

EXPOSING THE “PRETTY WOMAN” MYTH:
A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF THE LIVES OF FEMALE
STREETWALKING PROSTITUTES

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The author examined the dichotomy between the lives of real women who are prostituted on the street versus the popular imagery of prostituted women through the media (e.g. Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*, Elizabeth Shue in *Leaving Las Vegas* and Jodie Foster in *Taxi Driver*). The author reviews the research on prostituted women that exposes the degree and amount of violence, abuse and exploitation they experience. Estimates of the rate of childhood sexual abuse that prostituted women experienced range from 10% to 73% – with the bulk of the research suggesting the higher range of violence. From this, two paths have been suggested between childhood sexual abuse and later prostitution. The first suggests a direct link between child sexual abuse and prostitution; the other being a more indirect link which is largely mediated by run-away behavior. While it appears that most women who are prostituted have been sexually abused as children, to connect this solely with women being prostituted is a false linking. As Bollough and Bullough (1996) stated “...when all is said and done, no single factor stands out as causal in a woman becoming a prostitute” (sic) (p.171). Women who are prostituted enter from a complex culmination of multiple factors both interpersonally and contextually.

The article is based on a research project involving 43 prostituted and formerly prostituted women in a “midsized Midwestern city.” A subgroup of five women was also created for more in-depth interviews which provided a depth to the research that would not have been possible through the survey methods alone. The women ranged in age from 19 to 56 and most lived either in shelters or were incarcerated. Most of the women were no longer in prostitution although most had escaped prostitution only within the past year. Most of the women also reported being addicted to drugs (crack and alcohol being the most common) although the majority of these also reported being in recovery. Most of these women were also mothers, although only a minority was living with their children at the time of the research. The average age at which these women first were prostituted was 19, with a range of between 11 and 31, and most of the women were prostituted for an average of 11.5 years.

The article provides a brief biographic description of the 5 women in the subgroup (who were representative of the larger group). Through these biographical descriptions, the reader is offered an opportunity to better “know” the women and come to read more about her story. Each woman describes her early life within her family of origin, her current situation, and her life in prostitution. All of the five women described stories of extreme physical and sexual abuse within their families of origin. Most of the five described beginning to runaway at relatively early ages (10).

After these brief biographies, the author provides a more in depth examination of the results of the research of the 43 women. Like the subgroup, a majority of the women (nearly 2/3) reported being sexually molested as a young child. Most of those who were abused stated that they did not report the abuse to authorities. Those who did report, the vast majority stated that they were either ignored or not believed. The sexual abuse of the children lasted an average of 5 years. Most of the women also stated experiences of being abandoned (literally or symbolically) as a young child. For many, they experienced being sexually abused *and* being abandoned. As a result, nearly half of the women stated that they began to run away from home (or foster homes) during early adolescents – the average age that they began running away was between 11 and 13. The average age at which these women started being prostituted at 19.4 years of age, and the primary reasons described for being prostituted was drug abuse and economic necessity.

Unlike the findings of most prostituted women, these project indicated that less than half (17 of 43) reported involvement with a pimp. Those 17 reported several similarities with women who didn't have pimps including: high rates of physical violence, fathering of children, awareness of the women's prostitution and drug abuse, and introducing the women to the streets. In other words, pimps and boyfriends both acted in similar ways to the women who were prostituted in the above ways.

There were also differences between boyfriends and pimps. The pimps required that the women make a certain amount of money; took all of their income in exchange for shelter, clothing, food and protection; and often had several women working for them at once.

The women reported having varying degrees of control with relationship to the johns. Although some reported an ability to negotiate specific sexual acts to some degree, most reported intermittent (at best) condom use.

As indicated earlier, most of the women (38) had children although only 5 lived with their children. Most of the children had been placed in foster care while the others lived with their fathers, or other family members. The women themselves reported sporadic contact with their children. This research did not explore the reasons for the disrupted relationship with their children.

Most of the women (31) reported incidents of “severe abuse” at the hands of their boyfriend, pimps or johns; and most also reported being raped, beaten with objects, threatened with weapons or abandoned in remote regions. The research did not report on frequency of the abuse these women experienced or if they experienced more than one violent incidence (although common sense suggests that many of them did). When asked if they reported these incidents to the police, the women responded “incredulously.” Their collective experience suggested that the police and society at large would not take their reports of abuse seriously and would blame her for what happened to her. Rather than face the blame, most did not report the incidents.

Leaving the streets proved to be a difficult and arduous process. When offered the option, the majority of these women (26) accepted assistance from an intervention program that was specifically designed for prostituted women, although their involvement was often sporadic. One three of the women were able to leave the streets on their own.

Conclusions

This brief article provides more information about women who have been prostituted and offers a better understanding of their lives and decisions. This article provides information on ways to support and assist prostituted women, and provides information that may guide the development of intervention programs to assist prostituted women.

References

Bollough, B. and Bullough, V. (1996). "Female prostitution: Current research and changing interpretations." *Annual Review of Sex Research*. V7 pp 158 – 180.