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*Affilia* 2007; 22; 195

DOI: 10.1177/0886109907299052

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# Reclaiming Their Lives and Breaking Free

## An Afrocentric Approach to Recovery From Prostitution

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Little research has examined the specific healing needs of prostituted African American women. In this qualitative research study, eight African American women who were receiving culturally specific services at an Afrocentric agency participated in a focus group and in-depth semistructured interviews. The analysis revealed seven categories of experience: (1) a legacy of violence and underreporting, (2) family and self-preservation, (3) kinship support and spirituality, (4) hitting rock bottom, (5) barriers to recovery, (6) helpful and harmful services, and (7) a prism of oppression. Implications for social workers, policy makers, advocates, and further research are discussed.

**Keywords:** *African American women; culturally specific services; prostitution recovery; survival sex*

Described by some as the “oldest profession” for women, prostitution seemingly provides a lucrative environment for the exchange of sex for money between mutually consenting adults. Within this paradigm, many customers/clients, sex workers, and corporate commercial conglomerates have argued for the legalization of sex-trade work. Antiprostitution activists, however, have campaigned for the abolition of prostitution, recognizing it a form of systemic violence and exploitation of women and children comparable to rape and domestic violence. Still others have positioned prostitution within the context of colonialism and slavery and have linked it inextricably with the racial, gender, and class oppression of African American and other women and girls of color. For proponents of this perspective, the buying, selling, and trading of women and children are recognized as “the oldest oppressions” or modern-day slavery.

Childhood risk factors and limited access to economic and educational resources place poor African American women and girls at significantly higher rates of risk for entry into prostitution at earlier ages as a consideration for survival (Kramer & Berg, 2003). African American women and girls are disproportionately represented among women who are involved in street prostitution—the lower echelon of the prostitution hierarchy (Kramer & Berg, 2003). They are disproportionately (90%) represented among female victims of prostitution-related homicide (Goktepe et al., 2002), and are more likely (60%) to be controlled by a pimp (Giobbe, 1993; Norton-Hawk, 2004). Prostituted African American women are more likely to be arrested, have higher fines levied, receive more jail time, and have their children removed by the child welfare system (Nelson, 1993). Faced with additional individual barriers associated with child sexual abuse, substance use, and mental health issues, African American women can benefit from culturally sensitive healing and

recovery programs that adequately address a multitude of needs. These considerations raise important issues regarding the need for service delivery programs that simultaneously address both individual and systemic factors in serving the needs of prostituted African American women and girls.

The specific recovery needs of African American women survivors of prostitution have received little attention from research. Most prostitution-related research has treated prostituted women as a homogeneous group who are defined almost exclusively by their victimization and/or empowerment. In addition, prostituted women have been compared to nonprostituted battered and sexually assaulted women who need appropriate prostitution-related services. Such research practices have minimized the diverse needs of African American women and the ways in which they resist, survive, and recover. These studies have made the violence of prostitution a priority over the violence of racism and poverty, which also affects the lives of African American women. They have also minimized the importance of the cultural context for the healing and recovery process.

### **The Agency: Breaking Free**

Breaking Free, a grassroots Afrocentric nonprofit organization in St. Paul, Minnesota, which since 1996 has served women and girls who are used in systems of prostitution, provides an atmosphere and service approach that acknowledges the cultural context and addresses the impact of systemic race-, gender-, and class-based oppression in the lives of African American women who are recovering from prostitution. It is dedicated to assisting women and girls who are exploited through various forms of violence, including battery, prostitution, and rape, and to promoting social and political change (*About Breaking Free*, 2003). Located within the African American community, with a board and staff representative of the women who are served, the agency has a philosophy that includes recognition of the following:

1. Prostitution as systematic violence against and sexual exploitation of women;
2. Sexist and racist attitudes that promote prostitution as violence against women;
3. Prostitution as an extension of slavery that disproportionately affects African American women and girls; and
4. The systemic barriers encountered by prostituted women, particularly African American women, who are involved in the criminal justice system that impede the women's recovery.

### **The Study**

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of the study was to explore healing and recovery from sexual violence within the context of an Afrocentric approach, using in-depth interviews to magnify the personal experiences and perspectives of the women's lives. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, interviews were conducted at Breaking Free to maintain familiarity in the environment and to minimize the intrusiveness of the research process (Zimmerman & Watts, 2004). The structure of questions to ask was predetermined (Patton, 1990).

## Sampling and Recruitment

Purposive sampling (Goodman, 2001) required the participants to be at least 18 years old, to have self-identified as African American, and to have actively participated in 12 weeks of services or graduated from Breaking Free within the previous year. During weekly educational support groups, the staff of Breaking Free verbally informed women who met the criteria of the study and provided them with a flyer outlining the voluntary nature of the study, its purpose, risks, and benefits. Women who were interested in participating informed the staff. Sixteen women volunteered and were scheduled for one-hour in-depth personal interviews that I conducted between October 14 and 25, 2004, in a private setting at Breaking Free. Of the 16 interviews, 8 were completed. Upon completion of each interview, the participants were compensated with \$10 in cash from Breaking Free and a complimentary copy (sold at \$10) of the CD *Rhythms of My Heart: Healing from Within* (Valandra, 2002).

## Data Collection

A predetermined interview guide, consisting of 17 open-ended questions, was developed to examine antecedents of entry into prostitution, services received, and the women's experience and perceptions. A semistructured format was used to allow for variability in each participant's responses throughout the interviews, which lasted 45–75 minutes. Instances in which the participants chose not to share identifying information are reflected in Table 1 as "not indicated." Notes, instead of a tape recorder, were used to record the participants' responses and were transcribed later. Finally, each participant was offered a list of resources in the surrounding metropolitan area that provided counseling services for survivors of sexual assault. The majority of the women interviewed refused the resource list, stating a preference, in many instances, to speak with their individual case manager at Breaking Free, if needed.

## Data Analysis

The grounded theory approach to data analysis was used to code the data into themes and subthemes (Gilgun, 2001). Each interview was analyzed separately and coded by me. Merging the interviews into categories with related themes and subthemes further reduced the codes from all the interviews. The results were shared during one focus-group meeting that was held at Breaking Free with African American participants of the program and the staff to receive feedback that confirmed the themes, subthemes, and descriptions of experiences that were shared.

# Findings

## Characteristics of the Participants

The eight women who were interviewed ranged in age from 18 to 47, with an average age of about 34 years; some participants chose not to give their ages. The women lived in the Twin Cities metropolitan area of Minnesota, and all had one or more children. Their age at entry into prostitution ranged from an early age (unspecified) to 39 years old. The majority (six women) were 18 years or younger when they entered prostitution. The number of years they were involved in prostitution ranged from six weeks to 38 years, with an average

**Table 1**  
**Profile Summary of the Participants**

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Age of entry	Not indicated	Early age	13	14	18	18	20	39
Years involved	1	38	2	30	19	Not sure	Not sure	Six weeks
Reason for involvement	Homeless	Child sexual abuse	Homeless	Money for food and clothing	Dancing	Money to feed children	Drug use	Homeless
Reason for exit	Support from children, friends	Needed change	Tired of the life	Support from children	Support from mother	Tired of pleasing others	Jail and pregnancy	Support from children
Barriers to exit	No community support	Money, drugs, own thinking	No housing, job, or community support	Extortion and domestic violence	Not indicated	Violence, drugs, no community support	Drugs	Money, drugs, domestic violence
Drug misuse and recovery	Yes	Yes	Not indicated	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Child sexual abuse (CSA)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Services for CSA	No	No	Foster care	NA	No	Police report, no service	No	NA
Intimate Partner Abuse (IPA)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Services for IPA	Reported, no service	No	NA	Shelter	No	No	No	No
Stranger Violence (SV)	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Services for SV	Reported and received services	NA	Police report filed	NA	No	No	No	No

of about 18 years; some participants were not sure of the exact number of years of involvement. Four women credited their children, friends, or family members with encouraging them to leave prostitution, and four attributed their exit from prostitution to "being tired of the life and/or wanting something different." Six women referred to their spirituality or faith as a source of strength in breaking free and recovering from prostitution.

Of the six women who reported experiencing childhood sexual abuse, four did not report it or receive services related to childhood sexual abuse. Of the seven women who said that they had experienced sexual and/or physical or emotional violence in an intimate partner relationship, one received services at a battered women's shelter, one spoke with someone about the abuse but did not share details, and the remaining five did not report the abuse or receive services. Six women reported sexual violence by a stranger or acquaintance. Seven women referred to past drug misuse, but only one woman was drawn into prostitution to support an established drug habit. Economic survival needs led six women to enter prostitution. All the women received program services from Breaking Free, as well as from other agencies in the past that provided mental health, chemical dependence, emergency shelter, and child welfare services. Table 1 presents a profile of each participant.

Seven themes and subthemes emerged from the findings: (1) a legacy of violence and underreporting of violence, (2) family and self-preservation, (3) kinship support and spirituality, (4) hitting rock bottom, (5) barriers to recovery, (6) helpful and harmful program services, and (7) prism of oppression.

#### *Legacy of Violence and Underreporting*

*History of child sexual abuse.* Six women reported experiencing sexual abuse as children. Their experiences included being sexually abused several times by brothers, cousins, and friends and being raped by a brother-in-law at age 5 or 6. In most instances, the abuse was not disclosed. One woman said, "I was raped by my sister's husband when I was 5 or 6 six years old. I tried to tell, and people got mad at me. I come from a family full of cops." Another woman explained, "I was sexually abused as a child by family, friends, men, and women. I didn't talk about it. I learned at an early age [that] if someone wants to touch me, they gotta pay." Another woman reported:

At age 13, I was forced by my brother to have sex with a friend, who became my future husband. This is also the first time I snorted crack cocaine. When I was 15, I was raped by a boyfriend and forced to use drugs.

*Intimate partner violence.* Seven women indicated that they had experienced sexual and/or physical or emotional violence in an intimate partner relationship. They were physically and emotionally abused and raped by their children's fathers, their husbands, and/or their boyfriends. The use of the broad term *intimate partner* allowed for the inclusion of several types of intimate relationship experiences. For example, one woman experienced physical, emotional, and sexual abuse in an open marriage. Another woman was a housewife for 14 years. She said, "The 12 years of abuse from my baby's dad made me think that all men want is sex." Describing her relationship, another woman stated:

I had a wonderful two-year relationship with a Jewish man that changed to physical and emotional abuse and extortion. If I had not left and gone to the shelter, I would have ended up in jail for hurting him.

Sharing her first experience with heroin, another woman explained, "The first time I tried heroin, I was 16 or 17, and my boyfriend's cousin raped me on the bathroom floor. This was a very shameful experience, and I've never used heroin again."

*Sexual assault by a stranger.* Six women reported sexual violence by a stranger or acquaintance, including being gang raped, beaten, and tortured. One woman said, "I was gang raped by four men. I filed a police report, but nothing happened." Another stated, "In the drug world, women are threatened, beaten, forced to have sex with drug dealers, forced into writing bad checks, and forced to submit to controlling situations."

#### *Family and Self-Preservation*

Family and self-preservation strategies were described in relation to factors that led the women to become involved in prostitution. Economic survival issues—including homelessness and the lack of food and clothing for themselves and their children—led six of the eight women into prostitution. One woman stated,

After the birth of my second daughter, my brother took the money [for my daughter]. I had to get money to take care of my baby. I was introduced into prostitution when my uncle forced me to have sex with him in exchange for money to care for my baby. I was 18 years old.

A woman who had run away at age 14 because she was pregnant explained,

I met an older woman in her 50s who taught me how to turn a trick to feed and clothe myself. After that, my boyfriend and father of my three children continued to lure me into prostitution, wining and dining me until I was hooked into what I believed at the time to be a glamorous lifestyle. By this time, I was in high school.

Although there were variations in the women's experiences, with the exception of the woman who was drawn into prostitution to support an established drug habit, the majority of the women entered prostitution as a strategy for family and self-preservation and survival.

#### *Kin Support and Spirituality*

Kin support, through encouragement from adult children, grandchildren, other family members, and friends, helped four women to leave prostitution. One woman explained, "After 30 years of prostitution, my three adult children told me that if I wanted to have a relationship with my grandchildren, I needed to get out of the life and off drugs." Another said, "My children cried and begged me to get a job and stop using my body." In various degrees, this experience was cited by several other women who credited kin and/or friends with giving them the emotional support needed to seek help in leaving prostitution.

The spirituality theme was reflected as a source of support and strength, a factor in healing and recovery, and a factor in the decision to leave prostitution. Six women referred to God, a higher power, or spirituality as a source of strength. Spirituality was experienced as an integral part of the physical world, interwoven with other sources of support, as illustrated by the following comments:

I called on God to help me leave prostitution. My spirituality was impacted by the bondage of drugs, addiction, and violence. I called on God to help me make a change, and my road to

recovery is God's will, and I don't want to let it go. I'm not religious in the traditional sense of organized religion. I believe in the spiritual power of the world of nature—earth, trees changing with the seasons, plants, and sunshine; the human touch of healthy relationships; the witnessing of other addicts; and the spirit of God as sources of strength.

I rely on support from sober brothers and sisters, support groups, family, and strangers. Reading the Bible, talking to God every day, and praying are also sources of strength and help me stay in recovery.

After seven years of sobriety, another woman described her relapse and getting into a car with an undercover cop as “God intervening” to help her back into recovery from addiction.

*Hitting rock bottom.* The subtheme of hitting rock bottom describes three women's reasons for leaving prostitution. These women became “tired of the life” and “wanted something different.” One woman commented, “The life is all violence and sickness on the part of the person in the life, too. I was homeless, dropped out, sleeping in abandoned places . . . the walking dead.” Another woman explained, “I just didn't want to live my life like that anymore. I got fed up with the life.” Two of these three women also identified spirituality and kinship support as significant factors that contributed to their exit from prostitution.

#### *Barriers to Recovery*

In this theme, the participants described experiences that were coded into several sub-themes: (1) a lack of sustaining economic resources, (2) substance use, (3) violence, and (4) community- and self-alienation. Six women identified the lack of financial or economic resources; substance use; and/or threats, intimidation, and violence by intimate partners or pimps as barriers to breaking free from prostitution. One woman summed it up in this manner:

When you're broke, busted, [and] disgusted, money is the addiction. I was addicted to crack cocaine and on depression medication for five years. . . . I was a housewife for 14 years, in abusive relationships for 12 years with my babies' dads.

Another woman stated,

I didn't have another way to make money. I had no housing and felt like I wasn't accepted by the community or people outside my community. Trying to get a job and having to put down being in the criminal justice system and the details of charges makes it harder to get a job.

The list of barriers for another woman included “low self-esteem, not enough feedback from my own culture, having mostly Caucasians genuinely helping me, and sisters turning me away.”

#### *Helpful and Harmful Services*

Specific types of services emerged from the interviews as providing various degrees of helpfulness: (1) inpatient and outpatient mental health services, (2) chemical dependence treatment, (3) support groups, (4) child welfare services, and (5) emergency shelter. All the women said that the majority of the services they received in the past had been helpful to some degree.

*Personalization, collective identity, and alienation.* Services that reflected alienation, characterized by emotional aloofness and distance by the service provider, the lack of



common experiences with other participants, and a disregard for personhood were described as the least helpful, regardless of the nature of the service that was provided. Services that promoted personalization, a collective identity, (characterized by the sharing of a common experience, race, or emotional affect with the helping professional and/or the other participants), and flexibility were described as the most helpful. For example, several women distinguished support services at Breaking Free and other programs, in which they could talk openly about their experiences in prostitution and drug use with other participants and service providers who had similar experiences, as the most helpful. One woman said that counselors are the most helpful when “they [have] walked the life they talk about, and this makes it more comfortable for me to share with them.” Another explained, “Support groups are helpful to me because I can talk about my feelings with women who’ve had similar experiences.” Identifying two African American counselors from two treatment facilities as the most helpful, another woman said, “Their tone of voice and word choices made it more comfortable for me to share my feelings.”

Seven women identified services provided by Breaking Free as the most helpful. One woman said, “I experience a sense of direction, a choice, and the recognition that I am a worthwhile woman deserving of love and respect.” Another woman stated, “I used to believe my purpose was to be used. Now I have a voice; at Breaking Free my voice is heard, while at other organizations I just went through the routine.”

*Unrealistic programs and disrespectful helpers.* Chemical dependence and child welfare programs were identified as problematic and the least helpful services for several reasons, including (1) unrealistic expectations of recovery, (2) one-size-fits-all treatment approaches, (3) threatening and disrespectful counselors, and (4) unrealistic child protection case plans for the return of children. Sharing her frustration with the chemical dependence program she was currently attending, one woman lamented,

Because I’m not in tears or getting in touch with my feelings and emotions the way the counselors think I should at this phase of the treatment, they believe I’m not working the program, and they won’t let me move to the next level. They don’t understand that it’s taken me 30 years to get this way, and it’s unrealistic to think that a 96-day treatment program is going to help me just start feeling and sharing emotions, especially in front of strangers.

When asked if her treatment was court ordered, this woman replied, “No, this is self-inflicted; I can leave anytime I want.” Another woman, expressing her frustrations after having gone through chemical dependence treatment six times, said,

It’s hard to open up to treatment when groups are too hard core or blunt or aggressive. I was in a treatment program in which there was a room full of women of different cultures and lifestyles, and we were verbally attacked, treated with demeaning attitudes, and controlled and received too much structure. I don’t do well in programs that beat you down and make you wear dog tags, stupid hats, and the like. Counselors need to assess women’s needs and help them get into the right programs. One size fits all doesn’t work. Treatment can help you stay sober, but it can’t teach you how to live.

A woman who was involved in child protection during the time of the interview noted,

I’m sober but homeless with a 15-year-old son in the child welfare system. My 21-year-old, white, child protection worker really doesn’t know how to help me. She just goes through the

white-line paper [case plan]. I've completed a 30-day treatment program, 30-day halfway house program, aftercare, and parenting program, and now I have to find housing and a job. My other children have been signed over [legally transferred] to their fathers.

*Culturally specific prostitution-related service.* The women reported that African American women and girls who are recovering from prostitution need better-quality services and more Afrocentric programs in African American neighborhoods run by African American professionals who understand the needs of prostituted women. One woman summed it up this way:

African American culture is a culture that feels. African American women need to work with African American professionals who can provide both tough love and gentle guidance. We aren't white, and we aren't going to learn to be white. . . . We need each other.

Another woman, reflecting on the quality of services offered by other programs, said,

Services are at the low end of the scale in terms of quality. The housing services offered are like the crack houses women came out of in trying to break free from drugs and prostitution. Service providers should be encouraging, supportive, and not putting your story in your face all the time. Service providers need to take a risk to empower women. Breaking Free instilled in me that I can do something with my life.

#### *The Prism of Oppression*

*Race, gender, and class experience.* The prism of oppression characterized the multiplicity of the women's experiences with racism, sexism, and classism and how these experiences affected their ability to seek services, use services, and otherwise break free from prostitution. Five women described experiences with situations involving family and friends, the school system, johns, pimps, intimate partners, and society. For example, one woman stated,

Being in America is racist and sexist. Both dark- and light-skinned African American women catch hell because of their skin color. Growing up, my peers taunted me with racial slurs, such as "black burned biscuits," referring to my dark skin. Family members told me, "You're too dark to have children, so don't bring home no little monkeys." A seventh-grade teacher told me I could be a playboy bunny, and other teachers, both African American and Caucasian, told me I wouldn't amount to anything. Past boyfriends have told me, "Dark women are good only for cooking and having sex." These attitudes have made it more difficult for me to get much-needed support from other "sisters" and black mentors.

Another participant, discussing the johns she experienced, noted,

The majority of my johns were white men. One time, a white john, trying to pick me up, told me, "Once a ho always a ho." I decided to pick up a white trick for myself. I made him do for me what I had to do. He worked for me cleaning house, preparing meals, and turning tricks. He fell in love with me, but I only knew money, sex, and drugs. I asked God's forgiveness for this, and now I see myself as an ex-prostitute, recovering addict [who is] working every day to make a change.

Speaking about sexism and racism in society, one woman reported,

I see sexist subliminal and overt messages and attitudes every day, everywhere, from billboards, clothing ads, television, commercials, and videos. Sex sells—men come to the

Emmy awards in suits, and women come in stockings. . . . There is a white orientation in everything. While some may think racism is debatable, white people still have power. Blacks are treated as underdogs and yet don't harbor hatred as they are hated by others. Blacks are not given credit for all that they do and have been through. America is a big lie. I was raised by a strong black woman, so I have not been as affected by racist and sexist attitudes as other women.

*Respect and unity.* The women reported they would change society's lack of respect for African American women's bodies and sexuality, increase unity among African American women, and eliminate negative stereotypes. Several women expressed the need to be seen in a more positive regard. Their sentiments are reflected in statements like these:

I would let people know that African American women are human beings, not sex objects, not beasts, or a piece of meat. We are beautiful and need to be honored as the queens we are.

We are not meat. We're human beings and need to be respected. We're misunderstood too much. We need unity within the African race—to stand together more instead of being jealous and judgmental. African American women need to keep it real—don't lie and don't use and abuse the system. Be true to thyself, and thyself can be true to others.

Another participant stated,

There are other ways women can show their soul without being half naked and provocative. . . . I don't want to see black people conforming or trying to be white and so jealous of one another.

Sharing her frustration with the negative stereotypes of African Americans, one woman reported,

I would change the stereotype that all black women are loud, can't speak English, and use bad language. Black people need to stop falling into this stereotype and using it against each other, as well as the word *Nigger*.

## Discussion

This qualitative study focused on the lived experiences of eight African American women who were recovering from prostitution within the context of an Afrocentric agency. Their stories provide insights into significant factors that affected their involvement in and exit from prostitution and their journey of recovery and healing.

### Family and Self-Preservation

Six women identified some form of economic deprivation as a major factor that influenced their involvement in prostitution. Some also had children to support. Poverty as a risk factor for African American girls' entry into prostitution at early ages is recognized in the literature (Kramer & Berg, 2003). The term *survival sex* is used in the literature to describe situations in which women and girls exchange sex for food, housing, clothing, and other basic necessities. These experiences contrast with popularly held beliefs that prostitution is a viable and lucrative career option involving mutually consenting adults.

They also reinforce the need to broaden the scope of service delivery to include systems change.

### **Barriers to Recovery**

Violence and community alienation were two of the four subthemes identified as barriers to the women's exit and recovery from prostitution. Women's experiences with threats, intimidation, and assault by intimate partners and/or pimps when trying to leave prostitution have been articulated in the literature (Farley, 2003, Raphael & Shapiro, 2004) and challenge the concept of prostitution as mutual or consensual sex work. The women in this study described their experiences in prostitution using more problematic terms, such as *bondage*, *madness*, *insanity*, and *sickness*, and used more empowering terms, such as *freedom*, *surrender*, *recognition of choice*, *releasing*, and *letting go* when describing the process of breaking free and healing from prostitution. Nelson (1993) recognized that support *within* African American communities is essential to African American women's recovery. The Afrocentric perspective conceptualizes the individual as part of a collective identity (Schiele, 1996), emphasizing the need to build bridges, cooperation, and sharing among African American women survivors within the context of their collective communities as a strategy for support.

### **Kin Support and Spirituality**

The subtheme of spirituality and kin support as resources provides new insights in the literature on prostitution. For the women in this study, a strong spiritual connection; kin support; and culturally sensitive, prostitution-specific programming provided more encouragement for leaving prostitution than did more punitive strategies, such as arrests, high fines, incarceration, and the removal of children. Historically, African Americans have relied on their families, friends, and spiritual strength and faith to combat racial injustice and gender inequality. A traditional value and source of knowledge in cultures of African descent (Schiele, 1996), spirituality provided the African American women in this study with a transformative source of energy and grounding—essential components of their healing and recovery from prostitution.

### **Legacy of Violence and Underreporting**

The high incidence of childhood sexual abuse, intimate partner violence, and sexual assault by strangers that these women experienced is consistent with the findings of other studies (Nandon, Koverola, & Schludermann, 1998; Silbert & Pines, 1983a, 1983b). Contrary to studies in which survivors of prostitution link their childhood abuse to later prostitution (Silbert & Pines, 1983a, 1983b), only one woman in this study linked her experiences of childhood sexual exploitation with later involvement in prostitution. The majority of the women identified poverty as the major contributing factor to prostitution. Further research is needed to explore the meaning that African American women give to their experiences of childhood and later sexual victimization and their perceptions of how these experiences affect their lives. Researchers and service providers are cautioned not to apply solely Eurocentric standards and approaches to healing as a measure of African American women's ways of addressing sexual victimization. West (2002) distinguished informal networks, community supports, and activism as additional healing modalities for African American survivors of

sexual victimization. Further research can clarify the individual and environmental barriers that prevent the disclosure of child sexual abuse (Valandra, 2005) and later intimate partner violence.

### **Personalization, Collective Identity, and Alienation**

This subtheme provides additional insights on programming and the provision of services. The women in this study benefited from professional helping relationships in which they could experience reflections of themselves characterized by collective identity, similarity of experience, race, and emotional affect with other participants and helping professionals. In service settings in which clients and practitioners had had similar life experiences, were African American, or demonstrated some sense of familiarity, emotional understanding, and respect, the women felt less apprehensive about discussing their lives and needs or otherwise engaging in the program in a meaningful way. This finding suggests that some degree of self-disclosure or sharing by the helper may prove to be important in establishing a nonjudgmental climate of trust and mutual respect that is conducive to healing. The Eurocentric model of emotional distancing, detachment, or aloofness by service providers can act as a barrier. A healthy balance must be maintained between alienation and emotional enmeshment in the helping relationship.

### **Prism of Oppression**

The women's experiences with racism and sexism within their families, their communities, the prostitution industry, and the larger society affected their decisions to seek services, use services, and otherwise break free from prostitution. Salient topics resonating around skin color, features, and race-based stereotypical beliefs and attitudes toward (and possibly internalized by) African American women provide critical insights for developing culturally specific program curricula and effective program strategies that are specifically targeted to fight oppression.

## **Implications**

The finding that seven interrelated themes and subthemes were reflected in the lived experiences of eight African American women's recovery from prostitution contributes to the literature on prostitution, culturally relevant services, and recovery from sexual victimization.

This study contained a small sample of women who were involved in a culturally specific recovery program using a framework of prostitution as violence against women that is rooted in a historical system of institutional racial, class, and gender oppression. Although this perspective clearly serves the recovery needs of this group of women, their experiences may not be generalized to all African American women who are involved in or are recovering from prostitution. Thus, the findings can be used to understand the lived experiences of African American women who experience prostitution as violence and seek culturally specific recovery programs. That notes, instead of a tape recorder, were used to collect the data, suggests a margin of error in accuracy that may not otherwise be reflected with verbatim translations from a recording device.

Helping professionals, policy makers, and researchers must recognize that women involved in prostitution are a heterogeneous group with various needs, depending on their

cultural values and individual and environmental risks and opportunities. Several recommendations emerge from these findings to improve the delivery of services, to promote social justice, and to support prevention, recovery, and healing of African American women and girls who are at risk of or are involved in prostitution. Social workers and policy makers need to recognize the interconnections among prostitution and racial, class, and gender oppression. Prevention and outreach programs should be designed to reduce environmental factors that affect the lives of African American women and girls who live in poverty-stricken urban areas. For instance, legislation is needed that is aimed at reducing the targeting of poor African American women and girls in urban neighborhoods and eliminating economic, educational, and social barriers that contribute to poverty. Systems change and advocacy are as essential to ending prostitution as are individual support services.

Despite experiences of sexual and physical violence in childhood and later adulthood, the women in this study, like many women, were reluctant to seek help. Physical safety issues are a critical consideration in supporting women's efforts to leave prostitution. The reluctance to report violence is compounded when providers of legal and social services question, minimize, and otherwise dismiss the legitimacy of women's experiences. Service professionals should receive training in cultural competence and prostitution-related issues. Further research is needed to understand the meaning that African American women give to experiences of childhood sexual exploitation and later sexual victimization and how these experiences affect their lives.

The need for culturally affirming services in which African American women can experience a sense of collective identity, spirituality, and life-affirming reflections and affirmations of themselves is critical to gain the women's trust and to create safety for healing to occur in a mutually respectful atmosphere. When appropriate, kin should also be engaged as collaborative allies in supporting women's recovery as well as prevention efforts. Substance abuse and treatment programs should be designed around not only addiction issues or drug use but also around women's life experiences. It is important for women to share their feelings with others of similar experiences to reduce the stigmatization and isolation that are associated with involvement in prostitution. The women in this study identified the importance of working with African American service providers and helping professionals who have related life experiences. Services around the country that are staffed by prostitution survivors and advocates for survivors are proving to be effective and critical to women's recovery. Treatment programs that are characterized by unrealistic expectations, insensitive and threatening counselors, and the lack of culturally specific prostitution-related programming can hinder women's recovery.

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of African American women who were recovering from sexual violence within a culturally specific program. The findings provide a rich description of the lived experiences of eight women who were recovering and healing from the sexual violence of prostitution. Their stories both confirm some aspects of the literature on prostitution and broaden our understanding and knowledge base. Their courage to give voice to their lived experiences for the sake of individual and collective healing and prevention efforts is a true testament of their resilience, determination, and courage to break free from the violently exploitive world of prostitution. In their transformation from victim to survivor to advocate and activist, they are visible beacons of hope of what is possible for other women and girls who are trapped in the violence of prostitution and for us all. Further research is needed to distinguish the variability in needs among African American women who are recovering from prostitution using nonculturally specific services.

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