

# Becoming An Ex-Sex Worker

## Making Transitions Out of a Deviant Career

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This article has four core aims. First, to identify the processes of change women undertake to leave sex work through a typology of transitions. The typology suggests four dominant ways out of sex work as reactionary, gradual planning, natural progression, and “yo-yoing.” Second, the article argues against the low self-control theory by asserting that sex workers engage in specific deviant “careers” rather than stable deviant roles and, therefore, exit to “complete conformist” once sex work is ceased. Third, it rejects Mansson and Hedin’s claim that the “emotional commitment” of individual women is the key factor to leaving and instead argues that structural, political, cultural, and legal factors as well as cognitive transformations and agency are key determinants in trapping women in the industry. Fourth, the article challenges the U.K. policy context that reinforces “exiting” through compulsory rehabilitation and the criminalization of sex work.

**Keywords:** *sex work; transitions; deviant career; exiting; desistance*

In the United Kingdom, the sex markets are varied and diverse in their nature, location, and characteristics. Traditionally, the street sex work market operates in many towns and cities, although this is heavily policed because of a recent government enforcement strategy that aims to “disrupt the sex markets” by using punitive soliciting, loitering, and antisocial behavior laws (Home Office, 2006). The street market is interlinked entirely with the drug markets (May, Edmunds, & Hough, 1999), as established in the United States by Maher (2000). However, the indoor markets are significantly different as there are loopholes in the law that make some forms of commercial sex legal. For instance, although brothel keeping laws, procuring women into prostitution, and living off immoral earnings are illegal, the actual act of selling or buying sex is legal in the United Kingdom, and one woman can work alone in her own premises perfectly legitimately. One significant sex market is that of independent entrepreneurial sex workers who set up escort services, visiting men at hotels or renting an apartment to receive customers at their place of work. Much

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of the escort work is organized via the Internet (Sanders, 2005). Other indoor options are to work from a flat with several other women or to work in a massage parlour, also known as a "sauna." In the United Kingdom, there is a licensing system whereby establishments can be licensed to sell massage only. This has traditionally been a thin disguise for a brothel where sexual services can be purchased from a number of women. In cities such as Manchester, Merseyside, and Birmingham, the sauna-type establishments are popular and many saunas are well managed and provide good working conditions for sex workers (Sanders & Campbell, in press).

Knowledge and understanding about the leaving processes are important on several accounts. First, this is an underdeveloped area of the sociology of sex work that leaves knowledge gaps about how women move out of a "deviant" activity, "career," and identity that is often associated with criminality. Second, leaving street sex work, known in the policy literature as "exiting," has been a significant focus for social and criminal justice policy makers who initiated a review of the prostitution laws through the consultation document, *Paying the Price* (Home Office, 2004), followed by the *Coordinated Prostitution Strategy* (Home Office, 2006) that sets out the guidelines for how prostitution should be managed in the United Kingdom. Information about the processes of leaving sex work and reintegration into mainstream occupations or resistance from further deviance or criminality can feed directly into policy discussions and debates as well as welfare practices with sex workers who seek assistance. Third, knowledge of transitions out of lifestyles that are considered deviant can build on and inform the desistance literature, particularly understanding of the complexity of the gendered process of change or desistance (see Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002).

Despite a wealth of empirical findings and commentary on sex work, and some classic studies of abandoning behaviors, identities, and transformations from deviant roles or careers (Adler, 1992; Becker, 1963; Brown, 1991; Fuchs Ebauch, 1988; Luckenbill & Best, 1981; Meisenhelder, 1977), what we know about how women leave the sex industry is patchy, largely based on the street market, and rarely the main focus of research. There has been little commentary on sex work as a career, little intrigue into stigma-management strategies or the process of reintegration into conformity after sexual deviancy. We know that women remain in street sex work because of economic need (James, 1974; Manopaiboon et al., 2003), drug addiction (Gossop, Powis, Griffiths, & Strang, 1994; May et al., 1999), and a lack of alternative employment options (Benson & Matthews, 1995), especially where individuals have convictions (Phoenix, 1999). More recent, Cusick and Hickman (2005) have identified strong connections between being "trapped" in "outdoor/drift" sex work, drug use, and having criminal convictions. Hester and Westmarland (2004) evaluated 11 multiagency projects across the United Kingdom for street sex workers, of which some had remits to provide services for sex workers to exit prostitution; they found among women who used outreach services that 69% (128 out of 186) of street workers had attempted to leave on one or more occasion (p. 85). What we also know is that

the longevity of involvement in prostitution is varied. Potterat, Woodhouse, Muth, and Muth (1990), from observations spanning two decades (1970 to 1988) of sex workers across the sexual marketplace in Colorado, reported three types of career longevity in sex work: "evanescent" workers who engage for a few days or weeks annually, "short-term" workers who work intermittently for weeks or even months, and "long-term" workers who are involved for several years although not continuously, with an average career length of 4 to 5 years. These findings suggest an occupational reality characterized by a spectrum of involvement ranging from sporadic to long term.

Outreach projects that provide services to women involved in the sex industry have traditionally assisted women to make changes in their lives, and those professionals working closely with individuals are aware of the trapping factors of poverty, lifestyle, poor access to appropriate services, and the emotional and identity anxieties that accompany stopping sex work (Women's Health in Prostitution, 1999). What is known about indoor sex workers' leaving is even more limited. Rickard (2001) presented "imaginary" curricula vitae of five sex workers in the United Kingdom, identifying a range of employment experiences, skills, and future work plans while individuals continued to sell sex as a job. Both Rickard's study and that by Manopaiboon et al. (2003), focusing on female sex workers in the brothels of Northern Thailand, note how it was not necessarily negative attitudes toward the job or clients that motivated workers to leave but other concerns such as long-term financial stability, the unregulated nature of the industry, and worries about HIV/AIDS. These findings suggest different support needs are required to match the experiences of indoor workers who may want to explore other opportunities to leave the industry.

The most prominent piece of research in relation to leaving sex work comes from Mansson and Hedin (1999), who were motivated by the Swedish state's long-term project to systematically stop the expansion of the sex trade. This life-history study of 23 sex workers, mainly street based, offers some useful insight into the different methods of "breakaway" and the challenges of leaving the industry, such as living with a marginal status and managing intimate relationships. Mansson and Hedin developed an "exit model" that highlights the influence of structural, situational, interpersonal, and individual factors when women attempt to leave. However, the final conclusions of the authors are that it is the "emotional commitment" of individual women that determines whether removal from the sex industry is achieved. The theoretical position that locates the responsibility for entering into, remaining, and leaving the sex industry with individuals has influenced U.K. policy in recent years. The "responsibilization" agenda has influenced how individual sex workers are expected to take control of their involvement in sex work; otherwise, the criminal justice system will be the mechanism through which women are "supported" out of sex work (Phoenix & Oerton, 2005, p. 100). It is this responsibilization of women's exiting process that this study seeks to contest by exploring with sex workers the triggers and barriers for leaving that take account of their own agency and the structural disadvantages that make the physical and cognitive transition difficult.

This article has four core aims. First, to identify a typology of transitions that illustrates four different processes of change that women undertake to leave sex work. Second, to examine the deviant career of sex workers and assert that once sex work has ceased, sex workers adopt a “complete conformist” role and do not continue into other deviant roles. Therefore, I argue that deviance for sex workers is fluid, temporary, and time specific rather than stable across the life course. Third, I reject the claim by Mansson and Hedin (1999) that the emotional commitment of individual women is the key component to successfully leaving sex work. Instead, I argue that although agency has a significant place in transitions, the structural, political, cultural, and legal factors, as well as cognitive transformations and agency, are key determinants in trapping women into sex work. Fourth, I challenge the U.K. policy on prostitution that reinforces exiting through compulsory rehabilitation and criminalization.

## **The Study**

### **The Genesis of the Study**

This project was inspired by a previous ethnographic study with female sex workers in the United Kingdom, many of whom spoke of their plans to leave, experiences of taking time out and career breaks, and anxieties about not knowing how to leave (Sanders, 2005). After this original study, and congruent with the political climate in the United Kingdom concerning prostitution, a research project was designed specifically to investigate the processes of leaving the sex industry. It was decided that a small-scale project would be the most suitable way to respond quickly to the policy environment.

### **Method**

The research was informed by a symbolic interactionist perspective that promotes a set of principles that seeks to find understanding about the world and social interactions by exploring the meaning that people attach to their behaviors, interactions, and experiences. This theoretical paradigm was adopted as a proven and accessible standpoint that provides a space in research for those in a vulnerable or silenced position to exercise their voice and contribute to a wider process of knowledge production and potential policy development. For these reasons, qualitative research methods were adopted that are informed by the need for a sensitive approach to data collection, consideration of the researcher-respondent dynamics and its impact on data, and the process of reflexivity before, during, and after the research process (Roberts & Sanders, 2005). A small-scale pilot study was designed based on semistructured interviews that could be described as “guided conversations.” The overarching research

questions were as follows: (a) To what extent are the transitions out of sex work dependent on individual emotional commitment? (b) What structural barriers are hurdles to leaving sex work? (c) What are significant triggers to leaving? (d) How are barriers to leaving overcome? (e) What are the consequences of leaving? (f) To what extent do women return to sex work and why?

## **Access and Interview Process**

Apart from assistance with transcription and analysis, the whole of the design and data collection was conducted by the author. Street sex workers were accessed through a sexual health and harm reduction outreach project that works directly with women, offering a range of services including a mobile van that is taken to the streets to make contact with women in the working environment and offer drug and health services. Interviews were conducted with the 15 ex-street workers in the drop-in center at the sexual health project during the daytime. Here, the interviews were conducted in complete privacy with no interruptions and in a familiar environment where the women felt safe. Indoor sex workers were contacted through a local sauna that was also known to the sexual health project. Initially, one contact was made with a woman who currently worked as a receptionist in the sauna. From this contact, several other women were contacted who had worked in the sex industry; hence, a snowball sample of referrals was achieved. For the ex-indoor workers, half of the interviews were conducted in the sauna, either in the communal lounge before the premises had opened or in the back room where the women rested in between clients. Four of the women invited me to conduct the interview in their homes, as this was a comfortable and appropriate place for them. A further 5 women who had experience of the indoor sex markets were interviewed on the telephone because of geographical distance. All respondents accepted my request to tape the interviews.

All of the women went through a verbal informed consent process that involved two stages. On initial contact, either by telephone or in person, I explained the nature of the project, the general aims of the study, how respondents' identity would be kept anonymous, what would happen with the tape recordings, and who would hear the interview. If potential respondents were interested in taking part, I then made arrangements for them to be interviewed at a later date. At the start of the interview, respondents were told of their rights to withdraw at any point and not answer questions, as well as reiterating assurances of confidentiality. I explained that the professional transcription service had a confidential contract with the researcher that prevented any breaches of confidentiality. Additional checks were made to ensure anonymity by not recording any real names or identifiers but instead, asking the respondent to choose a pseudonym to be used in the writing up and dissemination process. Written informed consent was not required because of the need to ensure anonymity and to address the participants' concerns to avoid any formal identification with a research project in the sex industry.

To address the questions that formed the research proposal, the interview schedule included topics such as routes into sex work, money, relationships, education, career planning, mainstream employment, involvement in the criminal justice system, drug use, housing, health, mental health and self-esteem, stigma, triggers and life events that led to leaving, support services, returning to sex work, change in identity and role, and coping strategies. There were some nuances between the questions asked of the street workers compared to those asked of the indoor workers. For instance, all respondents were initially asked about drug use and violence, but because this was generally experienced by street workers and not by indoor workers, some interviewees had more to say about the impact of these issues on their decisions to leave. In a similar manner, indoor workers often had more to say about previous mainstream work experiences, education, and career plans compared to street workers.

The experience of the researcher with the different groups of women is worth reflecting on. I interviewed women at various stages of their transitions: Some had moved on entirely to a different lifestyle, others had made the transition only recently, and a small number had recently returned to sex work. Some of the interviewees were at the stage of being very sure that they would never reenter the sex industry, others were more realistic about the “yo-yo” effect (a “finding” I describe below) and had been through cycles of stopping and starting sex work. Others were not optimistic about staying out of sex work, usually because their drug treatment was not going well and they could “feel” the pull of moneymaking through sex work and, therefore, were finding it hard to resist returning to the “old” life. Consequently, the interview experiences were a mix of celebration and affirmation for those who had “moved on” entirely and caution and apprehension for those who were starting on what seemed a precarious road or were vividly living through the trauma of the transformation.

## **The Participants**

Thirty interviewees were purposely selected from the street ( $n = 15$ ) and the indoor markets ( $n = 15$ ). The latter involved women who had either worked in a sauna or as an independent escort advertising through the Internet. At the time of interview, all but 3 women had stopped working for between 3 months and 7 years. Of the 3 that continued to work, 1 street worker had just stopped drug treatment and had returned to street working, 1 escort had left three times during a career of 15 years and had currently returned to work for the past 3 years, and 1 other escort was in the process of leaving and had reduced her involvement considerably. These women were accepted into the sample because they identified important patterns of movement in and out of the industry. All of the 15 street workers identified as White British; 13 of the 15 indoor workers identified as White British and 2 identified as African Caribbean. The ex-indoor workers were currently employed in a range of occupations including media, office work, counseling, graphic design, teaching, researching, and social services,

**Table 1**  
**Characteristics of the Sample**

| Characteristic                                           | Ex-Street Worker (n = 15) | Ex-Indoor Worker (n = 15) |
|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Average age                                              | 21.5                      | 33                        |
| Average age of entry                                     | 16.4                      | 23                        |
| Average career length (range from 18 months to 15 years) | 4.5                       | 6.5                       |
| Mother                                                   | n = 5                     | n = 8                     |
| Average age of leaving education                         | 15                        | 18                        |

Note: Values represent years.

and 3 women were taking higher degrees. The ex-street workers had moved into mainly unskilled or manual jobs, typically shop work and office work, whereas several women were taking college courses in subjects such as information technology, beauty therapy, hairdressing, and access to higher education. Details of the sample characteristics are recorded in Table 1.

## Analysis

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using a grounded theory approach and the software package Nvivo. The transcripts were analyzed using a thematic analytic process to develop weblike themes that summarize the main themes of the text (Attride-Stirling, 2001). This is essentially an inductive approach that allows the themes to be presented rather than imposing a “top-down” approach whereby themes are previously decided and sought from the data. In this inductive process, themes emerge from the data, some more frequently than others. Dominant themes as well as minor themes are important because the minor themes can highlight behavior and interactions that are the exception to the rule. The dominant themes (given the number of respondents, this was considered to be themes evident in two thirds of the sample) were those that formed the main findings. The examples of themes can be found in the selections of the verbatim quotes used in the results section; for purposes of this article, only quotes relating to transitions are identified. These quotes were chosen as clear examples of the dominant themes. Age of respondents is provided and pseudonyms have been used, whereas the terms *street worker*, *sauna worker*, and *escort* are used to identify which market the respondent had left.

## Results: Types of Transitions

My findings suggest that the processes of change out of sex work involve a combination of strategies including reduced engagement, time out, career breaks, reentering, part-time involvement, and “drift” before complete removal. To conceptualize these

**Table 2**  
**Typology of Transitions**

| Type of Transition  | Trigger for Street Worker                                                                   | Trigger for Indoor Worker                                                              |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Reactionary         | Violence, ill health, significant life events (e.g., pregnancy/child removal, imprisonment) | New relationship, being discovered, violence                                           |
| Gradual planning    | Drug treatment program, rehousing, welfare support, therapeutic engagement                  | Timed transition alongside alternative career and financial planning                   |
| Natural progression | Desire for a new, safer lifestyle that is drug free; concerned about working conditions     | Age, natural career length, disillusionment with working conditions/lack of regulation |
| Yo-Yoing            | Failed drug treatment and support package, drift in and out, criminal justice involvement   | Unplanned exit, psychological strain, working "on and off"/"career break"              |

processes of change and identify patterns from the findings, it can be deduced that there are four routine pathways out of sex work (see Table 2).

*Reactionary Routes Out: "If I didn't do something about it, I'd end up dead."*

Half of the women across the markets described how leaving sex work had often been the result of a reaction to a significant life event. This was usually related to the sex industry, although other life events, such as pregnancy, were also cited. A common experience across the markets was responding to either a specific violent attack by a client or the general increase in violence and hostility that sex workers encountered on the street: "What turned the corner for me was I got robbed and beaten at a house that I was working at. I didn't leave immediately but that was the reason to think about leaving" (Emily, ex-sauna worker, 34). At the time of the interviews, the street sex workers in the local area were dealing with the aftermath of an atrocious murder of a woman whose body was dismembered. This incident was poignant in the interviewee's discourses about the fear of violence and murder:

It [murder of a friend] affected me really badly actually because when I found out, when they [the police] found the leg, I'd been dragged into the park by two guys which prompted me to leave as well. I thought to myself you know, that could have been me. So it's scary. (Zoe, ex-street worker, 25)

There was a familiar discourse among the sex workers in both markets that relayed the fear of violence and hostility. However, rarely was the fear of violence or an

actual attack the main reason for leaving the industry, as motivations to earn money, especially for drugs, would override the fear of violence and the reality of risks.

The effects of heavy crack cocaine and heroin use often produced problematic health issues for some respondents. When street-based workers became very ill and went through a health crisis, usually involving a stay in hospital, they would stop working. Julie explained how a significant factor in making changes was realizing the long-term health implications of the lifestyle and the impact on their families:

I collapsed because I was really thin. I was five stone twelve with the drugs. And I collapsed. I had to go for an ECG and stuff. And the cleaning me out wasn't working right, stuff like that, and I wasn't eating. So I just decided that if I didn't do something about it, I'd end up dead. (Julie, ex-street worker, 28)

A health crisis would momentarily take women out of street sex work, but this was often temporary as women drifted in and out of sex work as drug treatment failed and money was needed once again to fund a drug habit.

Indoor workers explained how it was common for individuals to leave quickly and unplanned in reaction to a personal intimate relationship. This was because of feelings of "falling in love" that conflicted with sex work, thinking differently about sexual relationships, or a reaction to the deceit and lies if sex work was hidden from loved ones:

The partner I have got now, when I was first with him I was working off and on. But then the more involved with him I became and the more in love I fell with him I had to stop working. I couldn't go on with it. It wasn't just a lying thing. It got to the stage where I couldn't actually go in a room with other men because I'd feel dirty and I'd never felt dirty before. (Jessica, ex-sauna worker, 27)

Stopping sex work without notice was often a result of "being discovered" working in a sauna by a boyfriend or other family member who was unaware of the activity: "Some of his friends came in and then just walked out and they had spotted me. They told him [boyfriend] straight away so I had to leave. No notice nothing, which pissed off the boss" (Katie, ex-sauna worker, 24). Pregnancy or recently having children often made women think differently about their bodies, which was incompatible with selling sexual services and displaying their bodies as an economic commercial tool:

I found out I was pregnant but I was scared of not getting my bond back. But I actually had a really, really lovely boss. And I went back for the one day, I'd given in the notice, told him I was pregnant and that I just physically, I couldn't do it and that was it. (Jessica, ex-sauna worker, 27)

Reactionary reasons for leaving sex work were not usually permanent, as the transition was ill thought out and without a conscious plan of how to earn money.

*Gradual Planning: "I didn't want to do this forever."*

In contrast to women who left as a matter of urgency, others explained a conscious planned transition that happened during a period of time. Adler (1992, p. 113) found among drug traffickers that although sometimes a major turning point in their lives led them to exit, more commonly the transition occurred during a gradual period. Women who had been working for several years had often thought about "life after sex work" and had begun to put in place other activities to substitute earnings and develop another career path. Charlie had worked in the industry for more than 10 years and summarized how the gradual planned exit was often a lengthy decision-making and planning process where actually leaving was a goal that took several months, even years, to accomplish:

Leaving was more gradual. . . . Me mum getting breast cancer and losing one of me good friends, made me look at my life and assess. But it still took me a year and it was a year of depression as well, because I started to hate myself. And I quit prostitution at the end of 1997 and then I couldn't live on the income I had coming in so I came back. This time I saved more, sold one of my parlours and then could leave. (Charlie, ex-sauna worker, 35)

Once the debt had cleared I wanted to pay a bit off my mortgage before I left. I wanted a little bit of financial security in case anything happened, so I worked for another year before I left. (Helen, ex-escort, 32)

For women who worked indoors, gradual exit involved clear financial planning to prepare for the significant reduction in earnings. Charlie and Selina explained how financial planning involved a calculated savings plan to provide for their future lifestyle, child care, and other projects:

Every working girl I've ever met I've always said to her, "Split your money three ways. You've got one account for your shopping, your bills; you've got a long-term account for your big buys, your deposit on your house, your cars, your jewellery, your public school fees, for your kids, whatever. And a third account that you never, ever touch so that when they had eventually finished they had a nest egg that they could re-invest, so that they could then go on and do other things." (Charlie, ex-sauna worker, 35)

I was very good at saving. I saved quite a lot of money, sort of six and a half thousand pounds in the first year. Because I always had the mindset that I didn't want to do this forever. (Selina, ex-sauna worker, 34)

The language that indoor sex workers used to describe how they planned leaving the work was significantly different to that of street workers. Those who made lucrative earnings and identified themselves as career sex workers spoke of "retirement" plans:

To have a successful exit route you've got to have some other form of income coming in and you've got to have a very realistic approach to how much you need to live on; one of the major factors being the money side of it. (Clara, ex-escort, 39)

Indoor sex workers also spoke about concerns relating to income tax and a lack of national insurance contributions and pensions for old age. Women sought advice from financial advisers and a few women regularly paid tax to the Inland Revenue as they had registered as therapists or hostesses. There was a real sense of wanting to work legitimately, especially to gain long-term financial benefits. The current legal system prevented legitimate sex provider businesses owned by women from securing a pension for older age or achieving financial security.

Street sex workers who displayed a gradual planned transition out of sex work often started by reducing the amount of sex work by going to the beat less, reducing the number of clients, or working only occasionally. This coincided with starting a methadone program or other holistic therapies to begin to address the multiple issues of addiction, abuse, and exclusion. Women who gradually left the sex industry built up their new life slowly after drug treatment showed signs of success. Central to this planned change was rehousing to suitable secure accommodation and reconciliation with family (especially parents) and often children who had been placed in local authority care. Annabelle revealed how peers introduced her to street sex work and she soon found herself addicted to crack and working to pay for her addiction and that of her friend. Only after Annabelle's family became involved to help her stick to the drug treatment program did she stop using sex work to earn cash:

After the programme was working and my mum had taken me in, things got much better. Like with my family back around me—they've been so good to me the last twelve months. Paid for my holidays, and like I moved back home. They've given me a part time job and that. (Annabelle, ex-street worker, 22)

The gradual planned exit for street workers was often encouraged by specialist services working intensely to get women back into training, education, part-time employment, and other vocational skills training or voluntary work. Suitable housing and accommodation was central to starting a new life and removing oneself from the temptations of the street culture, life, and networks. In response to being asked about how important having a safe place to live was in her transition out of street sex work, Zoe replied,

That's very important if you want to rehabilitate because you can't rehabilitate and live on the streets because its [drugs] all around you. If you take yourself away from the normal places you go to, although it's more isolated there's less temptation because you don't know anybody. And if you have got some kind of support, someone to come and see you and fit in your appointments to get your medication and that type of thing you can overcome it. (Zoe, ex-street worker, 25)

A common theme among both street and indoor sex workers was the changes they had noted in the working conditions and characteristics of sex work that had contributed to a gradual decision to leave the industry. In both markets, interviewees spoke of sex work becoming more dangerous, an increasing difficulty to earn money, and a heightened competitiveness:

It wasn't so much the clients that were the problem, it wasn't the actual job itself . . . a lot of it was the people that run these places and how much money they want to take and I just found everyone was getting greedier and you were having to do more for the money and some of the nasty things that the clients wanted, I just wasn't comfortable with it anymore. It was getting too much like hard work. (Emily, ex-sauna worker, 34)

Just the fact that there were a lot more violence going on outside. And like my friend were murdered and I got attacked. . . . There were more and more girls anyway, so it were like a struggle to earn your money. . . . And they'd [clients] be wanting it without condoms and stuff, and you'd be stood there all night just to get a customer. . . . So there were no point. It weren't worth it. (Letisha, ex-street worker, 28)

With the street markets notoriously more violent compared to the relative safety of the indoor venues (Sanders & Campbell, in press), safety was a prominent risk for street workers that prompted motivations to leave. With increased police crackdowns resulting from the government's strategy of enforcement against women who solicit and men who "kerbcrawl" (Home Office, 2006), women on the streets are forced to work in more perilous conditions and take more risks. This may have the sporadic effect of convincing women to leave the street scene, but in reality, street sex workers need a range of support, welfare benefits, housing, and drug rehabilitation to plan a gradual exit and a sustainable lifestyle free from the trapping factors that encourage drift in and out of sex work. Equally, although there is evidence of well-managed saunas and self-regulated businesses, a lack of regulation through licensing brothels, for example, leaves women exposed to exploitation and oppressive working conditions.

*"Natural" Progression: "I think my time is up now."*

In both markets, interviewees described a process of natural progression out of the career that ended their involvement in the sex industry. However, there were often different triggers for indoor workers compared to street workers. On the street, women often reached a natural point of change based on a history of failed drug treatments, drifting in and out of the industry, violence, and a chaotic lifestyle that in extreme circumstances had women clinging onto life. Eventually this life became too much of a burden, and a strong desire for a different lifestyle was the catalyst for change. Julie had been into drug rehabilitation several times and had currently stopped working for 3 months. She described how she came to the point of resolution to finally leave:

I've been trying [to leave] for a while. I've just had enough because I were injecting and it were getting to the point where I just couldn't find a vein anymore and I just had enough. And just wanted to get my life back to normal. And I tried to get on methadone once but it didn't work, then I were going to try going to a rehab. I just think I've had enough of it now. It's been going on for too long. So I don't want the rest of my life doing drugs, so it's either now or never really. That's what it is. (Julie, ex-street worker, 28)

Other street sex workers explained that it was an accumulation of negative incidents relating to a life permeated by drug misuse, criminality, and danger that provided the momentum to leave. After living a life of chaos, embroiled with coercive drug-related relationships and a daily routine based on crack use funded by sex work, one interviewee explained how a catalyst of incidents prompted her to leave:

At the end it was a case of the drugs squad called me for supplying. A customer was going to kill me and I'd lost everything that ever meant anything to me and it was time to find myself and get back on my feet. (Vicky, ex-street worker, 32)

For indoor workers there was also evidence that women came to a natural point in their working career when it was time to stop and do something else. This was often triggered by getting older, a realization that new plans for the future need to be made that do not rely on sex work, as well as aspirations to do other kinds of work:

I'm getting old, I'm now 37 and I suppose, you come to a stage where you think right okay, I'm unskilled, don't know what I'm going to do, got to think about the long-term. (Stacey, ex-escort, 37)

It wasn't just any one thing, it was lots of little things. But the biggest factor was my age, for me, that was just personal, there were other women older than me working, but I just couldn't be bothered anymore. (Mia, ex-sauna worker, 39)

Felicity was still working at the time of the interview but had reduced her involvement considerably while she had set up her own graphic design business. She had slowly reduced her escorting to what she now described as "moonlighting" with regular clients:

I wouldn't ever give up my main thing [graphic design business] because like I say I do think we have a shelf life and I can't do this [escorting] forever and I think I am probably more aware of it because of my age. It's too competitive out there with more girls coming in now, so I just keep my regulars. (Felicity, escort, 39)

Some interviewees were very conscious of how age was a deciding factor that determined retirement from sex work. Some escorts said there was less demand for older

women and the pressure to “look good” was not something they wanted to keep up in older age. The “shelf life” in the above quotation refers to issues such as the menopause, having surgery, and gynaecological health concerns as reasons for naturally coming to the end of a sex work career. Irrespective of age, indoor workers echoed the same sentiments as street workers, that there was a natural length of time that individuals can work and then it was time for change:

Working eight years on and off, some people can work all their lives but some people can only work for like a couple of months and it's not for them. Working eight years, I think my time is up now. (Jessica, ex-sauna worker, 27)

Psychological strain and stress of sex work in relation to emotional work and labor has begun to be documented in prostitution studies (Sanders, 2005; Shaver, 1996). Responding to the needs of others, in both a physical and emotionally demanding job, can produce specific occupational health issues that have not been considered because of the illegitimacy afforded sex work in prohibition regimes.

*The Yo-Yo Pattern: “I’ve had more comebacks than Shirley Bassey.”*

Interviewees who described the various processes of change also accounted for how leaving was often preceded by frequent movement in and out of sex work. This yo-yoing effect is experienced by indoor and street sex workers, but the “trapping” factors of the markets are different. Street workers, without planned transitions, were attracted back into sex work because of the need to earn money for drugs. Parallel movements in and out of the criminal justice system for offences such as possession of drugs, shoplifting, and other minor offences often stimulated this yo-yo effect. Sarah had been drifting in and out of street sex work for more than 10 years:

It took two years to get that house and that's what I really wanted. But I think that was my downfall. I started doing the rock and that. And it were like I had to support myself and Joel and it were all too much. I started doing crack cocaine and then I started doing heroin again. And then one thing led to another and it all spiralled and then I lost Joel [her son] again—I'd only had him six months. . . . I do want the education and then a job. . . . I don't want to be sat bored because that's another thing as well, when boredom sets in. You end up doing gear. You end up back out on the streets again, you end up with a habit. (Sarah, ex-street worker, 28)

Ex-street workers described how involvement with the criminal justice system set them on a spiral of yo-yoing back and forth, in and out of sex work. Another ex-street worker explained how fines incurred for soliciting offences meant returning to the streets:

They fine you, then how do they expect you to pay the fine? You've got to go back out to work to get the money to pay the fine. You know, it's a vicious circle. They want to

get you off the street so they fine you two hundred pound. How are you supposed to pay the two hundred pound? (Letisha, ex-street worker, 28)

Indoor workers spoke of the psychological stress that working permanently in the sex industry caused, which triggered the need to take “time out” before returning to work:

You get to the point where you’re like fuck this, it’s not worth it. It starts playing with your head and your mind and your body becomes tired and drained and mentally tired and then you’re off for a couple of months and money starts getting tight again and you have to go back (Charlie, ex-sauna worker, 35)

Occupational stress and strain was compounded by no sick pay or leave, no holidays, no regulated working conditions (for instance, limits on the numbers of clients per day), and sometimes, exploitative management who expected women to work long shifts and frequent days. Women who had made successful transitions described how the final exit was characterized by a period of moving in and out of sex work, taking breaks and struggling to decide what to do next:

I’d sort of been through that for the past two years. Sort of having a couple of weeks out here and there . . . so I’d done the backwards and forwards thing before I stopped. . . . I think I’d known for quite some time that I wanted to get out but I didn’t know how to go about it or how I was going to live . . . you get comfortable and you get used to a certain environment and way of life. The fact I was comfortable with what I was doing because it’s what I knew, and the frightening part was the unknown, working in a normal environment with normal people and how do I fit into that. . . . I’d always worried about people sort of asking, well what do you say? (Mia, ex-sauna worker, 39)

Indoor workers were trapped in a cycle of moving in and out of sex work because the money they earned could not be directly substituted by a “normal” job in the mainstream labor market. Women described how they had often left sex work unplanned; taken unskilled jobs for £200 (US\$350) a week only to find they could not adjust their lifestyle, which was based on three times these earnings; and, thus, returned to sex work until a more planned transition was feasible.

## **Discussion: Trajectories From Deviance to Conformity**

To place these empirical findings that are specific to prostitution in a wider context of deviant behavior and explanations of the transformation process, the results need to be understood in relation to the concepts of deviant roles and careers. Like Sharp and Hope (2001) stated, it is important to make a distinction between deviant roles and careers to understand the processes of change when individuals stop doing one kind of deviant behavior. Although the typology of transitions that I present

shows the micro and macro triggers and barriers to leaving sex work, there are still further implications for the nature of deviance in sex workers' lives. To deconstruct this argument, it is useful to return to a general theory of crime and criminality, namely, that presented by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) and applied by Sharp and Hope to the case of the continuity of the deviant role. Gottfredson and Hirschi critiqued the notion of a deviant career by refuting that the nature of deviance has a beginning, an ending, and is characterized by an increasing amount of deviance throughout the period of deviancy. Instead, Gottfredson and Hirschi applied the self-control theory to explain how people with low self-control have a tendency to act in ways that are on the spectrum of criminality, including risky and deviant behavior, throughout their lifetime rather than at particular points and with specific types of behavior. Sharp and Hope demonstrated this theory through a case study of ex-substance users who adopt counseling roles in substance misuse projects yet go on to act as white-collar criminals. Sharp and Hope offered an alternative view of the transformation out of deviance by demonstrating that "individuals may cease one type of deviance due to natural sanctions but continue to engage in other forms" (p. 688). This alternative conceptualization of the "complete" exit (also put forward by Brown, 1991) suggests that deviance is stable and general (across a life course, involving different types of behavior), rather than specific and fluid (at one point in the life course and involving singular deviant behavior). The types of transitions that sex workers adopted in my study can be analyzed using this argument to explore whether there is complete exit from deviancy or whether involvement in deviant behavior is more stable.

#### *Moving on From a Deviant Career*

From my study of women who became ex-sex workers, the general case is that their engagement in deviant behavior was specific and fluid rather than general. Once the "transformation to legitimacy" or movement to complete conformity takes place, no other deviant behavior is encountered. This evidence is contrary to that asserted by Mestemacher and Roberti (2004) that views the careers of strippers as characterized by "delinquency" and "anti-social outlooks." It also speaks against the argument put forward by Love (2006) that illicit sexual behavior correlates with the low self-control theory. Involvement in sex work as a means of earning money does not fit into the low self-control explanation, as for many respondents, their involvement in a deviant activity was framed as "work" rather than gratification or gain. Equally, respondents were involved in much nondeviant behavior both during and after sex work (Lucas, 2005). For example, women usually ran a household and a family, were in long-term personal relationships, and functioned in the local community as nondeviant actors. For those women who worked as escorts and in saunas, there was an ethos that selling sex was work and that they were providing a function for society. Indoor sex workers were generally not involved in other forms of deviant behavior and often worked hard to resist behavior such as substance misuse, other

criminality, and sexual deviancy such as adultery or multiple sexual partners in their private life. For the indoor sex workers, their only deviant role was working in an industry that has no legitimacy in the United Kingdom. In this sense, their involvement in sex work can be characterized as a career that is made up of a defined beginning and eventually, an ending. The ending symbolizes the cessation of all deviant behavior and a transformation into complete conformity.

### *Stable or Fluid Deviancy?*

Despite arguing from the empirical evidence that sex work is a fluid deviant career, critics could suggest the evidence explains street sex workers' involvement in a range of deviant behavior through the low self-control theory. The narratives from the interviews describe how this group of women were making transitions out of a range of deviant behaviors: sex work, drug use, and sometimes other petty acquisitive crimes. In addition, they were often trying to escape other deviant labels such as being in state care, being a single parent, or having their own children removed by the state. The relationships of dependency between the deviant activities of sex work, drug use, and petty crimes were tightly connected and accounted for the familiar cycles of the yo-yo effect. As Adler (1992) identified among drug traffickers, replacing a deviant lifestyle with a conformist lifestyle was not a straight transition but involved lapses of behavior back into drug dealing until eventually it ceased and a nondeviant lifestyle was completely adopted. However, I argue that these lapses of behavior, as retold by the sex workers in both samples, do not exhibit low self-control or indicate stable deviant roles but instead, suggest that the process of transformation involves these lapses because of both cognitive transformation processes and structural influences.

Giordano et al. (2002) used qualitative and quantitative data from a long-term follow-up of adolescent female offenders to explain how a cognitive transformation process enables women to experience cognitive and identity shifts away from deviance or criminality. This cognitive process is made up of four stages: (a) a basic openness to change, (b) exposure to particular "hooks of change" (such as relationships, religion, children), (c) "replacement of self"—envisaging a new self, and (d) a transformation away from the viability or relevance of the deviant lifestyle (Giordano et al., 2002, p. 1000). These cognitive processes and in particular hooks of change such as employment, drug treatments, appropriate rehousing, and relationships with spouses and children were evident among sex workers in their transformations to conformity. For example, street and indoor ex-sex workers indicated that they wanted to be free from old networks to avoid opportunities of deviance and that a successful transformation to legitimacy could be achieved only by cutting off old ties. The yo-yoing effect that resulted in a return to sex work was often attributed to the links, both physically and psychologically, maintained between the old and the new lifestyle that was "under construction." The cognitive processes of transformation are affected by the interplay between agency and structural disadvantages. Appropriate, safe, and

considered housing; adequate drug treatment; and realistic vocational input are all key to resisting the yo-yo effect and making long-lasting changes.

It is the prominence of structural factors and not individual motivations to leave deviant careers that marks my argument out from Mansson and Hedin (1999) who have also written about how sex workers leave the industry. In some ways, my findings concur with those of Mansson and Hedin (p. 69) who asserted that leaving sex work is often not one event but involves different phases during a longer period of time. Although Mansson and Hedin did promote that women often reach a "turning point," whether it is a life event or an accumulation of feelings, thinking, or events that drive women to make changes, their conceptualization of the leaving process does not reflect the extent and complexity of transitory patterns out of deviancy. This simplicity is based on Mansson and Hedin's understanding of sex work only as exploitation and of the sex workers as victims. The accounts, especially from the indoor workers in my sample, echo agency and decision making as well as a strong "sex as work" discourse. These experiences, that are the foundations from which sex workers make changes, are in sharp contrast to the conclusions made by Mansson and Hedin that "[it is] the individual's emotional commitment, as it is expressed through dreams and positive illusions, [that] lies at the very heart of the process of change" (p. 75). Although they discussed the importance of "internal driving forces" such as "capabilities and interests" and "adaptation and coping strategies" in their exit model, the dismissal of the prominence of structural, cultural, and legal factors in determining processes of change is problematic. Mansson and Hedin's insistence that the most important exiting factor is "the woman's own coping strategies . . . and how she overcomes the strains and hardships of prostitution" (p. 76) does not consider how individual resilience is located within a structured and social reality whereby trapping factors restrict movement out of sex work and make permanent removal from the deviant career a complex and lengthy process.

#### *Deviant Identity Post-Deviant Behavior*

The general commentary on deviance status, roles, and career has centered on the "after" phase. Fuchs Ebaugh (1988) presented an exiting model that states roles are not abandoned but are reformulated into new models and roles of behavior. Brown (1991) took this further by demonstrating how the "professional ex" uses the past deviant identity explicitly in the transformation process: "One's lingering deviant identity facilitates rather than inhibits the exiting process" (p. 220). However, here I would argue that this overt reliance on a past deviant identity as part of the change process depends on what the deviant behavior is and is highly gender specific. Sex workers suffer terribly from the sexual stigma wrongly attributed to their behavior, leaving them open to a multitude of deviant labels relating to their sexuality, morality, femininity, and criminality (Lawless, Kippax, & Crawford 1996). Because of these infectious and devastating stereotypes that have structural implications (for example, difficulties constructing a curriculum vitae because of gaps in a legitimate

work history), women usually choose to keep their sex work history secret and not opt to become a professional ex.<sup>1</sup> Instead, both in the “during” and the after sex work phase, women work hard to keep their sexual behavior secret (Sanders, 2005 p. 116-137). In this study, there was one exception where the deviant career was capitalized on to form a new identity and career. This is the case of Charlie Daniels (2006), who was a respondent in this study and who subsequently became a media pundit on adult issues and wrote her autobiography, *Priceless: My Journey Through a Life of Vice*, which tells of her rise from street prostitution to a madam. Charlie is one of the rare characters who has reconciled her sexually deviant role with other aspects of her life after the sex work is completely finished. A further caveat to how sex workers capitalize on their experience in their new identity and work relates to the transferable skills that ex-sex workers apply to mainstream employment. Those sex workers who have been self-employed business women transfer key skills and business acumen to new occupations, but rarely do they overtly attribute where their skills came from because of the stigma attached to prostitution.

Although I would argue that in general, sex workers do not go on to become involved in other deviancy, the deviant role does not end once the transformation has been made to complete conformity. Although the transitions to mainstream lifestyles have usually occurred by moving into “ordinary” or “acceptable” occupations, respondents explained that they had often internalized the deviant role and status as a sexually deviant woman. For some ex-sex workers, particularly those from the street, they were coping with several ex-roles that prolonged their deviant status. Drug use, sex work, theft, and fraud were some of the identities that were difficult to shake off even when the activity had stopped. In a similar manner, women who had had their own children removed because of their chaotic and unstable deviant lifestyles were fighting hard to regain the custody of their children or to maintain the guardianship of new children. Indeed, the positive role of being a “good mother” was something that ex-sex workers strived toward as a replacement for the deviant status they had internalized. As the classic interactionists have discussed (Becker, 1963, Goffman, 1961), a deviant role can produce stigma during and after the behavior, and stigmatized individuals are concerned that their loved ones will be affected by “courtesy stigma” (Goffman, 1963). The powerful stigma associated with gendered sexual deviancy is “lived with” long after the behavior has ceased and conformity adopted. This stigma and the desire or need to keep sex work secret is further exacerbated by the increasing criminalization of the activity in the United Kingdom (Campbell & Sanders, in press).

## Concluding Comments: Criminalization as a Trapping Factor

The processes of becoming an ex, moving out of a deviant career and reintegrating into mainstream conformity, are significantly affected by the legal framework in the

United Kingdom that criminalizes many aspects of sex work. The current prostitution management policy expressed in the *Coordinated Prostitution Strategy* (Home Office, 2006) has been constructed without reference to the desistance literature or sensitivity to the gendered nature of developing strong attachment bonds or hooks of change as the pathway to desistance (see Sommer, Baskin, & Fagan, 1994). Uggen and Kruttschnitt (1998) further identified that in planning desistance policy and programs, both the behavior of the individual and the behavior of the law shape transitions out of crime. For instance, ex-sex workers with convictions for soliciting and loitering offences and more recent, antisocial behavior convictions, have been unable to get legitimate jobs because they hold a criminal record. Therefore, as a result of the criminalization process, some of the major attachment bonds to conformity are prevented. Further dangers of the criminalization approach are that “rehabilitation” or “routes out” are aligned within the criminal justice system. Giordano et al. (2002, p. 1033) demonstrated that prison or treatment strategies do not work well as catalysts for change. Although on paper there is emphasis on how sex workers can get fast-tracked to employment initiatives such as New Deal, “progress2work,” and Action Teams that provide intense specialist training and life skills to cope with the mainstream job market, the overwhelming emphasis on routes out pays no attention to how “individuals vary in what they bring to the change process, including differences in preferences and levels of motivation” (Giordano et al., 2002, p. 1055). The transformation process of leaving any deviant or criminal behavior is affected by interplay between actor and environment: Agency, including cognitive processes that direct behavior, are influenced by broader social forces such as structural disadvantage. Instead, of recognizing this as a gendered process, the government’s proposed rehabilitation away from sex work simply replaces one deviant identity with another—from sex worker to criminal.

The legal frameworks and regimes that criminalize female sex workers reinforce nefarious cultural messages about sex work and negative attitudes, myths, and stereotypes about the women who work in the industry. The cultural message underscored by policy is that “street prostitution is not an activity that we can tolerate” (Home Office, 2006, p. 1), leaving those women who are involved without full citizenship rights and directly labeled as unwanted, dirty, and disorderly criminals. The deviant identity not only persists in the internal mind of the ex but also is reinforced by policies that ascribe stigma and deviancy to sex work. These cultural messages, what Lowman (2000) has called a “discourse of disposability,” perpetuate violence against sex workers and reinforce their status as a vulnerable sexual minority where deviancy spreads into their femininity and capacity to be a mother. By rejecting structural changes such as managed street zones (similar to the Netherlands) or a licensed brothel system (such as Nevada and Germany) that legitimate the status of sex workers as workers, affording them labor rights, the deviant status and identity of sex workers is maintained during and after their involvement.

The reality of sex work, the policy implications of the government’s strategy, and the location of sex work within a criminal justice framework are at the center of any understanding of how women leave sex work and the trapping factors that make the

transformation to conformity a difficult process. Policy makers must consider the wider context of leaving a deviant career and the cognitive transformation processes in desistance rather than focusing blame and expectation only on female sex workers in the process of change. Cross-cultural comparative research is needed that examines different sex work regimes to explore the relevance of the deviant career and the reality of social reintegration after sexual deviancy.

## Note

1. Anecdotal evidence from my involvement in the UK Network of Sex Work Projects suggests there is a trajectory of sex workers leaving the industry and training in health and social care to work in sex work projects with sex workers. In some projects, this professionalization is encouraged. However, it is the minority of sex workers that take this role, and even then, they may not be explicit about their deviant history in all aspects of their life.

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