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2020
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Sex in the city: Exploring agency and challenges of street-based sex workers

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters in Community-Based Counselling Psychology

Abstract

Research into the reasons why sex workers enter and stay in sex work has largely viewed entry from perspectives of either choice or constraint. Choice perspectives attribute entry to reasons such as female agency and empowerment, and social and financial independence. Constraint perspectives attribute entry to reasons such as economic necessity, drug and alcohol abuse, childhood sexual abuse, lack of education and job opportunities, and homelessness and truancy. The study sought to explore how 10 street-based sex workers framed their presence within the sex work industry. It employed a qualitative approach to explore the stories sex workers told about their entry into sex work, their experiences within the industry, and the meanings they made of these experiences. The exploration and analysis of their accounts were informed by thematic analysis. Four broad themes were identified. These included: Poverty, Agency, Challenges, and Competition and Cooperation. The findings suggest that while an overt choice to pursue sex work as a desirable vocation was not commonly reported, participants communicated a sense of agency and choice in the decisions they made to better their circumstances through entering sex work, and the mechanisms they utilised to make meaning of their experiences and cope in their work. The findings suggest support third wave feminists in their contention that it is simplistic to view entry and continuation in sex work from perspectives communicated by either choice/constraint paradigms alone and argue for the necessity to explore the social contexts informing the reported realities of black working class sex workers in South Africa. Policy, policing, and health workers responses to sex work should therefore take these factors into account.

Keywords: *Street-based sex work; agency; constraint; intersectionality; third wave feminism*