal choice, informal support from significant others who denounced life in the game was further mentioned as essential for long-term abeyance.

### ***Significant Relationships/Emotional Attachments***

The five women who exited prostitution received substantial support from informal network members. Given their varied life circumstances, sources of informal support differed markedly between them.

#### *Family and partners*

Rachel and Marlee noted that family members, including parents and siblings, had been vital to their exiting. Marlee explained, "It was easy for me to get off the streets because of my mother. I wasn't raised to be a hooker, I had a beautiful mom—she never smoked, drank, or anything. So I lost myself for awhile, but I'm back!" Aside from biological kin, Marlee and Rachel noted that their husbands were their most critical sources of emotional support. Both women had been involved in prostitution with their husbands. Marlee's husband had been her pimp; together they worked the streets for nearly a decade. Importantly, they exited the sex industry together. In a similar vein, Rachel's husband was a former client and was a heroin and crack addict. They met 5 years prior to her incarceration; crack use was a daily routine for both. However, during Rachel's imprisonment he stopped using drugs and wanted the same for Rachel. He gave her an ultimatum: him or the game. She chose him and commented, "He is my biggest support. He has strength that's unbelievable."

In contrast, Yolanda, Kiley, and Amy reported that they were physically and emotionally cut off (Klein & White, 1996) from their

extended families due to severe and sustained childhood abuse (see Dalla, 2003). "Family" for these three included their children and church groups only. Moreover, all three described apprehension about romantic, intimate relationships and general distrust of men. Kiley believed avoiding men was critical to escaping prostitution. She noted:

It is important to be in touch with yourself and be relationship free, from men especially. They [counselors] suggest going through recovery relationship free, and I firmly believe that. It takes a lot of energy to go through recovery... and men will manipulate you.

All three described years of experience with dysfunctional relationships. They admittedly lacked role models of strong partnerships and were uncertain about the likelihood of ever developing and maintaining healthy, intimate relationships with men.

### *Children*

Participants discussed their children frequently throughout the interviews. Amy and Rachel, in particular, reported that the desire to be a better parent was significant to their exiting success. Rachel explained that parenting and involvement in the game cannot coexist. She stated, "[Before], I had them physically, not mentally. I was not there, ya know? They'd sit out in the living room and I'd stick my arm in the bathroom door and get shot up with a needle." She continued,

I am trying to be the mother I was supposed to be all along. The main reason I have stayed straight is—I look at my kids. I know the kind of person I was before I started on crack, and I'm not bragging—but I was a hell of a woman. I lost my self-respect. When I lost my kids I lost my self-respect. I lost everything.

Since deciding to exit, the parent-child relationship had changed dramatically for Amy as well. At the time of our second interview, she and her children had been reunited and living together for nearly 3 years, but the transition was difficult. Amy commented:

I was afraid that everything I was doing was wrong, and if I got a little bit angry they [sons] would say “that’s old behavior”—that I was returning to my old behavior. Because when I was using, I got mad a *whole lot* [emphasis included]. So they were scared of my going back to “old behaviors.”

It took time and concerted effort, but eventually Amy was able to regain her children’s trust. She explained:

I went to all my meetings, and when I told them “I will be back in an hour” I was back in an hour. Because they didn’t trust me. I think they were afraid to come home because I never showed them any security. They had a lot of fears. We did a lot of therapy.

### *Old playmates*

In addition to describing efforts to maintain and strengthen relationships with certain network members (i.e., family, partners, children) these five women also described distancing themselves from others—namely, old playmates. For instance, when asked about former acquaintances, Amy remarked,

Every once in awhile I believe that God will have someone stop in the gas station [her place of employment] and I will be there and it is either to show me what it will be like if I go back out there [on the streets] or to show them what their future could be like if they would get God in their lives.

She then described a specific encounter with a former client by saying:

There is this one guy named Jerry. He came by [place of work] one day and asked me if I still worked [prostituted] part-time. I said, “No Jerry, I don’t think God would approve of that.” He said, “I didn’t think so.” And I haven’t heard from him since.

She continued, “I don’t see many [old playmates] but I am not afraid to face these people of the past.” Rachel, too, had sporadic contact with

former clients while working as a waitress. She explained:

There was this guy that kept comin' in there that was a trick of mine... . He would step on my feet "Hi baby" and make little remarks. I couldn't do it. I would actually ask the other waitresses to take his table.

Rachel noted further:

When I used to hunt for my [drug] dealers I couldn't find 'em for nothin'. But when I got out of prison the first two weeks I ran into every dealer in town ... I told 'em I was straight and to put the word out.

Marlee and Kiley described similar encounters. None initiated contact with old playmates and if chance encounters occurred, they described interacting but avoiding prolonged conversation. They indicated further, however, that they were not "afraid" of former acquaintances. Instead, they intimated that they were far enough removed from the game that its lure had diminished. Yolanda's situation was unique in that she moved to a new city after deciding to exit. She believed the move was critical to her exit success and remarked: "I had a fresh new start in a new town. And I set up boundaries."

### ***Economics and Employment***

The ability to legally earn a living wage is paramount to sustained withdrawal from the sex industry. If one cannot afford the basic necessities of life, illegal schemes and income-generating ventures abound—particularly for women with connections to the street subculture and its pervasive drug trade. That said, employment was discussed frequently throughout the interviews. Despite extended absences from the job market, all five secured legal employment. Participants' first jobs typically included entry-level work (e.g., factory, fast food) that evolved into higher-paying and status positions. For instance, when originally interviewed, Amy worked in the fast-food industry; when interviewed 3 years later, she managed a gas station. Despite no prior training, she proudly noted being hired for the position because she was persistent and a fast learner. Kiley, too, had experienced benefits

of work commitment. In 3 years she had earned enough money to buy her first home, whereas in the not-too-distant past she had been in debt by thousands of dollars. Similarly, Rachel frequently worked 14-hour days and proudly described her parole officer's reaction:

He started seein' my paycheck stubs where I'd have so many hours and he says, "Well how in the ... how come you're doin' that? Habba dabba." And I said, "Isn't that what you want?" "Yeah, but don't burn yourself out." And I said, "Just let me do what I gotta do."

Economic viability not only allowed for daily subsistence, but also appeared to promote self-confidence. For instance, Yolanda noted being "hired on the spot" after completing an application and taking a test. She was hired as a receptionist, "... but they couldn't keep me busy. So now I run their hydro-berg machine and several other machines." She continued, "Yeah, I'm developing skills. It feels good." Like Rachel, it was not unusual for her to work long days and earn overtime. Employment opportunities appeared particularly significant during the initial exit stage for Yolanda and Kiley, both of whom lacked extensive informal support. Kiley explained, "I was paying off my bills instead of getting high." Likewise, Yolanda replaced her addiction "by working." All four women appeared to thrive on their work-related responsibilities, skill development, and ability to demonstrate competence and reliability; their employment records were a source of pride.

In contrast, because prostitution had been lucrative for Marlee, the transition to legal employment was financially disappointing. She explained,

It was kinda difficult when I started back [legal work]. I used to look at a check and would be like, "Uh—I can't believe this is what won out [over prostitution]!" But now, I thank God for the little checks I get.

She explained the sheer practicality of legal employment:

Before, I just lived day by day, didn't think about the future. And here it is I'm just starting to work—and keep in mind just about ready to retire. You can't hustle all your life. What

are you gonna do when you get too old, you know? You can't draw Social Security. I don't have really anything in Social Security and I'm 40 years old! So I'm really mad at myself about that.

### ***The Church Community***

All five women described, at length and spontaneously, belief in a higher power and the importance of organized religion in their successful exits. All also described spiritual journeys that began slowly but gained steady momentum. Rachel, Amy, and Marlee reported childhood introductions to religion, but only as adults did belief in a higher power become central in their lives. Rachel noted,

The religious seed was planted a long time ago. My mom used to take me to church. Then, while I was hooking, I used to stand outside this church and just cry. I saw a guy one time going to the church, I said "Would you pray for me? I really don't want to do this, but I don't know how to get out of it. I'm not strong enough."

After her release from prison, she found God again and reported,

I'm not a Bible thumper—but I look at my kids, I look at my husband, I look at where I was and I've got God so much in my life right now. I couldn't do it without Him. I really couldn't.

Amy described a similar journey and attributed equal credit to God for her ability to exit prostitution. She was introduced to religion through a co-resident at a treatment facility; an interaction between them had a profound impact. She explained:

I was always talking about my kids and wondering if they were okay and blah, blah, blah and she told me "You need to give your kids to God because you can't take care of them. You never did take care of them." And it was sad, but it was true. I learned I had to focus on myself and my recovery. In order for me to be a whole person, I had to recover first.

When interviewed in 2001, Amy's entire support system was comprised of friends from church.

Similarly, after exiting the industry, Marlee described sporadic church involvement at her husband's urging, followed by steady attendance, and then regular participation in Bible study and prayer meetings. She explained,

I used to want a lot of money. Money does not make you happy. I remember one time I had \$6,000 in cash and all my bills were paid. I was sitting in the bathtub crying. I didn't understand then why I was crying, but there was a void in my life. It was God.

Kiley and Yolanda were equally invested in their church communities; both attended services regularly and participated in Bible study groups. Yolanda was also an active member of church choir and "praise team."

The most prominent and consistent theme to emerge during data analysis with these women centered around the church. As their time out of the sex industry continued, reliance on their church communities for inspiration and support increased and use of formal services slowly diminished.

### **Summary**

During the initial exit period, four of the five women took extensive advantage of a variety of professional services (e.g., residential treatment, AA/NA, counseling/therapy). Use of formal support was, generally speaking, intense during the initial year of the exit process. With time and increased confidence, reliance on informal support increased and use of formal services lessened. Importantly, these women had severed ties with old playmates; maintaining sobriety and freedom from the sex industry demanded this. Moreover, their informal networks consisted of people who would not tolerate life in the game. Loss, or threatened loss, of those significant relationships, whether with partners or children, was central to exit success. Additionally, they described developing new support systems and connections to conventional society as they increasingly immersed themselves in various church groups. All described being impacted by a higher power.

In addition, although employment was necessary, it also appeared to fill a void, particularly during the initial exit stage for those whose informal support systems were sparse. The work arena provided a context in which these women obtained new skills and received recognition for their abilities and commitment. They reported that their lives were dull, comparatively speaking; their time was spent at work, attending religious services, or at home alone or with family. Still, they were content—a feeling impossible to capture when immersed in the game. Rachel's statement, "I wouldn't change my life right now for a million dollars," applied to all five women.

#### THE ENTRY-EXIT-REENTRY CYCLE CONTINUES

##### ***Background***

As noted earlier, 13 women had attempted to exit the street-level sex industry, but experienced significant setbacks resulting in continued prostitution involvement, drug use, or imprisonment. Analysis of follow-up interview data with these women revealed developmental trajectories and experiences that differed substantially from the five women whose exits had been successful. Themes that emerged as most prominent in their return to prostitution, drug use, or prison are described below.

##### ***Significant Relationships and Emotional Attachments***

Eleven of the 13 women (8 who returned to both prostitution and drug use and 3 who had been reincarcerated after parole violations) described events precipitating their return to old behaviors. Relationship loss emerged as a key theme, and further analysis revealed two subthemes: loss of new or anticipated relationships and loss of long-term, enduring relationships.

##### ***Loss of new or anticipated relationships***

Unlike Kiley, who heeded the advice of her counselors to remain "relationship free" during treatment, four women began new relationships with male partners within the initial exit period. All four described reentry into prostitution and drug use as precipitated by the

cessation of those relationships. Sharia's situation is illustrative. She was involved in professional treatment and was nearing graduation when originally interviewed. However, she became involved with a fellow treatment participant, a minister, and dreamt of becoming a "preacher's wife." During the follow-up interview, she said,

I thought at the time [1999] that my life and everything was going great. I was clean. I felt good about myself. I felt good about my life. My kids felt good about me, my family, everybody. And I was in love.

However, within months of program discharge, her partner began using drugs again and then turned violent. Sharia sought refuge with her sister, an active drug addict. Several days later, she was using again, and prostitution soon ensued. Sharia stated, "There's a lot of things that you shouldn't do during recovery that I did do because I thought I could handle this. But anything small can get you back to relapse."

Similarly, during the initial exit stage Trina, Char, and Lettie began new relationships, all of which ended in feelings of disappointment and worthlessness. Char, for example, explained how she "... met a man" before completing treatment through the Hope Center. He was a user, "So I did what he did." When asked what could have prevented her from relapsing, she commented, "Some man who loved me," and then continued, "I thought he did but I must be crazy." At the time of our follow-up interview, Char was married to a physically abusive man who forced her to prostitute for drug money.

Like Marlee and Rachel, Lettie too was married to a man well aware of her prostitution and drug involvement. In distinct contrast from Marlee and Rachel, however, her partner was not a source of support and her marriage was failing. She explained:

We are still together, but not really [they were separated]. He has a lot of dysfunctions... . He brings me down. If there is a cliff and I am about to jump he will say, "No, go over there where you can jump higher. Jump where it is higher and then you'll hit those rocks."

She explained her relapse with the following:

I fell in love with this guy [not her husband]. I felt “Oh my God, he really likes me” and then for a single no show [he failed to show up] I took that to heart and thought I must be dirty—I must not be worthy of being loved.

Drugs created the perfect escape, and prostitution provided an environment where she was accepted, where she belonged. She stated: “I know certain places that I can go and get money because those people still like me. I know I can just go there and get money and all I have to do is lay on my back.” Lettie’s desire to fit in and belong was not unique. In subtle ways, Char, Sharia, and Trina described similar desires, and all invested hope in the development of new, intimate relationships as realizations of those desires. Relationship failure and subsequent feelings of rejection triggered their return to old behaviors.

#### *Loss of long-term relationships*

Seven others, including the 3 who violated parole, also described relationship loss. Contrary to the loss of new or anticipated relationships, however, these women spoke at length of the loss of long-term, enduring relationships with male partners, children, and other family members. Marti is a case in point. When originally interviewed, she was living with her ex-husband (and had been for 25 years, despite divorcing a decade earlier). He was her sole source of companionship and only friend. Months after the interview in 1998, he died, and Marti was forced to sell their home. The cumulative losses triggered an immediate urge to escape loneliness and severe depression. The result was drug relapse and a return to prostitution.

Four others also experienced the death of loved ones in the 3 years spanning the original and follow-up interviews. For Talisha, the death was particularly devastating; her 18-year-old son had been murdered. The trauma compounded when she turned to her husband for support and learned he was using crack cocaine. She explained,

Crises like this [son’s death] and it was really hard for me to deal with. I had a nervous breakdown and he [husband] wasn’t there to help me. He was out on the streets ... I’m trying to save him and I ended up using with him.

Money obtained from prostitution allowed Talisha to maintain a chemically induced oblivion.

All three women who violated parole and returned to prison had also experienced the deaths of significant others between the two data collection points. To illustrate, 2 weeks after being released from prison in 1999, Georgette's "mother" (i.e., her biological grandmother) had died. Like Marti, Georgette was forced to sell the only home she had ever known. She explained, "I've never really been out on my own ... I lost everything out of my life, everything that I grew up with had just been wiped out." Bryn and Jackie described similar experiences. Bryn's father had died not long after our initial interview. Further, her 19-year marriage had ended and her relationship with her three children was severely strained. "That [relationship with her children] hurts me more than anything. My kids are grown. They were 4 and 1 when I started doing time, and now they're 18, 14, and 11." Still, like Rachel, Bryn believed there were benefits to prison and explained,

The way men treat their women, degrade them, letting them know they are a piece of shit—he is getting it through your mind that you can't have anybody else because no one else wants you. A lot of men, including mine, do that to women. To come up here [prison] and do some time is good for women to actually learn what is going on. Out there, they go straight to the drugs.

Her comment clearly indicates that, despite 19 years with the same man, Bryn's marriage was not a strong source of inspiration or support. Likewise, Jackie's 13-year marriage ended several months after she was initially interviewed. Furthermore, her grandmother, the one person she felt close to, had died. She explained "... and I just didn't care about nothin' no more because I had just lost my grandma. My grandma was like my best friend, you know?"

Although death did not separate Bridget and Barb from their children, the parent-child bond was nonetheless threatened. When originally interviewed, both women were doing exceptionally well. They were living in structured settings, attending the Hope Center, and free of prostitution and drugs. Barb was pregnant with her seventh child (her other six were in foster care or with their fathers), attending prenatal classes for the first time, and determined to be a good

mother. Bridget believed she and her ex-husband would reunite and together raise their 4-month-old daughter. However, when interviewed 3 years later, both women reported that they had returned to the game. Bridget recalled the day she returned to drug use with the following: "I was upset, lonely, hurt, angry, and I was fed up." Her ex-husband, she explained, denied her visitation with her daughter and was seeking legal action to bar further contact between them. She reacted with familiar self-destructive behaviors involving crack cocaine and street-level prostitution.

Barb's situation was similar in that fear of losing her children triggered an immediate need to escape; drug use and prostitution ensued. When interviewed in 2001, Barb had eight children but retained custody of the youngest two only. She described how, 2 years earlier, an accumulation of stressful events resulted in a "nervous breakdown" and she "started to crack up." Barb's sister intervened and removed her two children. "It was the first time in over 4 years" that she was not able to care for her children. The incident triggered guilt and remorse for losing custody of her older six children. She had vowed, she explained, to be a better parent to the youngest two than she had been with the others. After her children were gone, she went to a bar with every intention of picking up a "date." "I figured," she explained, "I was just going to be on the street [prostituting]. I didn't have any idea what was going to happen after that. I felt like I had already failed at everything, so whatever happens—I deserve."

### *Old playmates*

Moreover, in contrast to the five women whose exits had been successful, these 13 women had not severed ties with old playmates. It was not uncommon for them to describe continued relationships with people involved in drug use, prostitution, or other forms of illegal activity. In some instances, they actually pursued relationships with former acquaintances who often tempted their return to old behaviors. To illustrate, Sharia knew her sister was actively using crack cocaine; she nonetheless moved into her sister's home rather than seek shelter elsewhere when her engagement ended. Likewise, Char and Trina began new relationships with men known to be drug users. That these women mimicked the behavior of those comprising their informal networks is not surprising.

### ***Economics and Employment***

Among those wanting to work, securing legal employment did not appear to be problematic. In fact, since the original interviews, 11 of the 13 women had been legally employed. Two clear distinctions emerged in how these women described income-generating ventures, compared to the five who had been successful in their exit attempts. First, a clear lack of job stability or commitment was evident. It was not unusual for participants to describe working several different jobs in numerous agencies within brief spans of time. They described quitting their jobs and moving on to new places of employment for a variety of reasons: They did not like the work, they were not “getting enough hours,” or the location was inconvenient. Three women had never sought permanent employment, but instead chose to work for temporary agencies.<sup>6</sup> Thus, their employment at any one place was limited to a few days only. Finally, 2 of the 11 who had been employed had been fired for theft.

The second economic-related distinction between these women and those who had remained prostitution-free involved their frequent use of illegal, criminal acts to obtain money quickly. Sharia reported stealing merchandise “... at expensive stores, like Dillard’s” and then reselling those items to acquaintances. She explained: “I’d leave the tags on so they’d know how much the clothes were,” and continued, “I would get what people wanted. They would give me their lists.” She might steal \$500 worth of clothing, for instance, and then resell those items at half price. Georgette manufactured a similar scheme and three others simply resorted to stealing merchandise for themselves or forging checks if they could not afford desired items. Relatedly, four women either returned to the game between the first and second interviews, or reported that they would return in the future if finances became tight. Patti commented that money earned from hustling was simply “too good to give up.” She would not “... pass up no money, no kinda way.” And Lettie similarly explained that prostitution

... is just too easy. You try to ask somebody to give you some money to buy milk and eggs for your kids and they will say, “I didn’t have those kids for you. You need to get a job. But, we can go in the back room, okay baby?” That is a fact. A

man will find money for a blow-job quicker than he will a pair of shoes for your kids. That is a fact... He is gonna find some money for that.

### ***Formal Support Services***

Twelve of the 13 women (all but Patti) had been involved with some form of professional intervention in the time period spanning the original and follow-up interviews. In fact, 7 of the 13 had received individual and group counseling through the Hope Center. Six had participated in various structured, residential programs and 8 had attended AA or NA. Chancey participated in all of these in addition to sexual addicts anonymous and an obsessive-compulsive disorder group. Moreover, all of the incarcerated women took advantage of programs and classes within the prison system. However, unlike Rachel, who valued the educational courses offered in prison, these courses seemed to be of little value to these women. Bryn commented, "I have taken almost every class they can offer me here [in prison] twice, three, four times ... none of those classes can tell me how I am going to do my life."

Unlike those whose exits were successful, these 13 women did not "work" their programs or fully utilize services offered. Indeed, seven stopped using formal services prior to, or concurrent with, their relapses. Lettie stopped attending the Hope Center after returning to the game because "I didn't want to disappoint them." And Sharia noted that, despite having a "really good" probation officer, she "... wasn't ready to stop using drugs. So I lied to her and avoided her and I stopped seeing her." Likewise, Trina stated, "I wasn't ready [to quit]. I wasn't trying to deal with my issues. I wasn't saying 'I am through,' nor was I staying focused. I was not determined."

Several also described frustration with services received. Four explained how the continuously changing staff at various service agencies left them lacking stable, consistent care providers. Frequent turnover compromised the quality of services. Three others explained that professional help for prostituted women, specifically, was not available. Two women refused to see counselors because they were afraid of the consequences of revealing details of their lives to professionals. Barb explained: "I am not going to risk losing my kids over something stupid like that [talking to a counselor]." She was afraid of arrest or Child Protective Services involvement if she admitted the

circumstances of her life to professional support providers. Finally, Char was asked if she would seek formal assistance again, to which she replied, “No, they [programs] don’t work anymore.”

### ***Mental Health***

None of the five women whose exits had been successful mentioned emotional or mental health problems during our interviews. In sharp contrast, discussions of mental health difficulties emerged frequently among women whose exits had not been successful. Specifically, 7 of the 13 (54%) who had returned to prostitution or drug use reported that they had been diagnosed with some form of mental illness (e.g., bipolar disorder, clinical depression, obsessive compulsive disorder). Three reported a long history of mental health problems; one had received electro-shock treatment and two had been institutionalized. Moreover, Chancey, who identified herself as a “sex addict,” believed her return to the sex industry resulted from mental health problems and a medication mishap:

I was put on some psychotropic medication which did a number on me ... it made me paranoid and I became obsessed with sex. I was thinking about sex all the time ... I couldn’t get my mind off of it.

When asked if she would return to the game she stated, “It depends on what medication I’m on.” Still, Chancey was more fortunate than the other six women with diagnosable mental illnesses. At the time of the follow-up interviews, she was the only one receiving professional mental health treatment.

### ***Summary***

Relationships with significant others were frequently discussed in interviews with the women who were unable to maintain their exit attempts. In discussing their significant relationships, themes of loss or abandonment, largely due to death or feelings of rejection, surfaced frequently. In fact, 11 of the 13 described how their return to drugs, prostitution, or other criminal behavior was immediately preceded by stressful events or painful experiences with significant others.

Relationships with male partners and children were particularly problematic. In addition to experiencing the loss of significant relationships, these women frequently noted maintaining contact with or developing new relationships with people who would tempt their return to prostitution, drug use, or other criminal behavior.

Employment, or other means of earning income, also emerged as a key theme in interviews with these women, and nearly all had been legally employed at some time between the two points of contact. Even so, none described approaching employment as an opportunity to develop specialized skills or to learn a trade. Their employment histories were sporadic and characterized by frequent job hopping. Further, some appeared to prefer the ready cash associated with illegal ventures to legal employment. None, however, mentioned problems in finding legal employment. Also significant was the finding that 7 of the 13 women had been diagnosed with a mental health illness and that only one was receiving treatment. Finally, one might speculate that formal services were unavailable to these women or that they lacked access to professional intervention services. However, such was not the case. Twelve of the 13 sought assistance through a variety of community and professional services between the original and follow-up interviews, including AA, NA, and individual and group counseling. Some had participated in residential treatment programs for substance abusers. In fact, the formal support services available to and used by these women are quite similar to, and in some instances the same as, those available to and used by their "exited" peers.

## **Discussion**

The goal of this investigation was to explore the exit process among women attempting to leave the game of street-level prostitution, with particular attention to delineating key factors or experiences that challenge exit success. To this end, comprehensive data were collected allowing for the lives of 18 prostituted women to be contextualized through time. The value of this work is twofold. First, long-term research with street-level prostituted women is rare; information gained provides a basis for new avenues of scholarship with similarly vulnerable female populations. Second, because two distinct groups emerged,

comparison between those who had maintained their exits and those whose attempts had been less successful was possible.

Three common themes emerged as influential for all of the women, regardless of whether they maintained their exit attempts, including the significance of relationships and emotional attachments, formal support and professional services, and economics and employment. It is interesting to note that these same three themes were influential for all women, yet the way the exited and nonexited women experienced each differed a great deal. Among those whose exits had not been successful, experiences with significant others centered around issues of relationship loss and disconnect rather than renewal and maintenance. Also, in direct opposition to the women who had successfully exited, many who returned to old behaviors reported maintaining contact with old playmates. Thus, in addition to experiencing emotional trauma of relationship loss or rejection, their informal networks often consisted of individuals actively involved in various illegal endeavors, including prostitution and drug trafficking.

Moreover, unlike Marlee, who focused on long-term financial well-being, or the other successful four who perceived employment positions as opportunities to obtain skills and demonstrate competence, those who returned to old behaviors expressed limited patience with, or commitment to, legal employment. Short-term financial gain, rather than hard work and diligence, largely characterized their approach. Not surprisingly, illegal ventures often ensued.

Additional distinctions surfaced as well. Specifically, despite the consistency with which religion and spiritual rebirth were described by the 5 whose exits were successful, only 2 of the 13 who had not maintained their exits alluded to religion, God, or spirituality in any form. Moreover, interviews with the 13 who had not successfully exited revealed a theme of mental health difficulties, which was not evident among the 5 who successfully exited. Perhaps mental health issues were not discussed by those women able to maintain their prostitution exits because none had experienced problems in this area, or had experienced problems to such a minor degree that they played little role in their ability to exit. On the other hand, perhaps some of the five had, indeed, experienced mental health difficulties, but received enough professional help so that their exit efforts were not jeopardized. Unfortunately, data needed to probe this issue further were not

collected. However, the available information indicates that a need for professional mental health services exists among street-level prostituted women. It is important to point out that I did not initiate discussion of mental health with any of the participants. Fifty-four percent of those who returned to prostitution, drugs, or other criminal behavior spontaneously mentioned experience with diagnosable mental illnesses during the interview process. Additional studies of the incidence and type of mental illness among prostituted women would prove valuable for developing intervention strategies aimed at this unique population of women.

In a related vein, nearly all of the women ( $n = 16$ ) described involvement with formal support agencies (e.g., residential treatment, NA, AA, the Hope Center). Still, association with or use of such services was not sufficient to sustain lasting behavioral change; personal commitment was key. The women who successfully exited prostitution took it upon themselves to obtain knowledge, internalize information, and then apply newly acquired tools to their own lives. Their unsuccessful peers described instead an expectation that others were responsible for “fixing” their life situations or, more commonly, they described being uncommitted to making the necessary changes required in their lives to maintain exit pursuits.

The Stages of Change Model developed as a framework for understanding an individual’s readiness to change addictive behaviors (Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992) is relevant for understanding the street-level prostitution exit process. Working with individuals with addictive behaviors, Prochaska and colleagues identified five stages of change experienced by their clients. In the *precontemplative stage*, individuals are not aware of their problem and further, have no plans to change their behaviors any time in the foreseeable future. Only at the insistence of others would individuals seek help during this stage. In the *contemplative stage*, individuals are consciously aware of their problem behaviors but have not made a commitment to address them. Individuals in this stage are considering behavior changes, but it may be a long time before action is taken. Individuals in the next stage, *preparation*, have begun to make small changes in their behaviors and have intentions of making additional, perhaps larger, changes in the near future. The *action stage* often follows and is reached when individuals successfully change their behavior. If change persists for more than 6 months,

individuals have entered the *maintenance stage*. During this stage, the ultimate goal is to maintain behavioral and attitudinal changes.

This model appears to have broad applicability. Hood and Johnson (2002) concur, noting, "These same stages of change pertain to clients with a wide variety of problems" (p. 70). When examined in relation to the women who participated in this investigation, the model informs the exit process. To illustrate, due to their extended absences from the sex industry for more than 6 months, the five whose exits had been successful through time could readily be identified as fitting within the maintenance stage. Further, examination of the model in relation to those who had returned to prostitution, drug use, or criminal activity would result in some (i.e., Bryn, Sharia) being placed in the preparation or action stages, and others (i.e., Char, Patti) being placed in the precontemplative or contemplative stages. Development of a new model that addresses the unique components of the prostitution exit process while incorporating aspects of the stages of change model could prove valuable for service delivery. Development of such a model could be used to identify key points of intervention within critical life areas informed by a woman's readiness to change. For example, the data suggest that the initial stages of the exit process, what might be interpreted as the preparation stage, requires safe residence away from old playmates, structured professional drug treatment, and mental health assessment and treatment. With time, movement into the action stage would necessitate additional forms of supports, including development or renewal of healthy emotional attachments to informal networks (e.g., church groups and family) and emphasizing reintegration and incorporation into the larger community. Development of employment skills and assistance with economic support for legal employment would also be integrated in the action stage. The maintenance stage would consist of ongoing individual and group counseling, mentoring, and monitoring to identify and address person-specific "triggers" or challenges facing the women in their unique life contexts.

Importantly, however, models specific to the prostitution exit process must be created with individual differences in mind. To illustrate, the five women who were able to maintain their exit attempts varied considerably with regard to age, race, amount of time spent in the sex industry, family composition, and chemical addiction. Moreover,

the one participant who appeared to make the easiest transition out of the industry, requiring the least amount of formal assistance, was the one who had been immersed in the sex industry for the longest period of time and was the only one with a pimp. Her case history defies Månsson and Hedin's (1999) conclusion regarding two types of break-aways. She was able to exit smoothly and develop a new identity and lifestyle, but could hardly be defined as "... loosely associated with the sex industry" (p. 69). Several factors contributed to her relatively seamless exit: She had never been chemically addicted, street-level prostitution was no longer lucrative, and, perhaps most importantly, she exited with her husband and had a strong informal support network (e.g., family, church group) that did not condone criminal activity.

Despite this exception to the break-away experiences identified by Månsson and Hedin (1999), other aspects of their work parallels results obtained here. Specifically, they identified traumatic (e.g., life-threatening experiences) and positive (e.g., falling in love, having a child) events as factors motivating the exit process. In this investigation, similar events were described by those who had maintained their exits in this investigation. Importantly, the influence of significant relationships on the exit process was noted not only by Månsson and Hedin (1999), but also by Manopaiboon et al. (2003) and Williamson and Folaron (2003). The data presented in this study, coupled with work revealed by these researchers, clearly speaks to the central role of relationship loss and relationship renewal in the exit process. Further development of this concept could greatly enhance theory creation or modification and potentially aid intervention strategies. Assisting women in developing new informal systems of support or recovering from the emotional loss of significant others appears central for exit success.

Furthermore, it is important to note that leaving the sex industry rests, at least in part, on having the ability to legally support oneself. Still, working minimum-wage jobs with little room for growth and that require and teach few transferable skills may prompt a return to old behaviors in an attempt to earn "fast cash." Employable skills and job training would be components of an ideal intervention program. Moreover, one of the most interesting, yet surprising, findings of this study involved the central role of religion (and integration

within religious communities) among those whose exits were successful. No other study involving prostituted women could be located that addressed, or even alluded to, this issue. The door is certainly open for continued exploration of the role of religion in the exit process.

### ***Limitations and Future Directions***

Several limitations, particularly in relation to sample representation, must be kept in mind when interpreting results. First, this investigation focused exclusively on street-level prostituted women. These women differ substantially from those involved in other sex-industry venues. Information presented should therefore be interpreted within context; generalizations to women involved in other types of sex work (e.g., call girl services) must be made with caution. Future studies that comparatively analyze the exit process between women involved in different types of prostitution would be useful. Thus, services should be tailored to the specific needs of prostituted women, and these needs will likely differ substantially based on the type of prostitution in which each is involved.

Moreover, this investigation is limited due to sample size. Only 18 of the original 43 women were located for a follow-up interview, and biases inherent in the sample's composition may further limit transferability of results. Specifically, compared to the 25 women who were interviewed only once, the 18 who participated at both data collection points were older, had been involved in the sex industry for a significantly longer amount of time, and were more likely to be single and African American. Perhaps the younger women, with fewer years invested in prostitution and subsequently fewer connections to the game, found it easier to transition into new roles and identities, as the work of Månsson and Hedin (1999) would suggest. If such is the case, their severance of ties with formal agencies (e.g., Hope Center) and people (e.g., parole officers) might explain the difficulty in locating them. On the other hand, it is also possible that the younger women, who were newer to the streets, had returned to the game and not yet resurfaced or come to the attention of intervention agencies. In other words, some of the 25 women who could not be located may have been actively involved in the game but maintaining very low profiles.

Further, it is possible that the married women transitioned out of the industry more easily than their single peers, thus making them more difficult to locate for a follow-up interview. That is, one might assume that having a marriage partner promotes the exit process, with formation of new roles and identities, thus explaining my inability to find these women after 3 years. Racial disparities between those who could and could not be located for a second interview present additional complexity and raise additional questions about the exit process. It is unclear why African American women would be more easily located at the second point of contact, particularly given that the original sample of 43 consisted of more Euro American ( $n = 20$ ) than African American ( $n = 18$ ) women.

Although speculation of the meaning of biases due to age, industry tenure, marital status, and race for the exit process is possible, definitive answers cannot be made at this juncture. Future investigations with larger samples would provide valuable data to inform the present field of knowledge and, by extension, practice and intervention efforts. Suggested strategies for maintaining sample size through time are to (a) obtain contact information on participants' closest kin or primary sources of formal support (e.g., specific shelters) during the initial data collection and (b) arrange for follow-up data to be collected more frequently.

Future studies aimed at theoretical development and model building to identify critical service needs at various points in the exit process are warranted. Street-level prostituted women are embedded within unique social, historical, and political contexts. Continued longitudinal work designed to critically examine the developmental trajectories of prostituted individuals for purposes of theory development and testing would provide valuable data for effectively intervening on behalf of those caught in the entry-exit-reentry cycle.

### **Conclusion**

It was discouraging to learn that only 5 of the 18 (27%) women located for this study had maintained their exit efforts for a significant amount of time. Still, one must remember that although 13 returned to old behaviors, this does not mean that their exit attempts were not valuable or that progress was not made. Leaving the street-level sex

industry is a process, often involving numerous exit-reentry cycles, and thus “success” is a vague term and difficult to define. It is likely that each time a woman attempts to exit, she becomes a little stronger, a little more confident, and a little more committed to making a permanent lifestyle change. Certainly, to some degree, development of these attributes qualifies as “success.” Even though she may return to the sex industry after attempting to leave, perhaps her next exit will be her last. The exit process is clearly complex and the challenges significant, but change is possible, as evidenced by Marlee, Kiley, Amy, Yolanda, and Rachel.

## Notes

1. *The game* is a term used by street-level sex workers in describing the culture of prostitution in which women attempt to receive goods (e.g., money or drugs) by doing as little sex work as possible and in which their clients attempt to obtain sexual services as cheaply as possible. Some also use the term to denote that street-walkers “play with” (i.e., risk) their lives.
2. This is not the actual name of the program.
3. All names are pseudonyms.
4. Marlee’s husband had also been her pimp for the majority of the time she was involved in the street-level sex industry.
5. About 6 years in total, as they had been out of the game an average of 3 years when first interviewed and 3 years passed between the first and second interviews.
6. It was not clear whether this was because temporary positions were all that were available or rather that these women chose temporary work over more permanent positions.

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