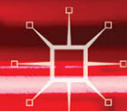


**ROGER MATTHEWS, HELEN EASTON,  
LISA YOUNG & JULIE BINDEL**

# **EXITING** PROSTITUTION

**A STUDY IN FEMALE DESISTANCE**



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## A Study in Female Desistance

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# Preface

This book draws mainly on the PEER research project funded by the National Lottery, and was carried out by Eaves (<http://www.eavesforwomen.org.uk>) and London South Bank University between 2010 and 2012. The research took a multi-method approach, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative methods. These included contact with women involved in or exiting prostitution or formerly trafficked women as well as interviews with practitioners and other relevant professionals. Fieldwork was conducted in seven locations across England, with women participating in the study in Doncaster, Ipswich, Leeds, London, Newcastle, Southampton and Sheffield. The research incorporated visual methods and the use of personal journals by participants. Interviews collected information about women's current and personal circumstances as well as an in-depth life history interview and visual mapping exercise.

Some 114 women (55 of whom had exited prostitution) participated in the face-to-face interviews. Of these, 73 were or had been involved in street prostitution, 6 in brothels, 13 in private premises and 12 as escorts. We also interviewed 7 women who had been trafficked. Three women sold sex in clubs. In all, 117 interviews were undertaken, but 3 were not completed; the total number of completed interviews with women was therefore 114. A total of 35 semi-structured interviews were undertaken with stakeholders across 10 sites in England and Wales.

Ethical approval for the research was obtained from both the London South Bank University Research Ethics Committee and the Central London (Camden and Islington) NHS Research Ethics Committee. A research advisory group was convened to provide external guidance for the research and as a regular point of consultation in relation to research tool design, ethical issues and as a testing ground for preliminary findings. The group consisted of ten members including specialist practitioners, academics, members of the Metropolitan Police Service and local government policymakers.



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Thanks also go to all the stakeholders who agreed to be interviewed and shared their experiences, as well as to all the women who participated in the research and who gave up their time to express their views on their involvement in prostitution and their experience of exiting.

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# 1

## The Dynamics of Exiting and Desistance

### Introduction

There has been a considerable amount written about women's entry into prostitution but relatively little about how they exit. Over the past decade, however, there has been growing interest in the exiting process. This interest has been stimulated on one hand by a steady stream of sociological and criminological literature on desistance and on the other by the growing realisation that a large percentage of women involved in prostitution would like to exit if they could (Audet and Carrier 2006; Bradford 2005; Farley 2004; Hough and Rice 2008; Ng and Venticich 2006; O'Neill and Campbell 2011).

It has been found in various studies that few women see prostitution as a long-term 'career' but that most aim to be involved for a limited period of time, either to deal with financial or personal issues, or to finance drug habits. Some women take breaks from prostitution to take up 'formal' employment for certain periods and return to prostitution at a later date (Melrose et al. 1999). Significantly, a recent review of trends in Glasgow found that in the late 1990s that there were an estimated 1,100 women involved in street prostitution and that by 2010 the number had decreased to approximately 250 (Matthews and Easton 2011; McKeganey 2005). This dramatic decrease serves as a salient reminder that women do leave prostitution over time in considerable numbers, and that in some cases they leave with a minimal amount of formal intervention.

In contrast, the successful removal of prostitution from the streets of Ipswich following the murders of five women in December 2006

involved the implementation of a coordinated multi-agency intervention (Poland et al. 2008). The key to this success was, on one hand, the provision of an integrated and comprehensive set of services that linked exiting to prevention work, while tackling demand; and on the other, the adoption of a multi-agency case conference approach for each of the women involved in street prostitution. This type of individualised case management approach has also been adopted to some extent in Manchester, Leeds and Glasgow. The aim is to develop a care plan and personalised programme that can engage with the women on a one-to-one basis and facilitate exiting. What is also significant about the exiting programmes that have been developed in these locations is that they all challenge the view that prostitution is here to stay and believe that a substantial reduction in the level of prostitution is not only desirable but also possible (Lawrence 2007; Manchester Prostitution Strategy 2007; Matthews and Easton 2011; Scottish Executive 2004; Ward 2007).

### **Explaining desistance**

Desistance is usually defined as the end of a period of involvement in addictive or deviant behaviour. However, it is always possible that those who have overcome addictions or stopped offending for a period may return at a later date. Consequently, it is always uncertain whether individuals have actually desisted or just stopped engaging in an activity for the period under consideration (Maruna 2001). Thus, although there is always a degree of arbitrariness involved in defining forms of desistance, for our purposes 'stopping' is defined as ceasing involvement in prostitution for up to three months, while 'exiting' refers to those women who have ceased their involvement in prostitution for at least three months. Normally, the process of exiting is seen to involve the construction of a post-prostitution identity and the adoption of an ex-role.

For the most part, studies to date have operated with a zero-sum conception of exiting. That is, an assessment is made of whether women are still involved in prostitution or whether they have ceased involvement altogether. However, many women will for one reason or another reduce their involvement in prostitution over time. It is important to find out, however, whether this reduction is linked to efforts to exit or not. By the same token, developing strategies

to facilitate exiting based solely on the final state of termination is unlikely to fully illuminate this complex process (Kanzemain 2007).

The growing focus on desistance has drawn attention to the issue of how people make radical changes in lifestyle over time and how they overcome various forms of addiction or cease their involvement in certain forms of behaviour. Among the most influential contributors to the literature on desistance has been the work of Sampson and Laub (1993). Adopting a form of longitudinal analysis, they have sought to identify the main factors that underpin significant changes in the life-course and suggest that gaining employment or entering a marriage or other stable relationship are amongst the most significant events that can affect desistance. Importantly, they argue that many of the classic predictors of onset and frequency of offending do not explain desistance. They also note that groups such as drug users do not follow the usual 'routes out'. Desistance, they suggest, is a process rather than an event and it is subject to reversals and failure. However, the causal relationship between desistance and employment and marriage has been questioned, and while it may be the case that these events are the most important factors for some groups, they may not be for certain marginalised groups, such as women involved in prostitution (Vaughan 2007).

## **Gender and desistance**

It is evident that even amongst the limited literature on desistance the vast majority is directed towards men, particularly young men. The research that has looked at women has shown both similarities and differences in the nature of desistance for men and women. Graham and Bowling (1995), for example, found that becoming an adult (e.g. leaving home, finishing schooling or starting a family) was related to desistance for women, but the same was not true for men. Sommers et al. (1994) on the other hand found that the factors associated with female desistance from street crime were very similar to those reported in male street offenders.

Giordano et al. (2002) found that neither marital attachment nor job stability was strongly related to female desistance, although they note that the cognitive transformations made by men and women tended to be similar and that maturation was a key factor in the desistance process for both groups. McIvor et al. (2004) found that

while men explained their desistance in utilitarian terms, women often alluded to the moral dimensions of their activities. Thus, it is suggested that women's desistance has a more pronounced 'relational' dimension. Interestingly, McIvor et al. (2004) and her colleagues note that many of the women in their study were keen to be viewed as desisting, even if they continued to offend. Also, the authors emphasise that it is important to distinguish between attitudinal and behavioural change when thinking about desistance. Relatedly, it is suggested by Graham and Bowling (1995) that disengaging from delinquent peers, whether consciously or by chance, is a necessary condition for desistance for some women.

The focus on gender difference suggests that if the process of desistance is different for men and women there may also be differences in relation to race and class (Katz 2000; O'Neill and Campbell 2011). In a similar way, given that women involved in prostitution are not a homogenous group, there may be significant differences amongst women involved in different forms of prostitution. Sanders (2007) has raised the question of whether exiting is different for street-based women and those who work indoors. It is also the case that 'exiting' has a very different meaning for trafficked women, given the role of coercion and deception in relation to their involvement in prostitution (Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group 2010).

### **Barriers to exiting**

Although studies repeatedly indicate that a large proportion of women involved in prostitution would like to exit, there are a number of formidable obstacles that women have to confront and overcome if they plan to leave prostitution. For many commentators, dealing with drug addiction is identified as a major issue, since it is estimated that in the UK some 70–90 per cent of women who work on the streets are problematic drug users (May and Hunter 2006). In most cases the drugs of choice are heroin and crack cocaine, the latter being particularly addictive and personally and socially destructive (Bourgois 2003; Goldstein 1979).

The question has been raised, however, of the extent to which drug use and addiction precedes, or is exacerbated, by involvement in prostitution (Potterat et al. 1998). It has also been suggested that

the links between drug use, prostitution and other forms of social exclusion may be overplayed (Buchanan 2004; Melrose 2007). Problematic drug use, however, is frequently found to be linked to other vulnerabilities and needs, while homelessness has been identified as a recurring issue amongst women involved in prostitution and many women report financial and health problems that can act as a barrier to exiting (Benoit and Millar 2001; Pitcher 2006).

Apart from these widely recognised obstacles, women involved in prostitution tend to refer to problems of lifestyle, boredom and above all money (Hoigard and Finstad 1992). Relatedly, women involved in prostitution tend to have low levels of skills, poor employment histories and limited social capital. Consequently, the employment opportunities that are available are often low paid menial or temporary jobs (Hough and Rice 2008). In some cases the main barrier to exiting is the pressure from coercive and abusive partners/pimps, a proportion of whom are themselves problematic drug users (Poland et al. 2008; Ward 2007). The problem of dealing with coercive and abusive partners has moved agencies in some areas to see this as a domestic violence issue and has fostered attempts to treat women involved in prostitution and their partners simultaneously (Boynton 1998; Rice 2010). According to Hoigard and Finstad (1992), underpinning these various obstacles are problems of shame, issues of identity, a sense of insecurity and the difficulties in overcoming marginalisation and stigmatisation.

Another barrier to exiting that has been identified by a number of researchers and activists in different countries is women's involvement in the criminal justice system (Hubbard 2006; Pitcher 2006). Involvement in the criminal justice system for prostitution-related offences is seen to increase women's vulnerability on one hand, and to make it difficult for them to gain legitimate employment, on the other. Thus there is a growing body of opinion amongst those who are trying to develop exiting programmes that soliciting for the purposes of prostitution should be decriminalised (PAAFE 2005).

## **What works and best practice**

The interest in exiting in the UK was increased significantly by the publication of *Tackling Street Prostitution: A Holistic Approach* by Hester and Westmarland (2004) and the subsequent official endorsement of

exiting programmes in the Home Office publication *A Co-ordinated Prostitution Strategy* (Home Office 2006). Hester and Westmarland (2004) have provided an evaluation of a number of exiting projects that have been established in England and Wales. In their examination, they concluded that provision needs to be holistic and integrated in order to meet the complex needs of women seeking support. They suggested that outreach is a significant prerequisite for building a sustainable working relationship with the women, while providing one-to-one support. They emphasised the need for fast-track drugs programmes and the provision of emergency accommodation where possible. Although Hester and Westmarland (2004) sought to identify 'what works' in relation to the exiting projects that they examined, they note that measuring change presented difficulties and that much of the exiting provision was 'crisis driven'. Consequently, they found it difficult to attribute change to specific interventions. They note that because different projects operated with different philosophies, policies and practices and used different definitions of 'engagement' and 'exiting', it was difficult if not impossible to determine 'what works' with any degree of confidence.

Other evaluations of exiting projects have encountered similar problems. The evaluation of Project Respect's Pathways Project, based in Melbourne, Australia, for example, identifies 'success' in terms of the number of women attending particular programmes together with statements from service users regarding the perceived benefits (Lewis and Montague 2008). However, there is little in this form of evaluation about 'what works' in terms of desistance or of assessing the effect of different interventions on the process of change (Christian et al. 2009). The evaluation of the Safe Exit Diversion Scheme in London, which is principally a scheme designed to divert women from the criminal justice system, found that it helped women to build more stable lives and increase their engagement with services. However, the number of women exiting prostitution in the review period was minimal and it is not clear what worked for them (Rice 2010). The author of the report also notes that while the provision of emergency accommodation is seen as a positive response to homelessness and associated vulnerability, it was reported that living in hostels with other vulnerable, marginalised and drug-dependent women can in some cases make it hard to give up prostitution and drug use.