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## Experiences of LGSWs in Working with Sex Workers

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# Experiences of LGSWs in Working with Sex Workers

by

Megan A. Week, B.A.

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the

School of Social Work

St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas

St. Paul, Minnesota

in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

**Abstract**

There are various factors that influence the lives of sex workers, especially as they are trying to exit sex work. Frequently these factors lead these women to interact with social workers. The purpose of this project was to examine the experiences and preparedness/comfort level of LGSWs in working with sex workers. It also examined the perceived barriers to exiting sex work. Using a mixed methods survey, 61 LGSWs in Minnesota were surveyed about their preparedness to work with this population and their beliefs about the barriers to exiting. Data were analyzed using both descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The findings indicated that a small percentage of participants felt that they had been prepared by either their graduate education or their employers to work with this population. They also indicate that approximately one third of participants have previously worked with sex workers. Participants' responses regarding the barriers to exiting sex work were largely reflective of the barriers indicated in the previous research. These findings illustrate the lack of preparedness to work with this population and point out a need for continued research in this area and changes in policy regarding social work education.

I would like to acknowledge the efforts of my thesis chair Andrea Nesmith, Ph.D., LISW and of my committee members, Heather Conley, MSW, LGSW, and Laurel Edinburgh, BSN. I would also like to acknowledge the faculty and staff of the social work department at University of St Thomas/St Catherine University for always being supportive and helpful.

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## Introduction

The reasons for entering sex work are varied and depend on the individual and the circumstances of their lives and the age at which they entered the sex work. Issues such as poverty at a young age, development in an abusive home, exploitation by others, earning money to fund chemical dependency, and the desire to exhibit some sense of control have all been factors discussed in the literature. Those who enter sex work are on average 12-13 years old. When surveyed, the majority express an interest in leaving prostitution ("Prostitution," 2012; Clarke, Clarke, Roe-Sepowitz, & Fey, 2012; Cobbina & Oselin, 2011; Cusick, Brooks-Gordon, Campbell, & Edgar, 2011; Roe-Sepowitz, 2012; Young, Boyd, & Hubbell, 2000).

However, while entering into prostitution seems comparatively easy, exiting the lifestyle is much more difficult. Prostitution is characterized by a cycle of entry, exit, and reentry. Much like the process of entering sex work, the decision to exit is influenced by a number of personal factors such as exposure to a traumatic event, worries about personal health and safety, a desire to provide a better environment for their families, or through the desire to enter treatment for chemical dependency (Baker, Dalla, & Williamson, 2010;). Some women are forced to exit the sex work lifestyle after being arrested (Cusick et al., 2011).

For those who make the decision to exit sex work willingly, there are considerable barriers in place, at an individual, systemic, and societal level (Baker et al., 2010). Some of the individual barriers include relapses into chemical addiction, reentry after emotionally traumatic life experiences, and reentry due to continued contact with

individuals with an association with sex work (Dalla, 2006). However, despite the individual nature of these barriers, a considerable systemic influence is still in play.

The systemic influences that act as barriers to exiting sex work include a lack of job training opportunities for women who are attempting to exit, lack of affordable housing, and a lack of community based health care to treat chronic illness and provide preventative care. These issues all keep women from moving away from high-risk areas and make it that much easier to reenter sex work (Prince, 2013; Williamson & Folaron, 2003).

The cultural issue influencing efforts to leave sex work is primarily the stigma against prostitution in our society. This stigma is especially damaging in regards to the attitudes of social workers toward sex workers. A lack of trust between client and social worker compromises the relationship and, in the case of women attempting to exit sex work, damages rapport and prevents these women from having the best opportunity to exit this lifestyle (Cimino, 2012; Wahab, 2004).

While many women attempting to exit sex work indicate that they have previously interacted with social workers, there are frequent reports of dissatisfaction in these interactions. This dissatisfaction ranges from perceptions that social workers don't understand the situation to outright prejudice and hostility. Women report that it seems like social worker knowledge is based in stereotyping and media portrayals of sex workers (Dalla, 2006).

While the current level of knowledge of social workers regarding sex work is lacking, it is also an opportunity to change the education of social workers regarding this population.

### **Literature Review**

The life surrounding sex work is often fraught with complexities. These complications come from both the reasons to enter sex work as well as the challenges faced when attempting to exit. Entering is influenced by a number of factors that differ depending on the age at which the individual entered sex work. Women's lives are further complicated when attempting to exit.

Entry into sex work as an adolescent is a common theme for women in prostitution. The reasons behind this are often varied and depend on the circumstances in which the individual is raised.

#### **Entry as Adolescents**

One factor that influences the entry into sex work is the incidence of emotional abuse as children. In a study of 71 women exiting a prostitution intervention program in Arizona, women who reported significant emotional abuse as children reported entry into the sex work industry about 4.5 years earlier than those who reported no emotional abuse (Clarke et al., 2012; Roe-Sepowitz, 2012). It is hypothesized that this is the result of women attempting to escape a difficult situation but unable to find a way to support themselves after leaving. Thus these young women resort to prostitution in order to obtain resources necessary to survival, such as housing and food. Another



common factor reported amongst women who entered prostitution as adolescents is the incidence of familial drug use as children.

Fleeing from abuse is also seen as an attempt by young women to regain control over their lives, especially in cases of sexual abuse (Cobbina & Oselin, 2011). This is especially evident in young women who entered prostitution at a young age. The young women in this study spoke about how their lives of victimization left them feeling like they had no control over the circumstances and direction of their own lives. Going into prostitution was a way for these individuals to assert their autonomy and illustrating that they were capable of surviving on their own.

However, upon leaving these abusive situations, many young women found themselves attached to men that would exploit them. Frequently young women cite men they turned to after leaving their home environments as their entry into sex work. The relationships that these women entered into began with gifts and resources to survive. The gifts eventually came with a price and women report being coerced into sex work in order to continue receiving these resources.

The early “normalization” of prostitution is also considered an avenue into sex work. In the neighborhoods in which many women who engage in prostitution grew up, prostitution was a normal occurrence and thus was viewed as a viable option for income. Through this socialization, they learn the beliefs and behaviors that come with sex work. However, this exposure fails to illustrate the various facets of sex work. This early exposure illustrated the glamorous side of sex work. The appearance of an easy income with glamorous clothing and social engagements failed to convey the various

barriers that come with prostitution. The early representation of prostitution in the media also influenced this idea of glamour.

The pattern of entry into prostitution for adolescents is significantly different from the pattern of entry as an adult. The pattern of exit is also quite different for these two groups as well. One of the reasons for this is the recent legislation dedicated to the topic. One example of this is the Safe Harbor for Sexually Exploited Youth Act, created in 2011 (Star Tribune Editorial, 2013). This act required that sex-trafficked children under the age of 16 be treated as victims rather than as criminals, as well as requiring that various state departments work to create a prevention and support model. Creating shelter for the victims as well as training law enforcement officers to identify these victims was also included. While this program is only statewide in Minnesota, different parts are being enacted in other states.

The need for these protective factors is easily indicated by the rates of occurrence aggregated by the Minnesota Office of Justice Program (Minnesota Office of Justice Program, 2012). Per this study, in 2011 63 charges of solicitation of a child and twelve charges of use of a minor in a sexual performance were recorded. 24 and 5 of these charges were made into convictions, respectively. While this number appears low, it is important to keep in mind that these are merely the cases that were brought to the attention of law enforcement. It is reasonable to hope that the increased education required by the Safe Harbor act will allow law enforcement individuals to better spot situations of solicitation of a minor.

### **Entry in Adulthood**

Entrance into prostitution as an adult is often attributed to different factors than that of entrance as an adolescent. One such influence is the support of a drug habit. Many of the women in this situation grew up in homes where drug use was rampant and consequently became drug addicted themselves. Eventually, in order to fund their habit, many women turned to prostitution. However, these women did not see the glamour of prostitution as adolescents and had a more negative view of sex work. These women violated these beliefs in order to earn money (Cobbina & Oselin, 2011; Young et al., 2000). Drug use is, in fact, such a pervasive factor in entering prostitution that many women do not exit prostitution due to prostitution itself but instead to reduce their drug habit. Frequently this intervention takes place in the prison system (Cusick et al., 2011).

Women who enter prostitution as adults also frequently enter as a means of survival. Issues of homelessness and the inability to support the cost of living spur these women to turn to prostitution in order to survive. Upon resorting to prostitution as a means of survival, many of these women are unable to escape sex work (Cobbina & Oselin, 2011).

### **Reentry**

The rate of reentry for women attempting to exit sex work is high. One study done to examine the effectiveness of diversion programs can attest to this fact. In this study, diversion programs refer to programs developed either through the courts or in areas of high prostitution concentration. These programs are established to divert

women from living on the streets or being arrested and to instead house them in treatment programs or sober housing. These programs frequently provided services such as counseling, literacy training, and job skills. Information about physical health was also provided in some programs. This study examined the Phoenix Diversion Program and found that almost 15% of the 448 sample was rearrested (Roe-Sepowitz et. al., 2011).

There are numerous variables attributed to the difficulty of exiting sex work. These variables can be broken down into a four-tiered system, as postulated by Baker, Dalla, and Williamson. Tier one of this system includes individual factors, such as self-destructive behaviors, mental health issues, substance abuse, and self-esteem/shame. The second tier consists of relational factors, including limited support, interactions with pimps and drug dealers, and social isolation. Tier three refers to structural issues limited training or employment options, lack of basic needs such as housing, and a stigmatizing criminal record. Tier four refers to societal factors such as discrimination or stigma (Baker et al., 2010). This tiered system does an excellent job of illustrating that, while there are some individual factors related to leaving prostitution, many are systemic and beyond the control of those attempting to deal with them.

### **Reasons for Exiting**

Various reasons for exiting sex work are cited by women. One reason for exiting is the desire to believe in a higher power. Women struggling to exit sex work sometimes talk about a childhood where religion played a prominent role. The desire to “get right with God” is an important motivator in exiting sex work. According to the women

interviewed, this was partially related to the lifestyle associated religion. For instance, one woman dreamed of being a preacher's wife.

Another influence in leaving sex work is witnessing a violent accidents or attacks. While violence is often a common theme in this lifestyle, some women see more than others. This leads to increased anxiety about violent acts or death happening to or around them. A large amount of fear stems from the idea of dying young while working as a prostitute (Oselin, 2010).

### **Barriers to exiting sex work**

Looking at the various reasons that are cited for leaving sex work, it is reasonable to assume that those involved would be eager to leave as soon as possible. In many situations this is the case. However it is more difficult than one would first believe. There are a number of barriers in place

#### **Loss of sex work relationships.**

The loss of previously well established relationships when leaving sex work is frequently very stressful and difficult for women. For this reason, some relationships from their old lifestyle remain. Thirteen women in a survey regarding the success at exiting sex work failed at severing ties with individuals from their previous lifestyle. These individuals were frequently involved in drug use, prostitution, or other illegal activity, and unsurprisingly this association tempted these women into return. The reasons for continuing these relationships are varied, but include having no other options or feeling a sense of stigma from those who have never been involved in sex

work. The sense of isolation felt by these women after leaving sex work only increases the difficulty of severing these ties (Dalla, 2006).

The difficulty in severing the ties of sex work relationships has to do with the strength of friendships formed in prostitution (Hwang & Bedford, 2004). Relationships formed in prostitution are one of the first steps to accepting one's position as a prostitute. These relationships are cited as one of the reasons women are reluctant to leave prostitution. It stands to reason that, after leaving, the loss of these relationships would be very stressful.

#### **Loss of future relationships.**

In a study of 13 women attempting to exit the sex work lifestyle, one of the contributing factors to reentering sex work is the loss of new relationships (Dalla, 2006). In the study, four women began new relationships with male partners during treatment. However, for a variety of reasons, these relationships ended with the women experiencing further disappointment and worthlessness. In one case, a woman dated a man from her treatment program who eventually relapsed, pushing her back into the lifestyle of sex work to get drug money. Other situations involved the new relationship devolving into a physically abusive one.

The loss of these new relationships not only pushed women back into sex work for concrete reasons such as income, but also out of desire to fit in. Going back to the sex work lifestyle gave them a community in which they felt comfortable and accepted, rather than rejected as they had been.

The loss of future relationships is related to attempts by former prostitutes to reclaim their identity. The importance of recognizing one's self as something other than a prostitute has been established (Oselin, 2009). However, the loss of these relationships forces women to let go of the roles they'd hoped to take (mother, wife, etc.) and pushes them back toward prostitution.

The loss of long-term relationships is also listed as a barrier to permanently exiting. In the same study as mentioned above, seven women discussed the loss of established relationships with partners, children, or other family. In one instance, a woman discussed the loss of her ex-husband, her only source of companionship. Due to the loss of this relationship, she was forced to sell her home. The trauma of this experience as well as her lack of coping skills led to a relapse into prostitution. Another woman told the story of a woman who lost her 18 year old son and, when she turned to her husband for support, discovered his use of crack cocaine. Eventually this individual ended up using crack cocaine with her husband and found herself reentering sex work in order to pay for it (Dalla, 2006). This reaction to admittedly extreme life stressors is an illustration of a lack of coping skills, a point further explored by Baker, Williamson, and Dalla below.

**Lack of job related skills.**

One of the financial barriers to women exiting sex work is the lack of job related skills. As reflected in an article by Williamson and Folaron, impoverished young women are frequently lured into sex work as a way to meet basic needs. These girls are typically too young to get mainstream work and, later, when they want to exit, they find they

lack the practical skills to earn them a job that will support them as prostitution was able to. The lack of training opportunities was also discussed (Williamson & Folaron, 2003).

**Lack of official resources.**

One of the ways in which the needs of sex workers are not being met is in the area of medicine and physical health. In one study, the majority of women surveyed viewed health and illness prevention as important factors. However, they also expressed a lack of culturally sensitive healthcare available in their communities. These women also felt that they were unwanted in many medical settings and thus were forced to utilize emergency services for medical care, enduring long wait lines and high cost. The women surveyed also mentioned a lack of access to nutritious food and mental health services (Prince, 2013). This lack of access further complicates exiting sex work because it confirms their feelings of stigmatization in “mainstream” society and jeopardizes their health by forcing them to rely on emergency medicine as opposed to preventative care.

Another difficulty faced by women in sex work is fully utilizing sex work intervention programs once they have been located. The environment that sex work creates is often a very hectic one with unexpected conflicts that keep women from attending appointments made with intervention workers. The difficulty in making it to these appointments also creates a sense of discouragement with this population (Mayhew & Mossman, 2007).



**Fear/Perceived Disrespect from Social Workers.**

While some intervention programs exist for this population, frequently sex workers cite fear or trepidation when interacting with social workers. Parental rights being suspended in women who engage in prostitution or drug addiction is not an uncommon occurrence. Frequently having their children taken from them is like hitting rock bottom for these women, an experience that does not engender trust in the social work system. However, working to be reunited with their children is often a very strong motivator for women and could be used as part of a reunification plan (Cimino, 2012).

**Previous Reentry.**

Previous attempts to exit sex work that led to reentry are also a barrier to exiting. These attempts lead women to feel stuck or trapped in the sex work lifestyle due to their previously failed attempts. Despite a desire to change, these failed attempts may lead to a lack of confidence or coping skills necessary to handle exiting sex work. A sense of pointlessness is also reported, leaving these women feeling like there is no purpose to them attempting to exit as they will just fail as they have previously (Baker et al., 2010).

A study done regarding the effectiveness of a Phoenix Prostitution Diversion project found that women who had been previously arrested for prostitution were almost five times more likely to be rearrested than those who had not previously been arrested, further illustrating the barrier of previous reentry (Roe-Sepowitz et al., 2011).

### **Beliefs Regarding Social Workers.**

A commonly held belief among sex workers is that social workers are unprepared to deal with the unique needs that are presented by this population. One belief is that social workers are naïve with no real understanding of what the sex work lifestyle involves. Those surveyed believe that social workers assume they know what is best for sex workers and assume that these women have other options for employment. In order to better understand this client group, it was recommended that social workers take an empowerment based approach as well as familiarizing themselves with the different life circumstances that are faced by sex workers.

While sex worker interactions with social workers were varied, one factor they all agreed on for more effective treatment was a non-judgmental, supportive attitude. The importance of discarding negative stereotypes and allowing the client to be the center of the social worker's focus, as opposed to the ideas about the client (Wahab, 2004).

### **Unresolved Trauma.**

Another barrier indicated by women is the existence of unresolved trauma as children. In a study surveying twelve women, they felt that they had no choice but to remain involved in sex work and that they were destined by their experiences of neglect, rejection, and abuse. This amount of traumatic experience is internalized and leads to an inability to cope with life events. As these women grow older, they develop a negative sense of self, which these women attribute to their difficulties leaving as they do not feel they are meant for anything else. This leaves them with little sense of

autonomy or independence and pushes them to remain in the sex work lifestyle (Dodsworth, 2012).

### **Inefficiency of Programming.**

The inefficiency of interventions offered to sex workers is attributed to a number of factors. While social work should be a profession where women are able to seek assistance without fearing judgment or fear, this has been indicated to be far from the truth. While there is not much information about this topic, one research has been able to impart some information. One of the factors is described as internal, having to do with the beliefs and personalities of the women surveyed (Dalla, 2006). These women did not fully utilize the program offered or stopped using the programming before termination, instead returning to sex work. One woman surveyed spoke about how she did not want to disappoint the individuals leading the intervention and felt it best to leave before that happened. Another woman discussed how, despite very good staff interventions, she wasn't ready to stop using and instead lied to the group leader and stopped attending.

The second factor is described as a frustration with the services themselves. One problem expressed was the frequently changing staff and the lack of a stable, consistent provider. This compromised the services for the women surveyed. Others believed that resources were not available, and yet others were afraid of the consequences of speaking to a professional counselor. These women feared consequences such as losing their children to Child Protective Services if they shared the facts and details regarding their lives in sex work.

These barriers to exiting illustrate a lack of opportunities for those who wish to exit sex work. The attitudes and beliefs regarding social workers especially illustrates a failure on behalf of social service workers to assist this population. A greater degree of education regarding the unique needs of those attempting to exit sex work is necessary.

### **Conceptual Framework**

While there are a number of theories that support both this topic in general and this project in specific, the one that seems to fit the best is critical theory. Critical theory is a mix of the classical Marxist approach with new empowerment theories, and is also known as emancipatory theory (Forte, 2007). Its intent is to raise the awareness of society regarding topics of oppression and to help them understand the issues surrounding that topic. In clinical practice, this is used to look at how social structure and patterns undermine the efforts of social workers and welfare in general. Critical theorists look at the values that are maintaining the inequality found in social institutions, as well as the ways that suffering can be alleviated (Forte, 2007).

Multiple subgroups of this theory exist, but the most fitting in this situation is structural theory. This focuses on the oppressive structures of our society that make life difficult for its members and the unjust ways in which society is organized. Theorists in this subgroup typically consist of feminist theorists, Afrocentric theorists, and queer theorists (Forte, 2007).

One of the main tenants of this theory is that social workers should work to empower oppressed groups of people. The role of the social worker is to fight injustice in all its forms and fight for justice whenever possible. Critical theory recognizes that

there are a number of issues that interfere with the pursuit of justice, including the desire to appease different organizations in order to keep ones job, or moral conflicts between the issue being faced and one's own personal values. However, according to critical theory it is the duty of the social worker to recognize these potential challenges and continue to work with them.

Critical theory is well represented in issues surrounding race, necessitating the creation of the concept of critical race theory (CRT). It was initially developed in the 1970s as a way to look at racism in legislation after civil rights. More recently, CRT has been used to look at the influence of racism in adult education (Closson, 2010; Trevino, Harris, & Wallace, 2008).

Critical theory is also examined in the context of social work education and the social work profession. As social work in academia continues to grow, the push to publish is at odds with the duty of social workers to be working in the public sphere as advocates for social change (MacKinnon, 2009). Critical theory in this instance works to integrate the needs of academia with the duty of social service, thereby best serving clientele through both direct interaction and through research toward best practices. Critical theory posits that the role of social work is to work for enlightenment and not to work to further an academic career.

One of the reasons this theory reflects so well with the topic of this project is the focus it places on structural factors. In interviews conducted with women currently and previously participating in sex work, a number of the barriers to exiting sex work cited are based in societal structure. These factors include lack of affordable housing, lack of

job skills or the opportunity to acquire them, and a lack of sufficient public assistance to help them live outside of sex work (Dalla, 2000; Brown et. al., 2006; Williamson & Folaron, 2003; Dalla, 2006; Roe-Sepowitz et al., 2012).

The emphasis of social justice is also important in this situation because, when interviewed, a number of women involved in sex work discuss the stigma and discrimination they feel coming from the social workers they interact with. They discuss their reluctance to share the sex work aspects of their lives for fear of judgment and potential intervention by CPS services (Dalla, 2006). The perceived discrimination that these women feel from social service workers is in violation of the social worker's duty to work to correct social injustice. Regardless of the personal beliefs, it is necessary for social workers to attempt and alleviate the societal structures that maintain inequality and difficulty of life for their clients.

The impulse for these women to not share the full circumstances of their lives is also an illustration of societal influences impeding their ability to fully utilize protective factors such as food assistance and job training programs. The stigma that prevents these women from disclosing the details of their lives is an injustice that social workers should be aware of and educated about.

## **Methods**

### **Design**

This study focused on adult, female sex workers working in street level prostitution as that is the demographic most frequently discussed in the available literature.

This study was designed to examine the level of knowledge of recently graduated, licensed graduate social workers on the topic of sex work. Specifically, what are the beliefs and attitudes of licensed graduate social workers regarding the barriers to exiting sex work and what is the preparedness level of these social workers to work with this population. The hypothesis of this study was that the beliefs of these subjects will not accurately reflect the barriers to exiting that are expressed by women who have left sex work. The hypothesis was also that the participants surveyed would not feel that they had been prepared to work with this population.

This study was a cross-sectional survey delivered via email to LGSWs in Minnesota. It was an exploratory, mixed method survey. The majority of the questions were multiple choice with one open ended qualitative question. Surveys were distributed through Qualtrics, a survey distribution program.

### **Sampling**

This random sample was contacted via email addresses of LGSWs through the Minnesota Board of Social Work (MNBSW). Included in the data set were the LGSWs in the state of Minnesota. Level of experience with the population was negligible. The only exclusionary criterion was holding a qualification other than LGSW. 999 LGSW email

addresses were purchased from the MNBSW and were selected randomly. Invitations to participate in the survey were sent out to 800 participants.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

Surveys were returned via email to a University of St Thomas email account. Completed surveys were kept on a password protected laptop accessible only by the primary investigator. Participants were informed of the purpose of the survey in the informed consent. Participants were asked to acknowledge that they have read and agree with the informed consent before they are able to proceed to the survey. Participants had the option of exiting the survey at any time.

### **Measures**

The primary measure in this study was a survey written by the researcher. The survey asked about demographic information such as race/ethnicity, marital status, and age. The survey also asked about the beliefs of the participants regarding the barriers to exiting sex work and participants' preparedness to work with this population.

### **Analysis**

Using SPSS, analysis was done to determine descriptive statistics including most frequently selected answers and percentages. This analysis looked at participant demographic data, participants' preparedness to work with this population, and participants' comfort level in working with this population. An analysis of the open ended question regarding barriers to exiting sex work was also done and recurring themes were established.



A quantitative analysis has been done to look at the comfort levels of LGSWs in addressing and discussing the needs of those ensnared in prostitution. An analysis was also done to look at the preparation of social workers to work with this population. Participant demographics were also analyzed.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of this survey is that it fails to examine the attitudes and beliefs of social workers outside of the Midwest. It's possible that areas outside of Minnesota have different levels of education and familiarity regarding the lifestyle surrounding prostitution. This could be due to different levels of population or due to other factors that make prostitution more of a possibility. It is also possible that areas outside of Minnesota educate their social workers on this population in order to increase their familiarity.

Another limitation of this study is the lack of depth achieved by an emailed survey as compared to a qualitative interview. However, the use of a quantitative survey allows for more respondents and a better rounded out idea of the problem.

A third limitation of this study is that it looks primarily at the experiences of adult women in prostitution. While this is a large percentage of the individuals that work in sex work, this is by no means an exhaustive study and further research should be done in order to examine the complications of men and adolescents working in prostitution.

One final limitation to this study is that the definition of sex workers was tenuously given and it is possible this misled a number of potential participants from completing the survey. Feedback was also given from potential participants that they

did not work with sex workers and thus did not feel comfortable completing the survey. A clearer statement of the purpose of this study and its desired participant base could have led to a more complete data set.

## **Results**

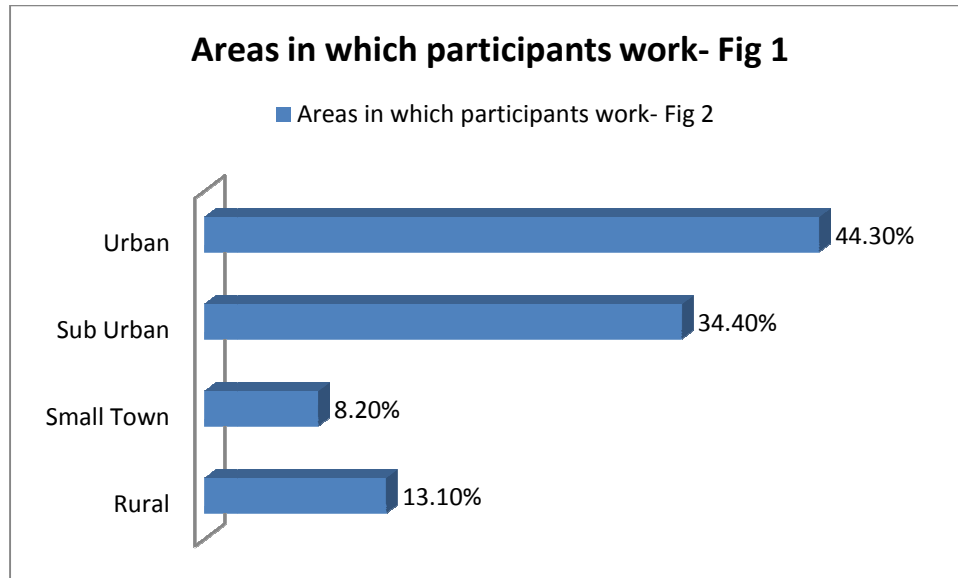
### **Obtained Sample/Participants**

A total of 61 participants participated in this study. All participants were LGWs and basic demographic information was obtained. 89.1% responded that they identify as female and ages ranged from 24 to 56 with an average age of 33.8. The majority of participants identify themselves as married or in a committed relationship. A large majority of the participants identified as Caucasian.

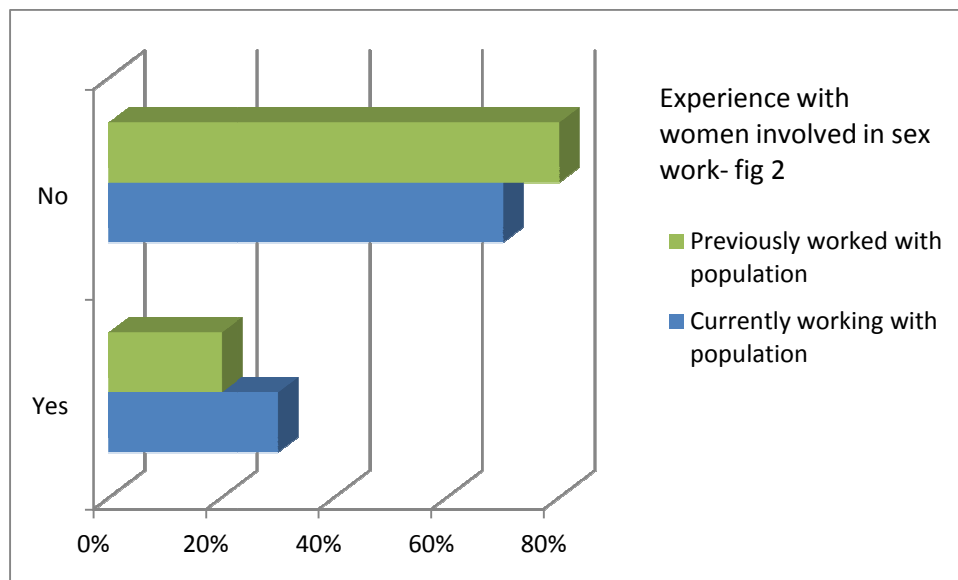
### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis in this study looked at several demographic variables as well as LGSW experience and education surrounding working with sex workers. A review of the perceived barriers to exiting sex work was also done. A total of 61 participants completed the survey. Of these participants, 89.1% identified as female and 4.7% identified as male.

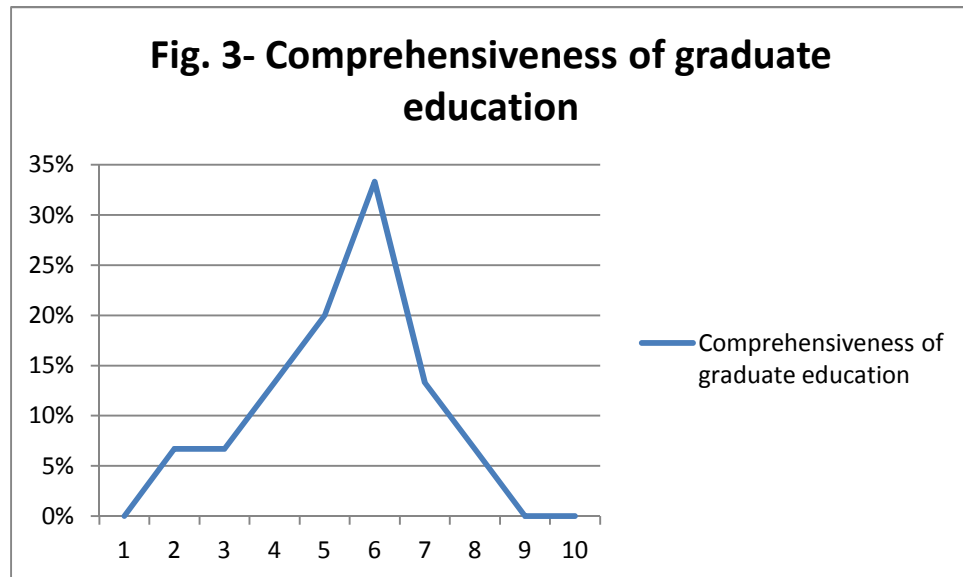
Participants were also asked to describe the area in which they work using 4 separate categories: rural, small town, suburban, and urban. According to participant data, 44.3% identified their work as in an urban area, 34.4% identified as suburban, 8.2% identified as small town, and 13.1% identified as rural. This is reflected in figure 1.

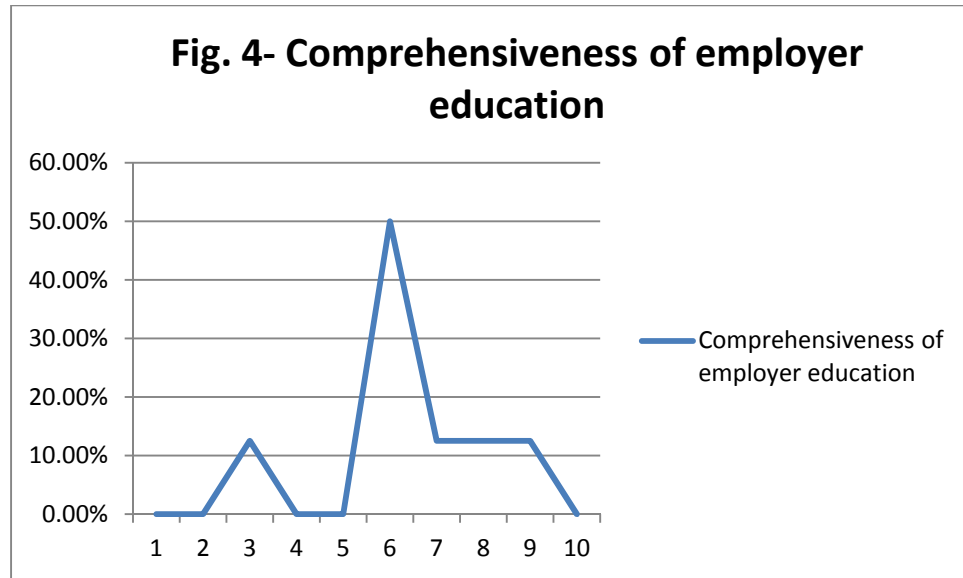


Participants were also asked to give information about their experiences working with sex workers and their preparedness to work with this population. 30% of respondents state that they have previously worked with women involved in sex work and 20% stated that they are currently working with women involved in sex work (figure 2).



In addition to their experiences working with the population, participants were asked to report on whether or not their graduate education or their employers prepared them to work with sex workers. Only 26.2% of respondents replied that their graduate education prepared them to work with sex workers and 13.3% replied that their employers prepared them. Those that replied that they had been prepared to work with the population were asked to rate the comprehensiveness of their preparation using a scale of one to ten, one being hardly prepared at all and ten being thoroughly prepared. Their responses are outlined in figures 3 and 4.





Participants were also asked to share what they perceived to be the most significant barriers to exiting sex work. The primary responses included lack of support, lack of resources, and fear of ramifications for exiting. This lack of support was specified to include a lack of trust in social workers and social stigma that impacts their attempts to exit. Lack of resources was specified to include lack of effective chemical addiction treatment programs and lack of education and job skills for the women attempting to exit. A fourth less common theme was also found. This described the primary barrier to exiting sex work as a lack of readiness or desire to change. A total of 48 participants answered this question and an outline of the number of answers to each theme is provided below in figure 5.

Participant Beliefs About Barriers to Exiting Sex Work- figure 5

Lack of Support	12
Lack of Resources	30
Fear of Ramifications	13
Readiness/Desire to Change	2

### Discussion

From the information gathered from the 61 participants, we are able to look at LGSW experiences in working with sex workers and their preparedness to work with this population.

The findings support the belief that the respondents do not feel appropriately prepared by either their education or their employment to work with these individuals despite the fact that a large percentage reported currently or previously working with them. This indicates that they are not prepared to work with these women despite the population being very present in social work practice.

However, despite their lack of preparation to work with these individuals, respondents were still able to accurately name a number of very prominent issues for women attempting to exit sex work. This can be attributed to a number of different factors. One potential factor is therapist experience in other areas that also affect women in sex work. As previously discussed above, women involved in sex work face a number of complicated issues, including drug addiction, poverty, and domestic violence. These are issues that social workers see and work with on a regular basis and it stands

to reason that familiarity with these issues would give social workers some insight into the barriers to exiting.

Another possibility is that this insight has come from previous participant research or experiences. This insight could also have come from other clients that were not directly involved in sex work but still had some knowledge about the challenges faced by this population.

There are a number of strengths to this study. One of the strengths to this study is that it focuses on LGSWs who have recently graduated from an accredited graduate social work program. The participants' recent graduation allows this survey to get information from a population that has been educated with the most recent information but also has some experience in the social work field.

Another strength of this study is the utilization of social worker email addresses from throughout Minnesota, which gives the opportunity to get opinions from social workers in urban, suburban, and rural areas. This varied sample will allow the survey to assess the familiarity with issues of prostitution as it associates with the size of one's practice area.

This study was conducted entirely with social workers educated and licensed in the state of Minnesota. However, due to the standardization of social work education, it is unlikely that social workers in other areas of the country are more prepared by their education to work with these women. However, it is possible that the employment experiences of social workers in other parts of the country have left them better prepared to work with sex workers.

There are considerable implications for social work education and practice in this study. One of those implications is the lack of preparedness of graduate programs to educate their students about the various issues and complications surrounding sex work. Sex workers are a considerable part of society today and it stands to reason that social workers would at some point come into contact with this population. However, the lack of education about the challenges faced by this population leaves social workers unprepared.

Along a similar vein is the lack of preparedness in places of employment. It is possible that these places of employment do not contact sex workers. However, those that do come in contact with sex workers are still unable to educate their employees and thus are providing a disservice.

Overall, the implications of this study are that increased education about sex work for LGSWs will lead to greater contact with community resources and greater comfort in seeking out these resources. This easier exposure to resources could potentially help women attempting to exit sex work with this practice, thus having a large effect on social work practice in general.



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**Survey**

**Age:**

**Gender:** Male Female Transgender Prefer Not to Answer Other

**Marital Status:**

**Race/Ethnicity:** Caucasian African American Asian American  
Native American Hawaiian/Pacific Islander Hispanic/Latin More than One  
Race  
Other Prefer Not to Answer

**What year did you graduate from your graduate program?**

**Are you currently working as a social worker?** Yes No

**Describe the area in which you work:** Rural Small Town Sub-Urban Urban

**Have you previously worked with women involved with sex work?** Yes No

**Are you currently working with women involved in sex work?** Yes No

**To what extent do you feel like your graduate program prepared you to work with sex workers, with 1 being no preparation at all and 10 being extensive preparation?**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

**If yes, to what extent did it prepare you to work with sex workers, 1 being very little, 10 being very comprehensively?**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

**Do you feel your place of employment has prepared you to work with sex workers?** Yes  
No

**If yes, to what extent did it prepare you to work with sex workers, 1 being very little, 10 being very comprehensively?**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

**On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being not at all comfortable, 10 being completely comfortable, please rate your comfort in working with sex workers.**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

**On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being not at all confident, 10 being completely confident, please rate your confidence in working with sex workers.**

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

**On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being not at all comfortable, 10 being completely comfortable, please rate your comfort in discussing issues surrounding working with sex workers with your supervisor.**

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

**On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being not at all knowledgeable, 10 being completely knowledgeable, please rate your supervisor's knowledge of the issues surrounding sex work.**

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

**What do you feel are the two most influential barriers to women exiting sex work?**