

In 2018, Embrace Dignity and Prostitution Research & Education will release a report on the lives of 100 women who were prostituted near Cape Town,

“I feel like I’m still living under apartheid:”

Racialized Sexual Exploitation of 100 Women in South African Prostitution”

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Here are some of our preliminary findings, March 5, 2018.

Indigenous South African women are at great risk for all of the factors that increase vulnerability to prostitution: family and community violence including an epidemic of sexual violence, life-threatening poverty, lack of educational and job opportunities, lack of health services throughout their lifetimes, and lack of culturally appropriate social services that would help them escape prostitution. When alternatives to prostitution are not available - although it can appear to be a choice - prostitution is coerced by social harms such as child abuse, racism, sexism, and poverty. All of these forms of violence against women, including prostitution, are related. A 2017 study by Hatcher et al. found that men in Johannesburg who had been involved in transactional sex were 3.5 times more likely to commit violence against women or girls. Transactional sex is a less stigmatized term than prostitution, but exactly like prostitution it is the exchange of goods or services for sex acts. In another study that investigated factors contributing to men's decision to rape women, researchers interviewed more than 1000 men in Chile, Croatia, India, Mexico, and Rwanda. In all 5 countries, men who paid for sex were more likely to commit rape (Heilman, Herbert, & Paul-Gera, 2014).

As part of Embrace Dignity's outreach to prostituted women and as part of Prostitution Research & Education's efforts to amplify the voices of prostituted women, we wanted to learn about the experiences and needs of prostituted women. The women were from Mfuleni, Khayelitsha, Gugulethu, and Langa townships and also Beaufort West.

Based on individual interviews with 100 women, our findings include the following.

71% of the women were Black and 29% were Coloured.

A majority of the women had a history of homelessness.

The women had begun prostitution on average at 22 years (range 13 to 36 years).

85% of the 100 women were prostituted in order to help their families financially.

78% of the women were prostituted in what was described as survival sex, an exchange of sex acts for food or shelter.

45% described the prostitution as transactional sex, an exchange of sex acts for goods or services.

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Where were the women prostituted?

- 87% had been prostituted in streets or highways
- 79% in bars
- 78% in private homes
- 73% in escort services
- 66% in pornography
- 63% in casinos
- 60% in brothels
- 57% in massage parlors
- 55% via live video chat
- 53% in strip clubs
- 18% in churches
- 12% via phone sex lines

Violence in prostitution and its consequences

- 81% of the women had been physically assaulted during prostitution
- 86% had been raped during prostitution, an average of three times.
 - Black women were raped more times during prostitution than Coloured women.
- 80% of the women had been raped by a sex buyer
- 94% of the women had been verbally abused in prostitution.
- 77% of the women reported racist abuse, which was more common among Black women than Coloured women.
- 86% of the women reported sexist abuse.

- 71% of the women were diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), an indication that they were experiencing extreme emotional distress. Black women had more severe symptoms of PTSD.

Needs of 100 women who were prostituted near Cape Town

- 96% wanted to escape prostitution
- 94% job training
- 88% self-defense training
- 86% individual counseling (more Black women than Coloured women reported this need)
- 85% home or safe place
- 83% peer support (more Black women than Coloured women reported this need)
- 81% medical care (more Black women than Coloured women reported this need)
- 80% drug or alcohol addiction treatment
- 76% support for being accepted back into the community (more Black women than Coloured women reported this need)
- 61% child care
- 51% protection from a pimp (more Black women than Coloured women needed protection from pimps)

Only 12% of these 100 women believed that prostitution would be safer if it were legalized/decriminalized.