

2022

## Former Female Sex Workers' Perceptions of Spirituality in Exiting Sex Work

Lisa Diane Hall  
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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Lisa Diane Hall

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Walden University  
2022

Abstract

Former Female Sex Workers' Perceptions of Spirituality in Exiting Sex Work

by

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MSP, Capella University, 2013

MSW, Clark-Atlanta University, 2002

MPA, Central Michigan University, 1993

BA, University of Michigan, 1991

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

May 2022

## Abstract

Exiting sex work is extremely difficult. Women trying to exit sex work experience cycles of exit and reentry until they finally succeed. Spirituality has been identified as one of the factors that contribute to the exiting process or that help in the decision of not returning to sex work. The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis was to explore former female sex workers' perceptions of spirituality during the process of exiting sex work. The integrated model for exiting sex work constituted the theoretical basis for this study. Data were collected from semistructured interviews with 15 adult former female sex workers who experienced spirituality as a major force for exiting sex work. Results of coding and thematic analysis indicated that former female sex workers entered sex work because of experiencing several vulnerabilities early in life, which led them to involuntary sex work. Engaging in sex work was traumatic. Spirituality was one of the supportive factors that helped participants consider a different life with a renewed sense of self. Spirituality provided hope, meaning, and a sense of peace with how participants saw themselves. It is hoped that the results can be used for positive social change in the creation and implementation of spiritually based prevention and intervention programs for this population.

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## Dedication

This research dedicates to every person that has recovered from the scars of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation. To my mother, who tried her best at being the best mother she could be. I also want to dedicate this research to every person that still suffers in silence from child sexual abuse and sexual exploitation. To my Husband, Dog, Sisters, and Brothers, who have patiently awaited the day of completion. God Bless the Mental Health Recovery of every person trapped in the dark world of sexual exploitation.

## Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank Jehovah-Elohim for birthing me into this world of many possibilities. My parents for generational gifts of transference. The skills and wisdom God has allowed me to share with the world. My sibling spoke encouragement, understanding, and knowledge throughout the research process. My Husband and Dog, taking time to understand the research process, and the time is taken away from them both to spend more time at my computer than with them.

To participant's voice of self-determination, encouragement, deliverance, healing, and speaking their truth to express recovery from sexual exploitation.

I would also like to thank Walden University Finest for encouragement, leadership, and honor. To Dr. Susana Verdinelli, my committee chair, my Diamond who sparkles brightly as my Queen to support my academic success. Special thanks to Dr. Tracy Marsh, Dr. Bonnie Nastasi, and Dr. Susan Marcus; your blessing is appreciated for the completed research.

Finally, for every problem, there is a solution. People can make the most of life and become solution-oriented by studying principles of spirituality in each part of life. And I pray they we don't forget to enjoy the journey to thriving, vibrant discoveries of life.

Thank you

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Leaving sex work is extremely difficult. Sex workers often experience cycles of exit and reentry until they finally exit (Cusick et al., 2011). Women who try to exit sex work experience several barriers such as few employment options, shame, mental and physical health issues, and financial hardship (Baker et al., 2010). Some factors have been linked to the successful exiting of sex work, such as the development of positive life skills, personal self-determination, educational job training, permanent housing, legal advocacy, social support, and family reunification (Hammond & McGlone, 2014).

Spirituality has been considered one of the factors that contributed to the exiting process or that helped in sustaining the decision of not returning to sex work (Dalla, 2000; Hickie, 2017; Prince, 2008; Oselin & Blasyak, 2013; Rand, 2014; Su, 2012). However, a more in-depth exploration of spirituality in the exiting and surviving processes among women who formerly engaged in sex work is warranted (Hickie, 2014; Rand, 2014). Researchers had not clearly established how these women articulate the influence of spirituality through the entry-exit-reentry cycle. In the current study, I explored the challenges and setbacks women faced in exiting sex work and how spirituality was conceptualized, incorporated, and maintained in their lives throughout the process. This study addressed this intersection of experiences.

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological study was to explore former female sex workers' perceptions of spirituality during the process of exiting sex work. I gained more in-depth understanding of how former female sex workers related their spirituality to the process of overcoming adversity, challenges, and setbacks in the process of exiting sex work. This chapter includes the background of this study, the problem and purpose

statements, and significance of this study. The research questions and theoretical framework are presented, followed by a discussion of the nature of the study, definition of terms specific to this study, and a discussion of the assumptions, scope, delimitations, and limitations of this study.

### **Background**

The existing literature on this topic had focused on understanding and describing the barriers female sex workers experience to exit sex work and the factors that contribute to the successful exit process (Baker et al., 2010; Dalla, 2006; Hickle, 2017; Love, 2015; Prince, 2008; Rand, 2014; Su, 2012). Although spirituality has been identified as one of the factors contributing to the exit of sex work, scholar-practitioners remain unclear about how former female sex workers describe the influence of spirituality in their decision to exit sex work and in their decision to not return to this type of activity (Hickle, 2017; Rand, 2014). Though preliminary qualitative investigation on these experiences suggested that spirituality was perceived as a sustaining force during difficult times in recovering from sex work (Prince, 2008; Valandra, 2007), more research is called for to provide an in-depth understanding and description of how spirituality is experienced during sex work, at the moment of the decision to exit, during the recovery process, and in the decision of not returning to sex work (Hickle, 2014; Rand, 2014).

There is a large payoff in both academic and applied practice by working to create a more comprehensive understanding of former female sex workers' experiences of spirituality as an influential coping force through the entry to the exit cycle of sex work (Hickle, 2014; Rand, 2014). In recognizing these experiences, practitioners will be better prepared to assist in

the long-term mental health treatment of former female sex workers (Bryant-Davis et al., 2012; Bryant-Davis & Wong, 2013). More attention must also be paid to the ways in which control is exercised toward women to force them to stay in sex work and what barriers they encountered in the exit process because the realization of these barriers is crucial in providing meaningful services to victims of sex work (Love, 2015; Sallmann, 2010). Not only will this information contribute to enhancing former female sex workers' welfare, but it will also expose the mechanisms of power and control that sustain the cycle of sex work, ultimately empowering survivors to take steps toward ending sex work in the treatment of the victim (Murphy, 2010).

### **Problem Statement**

Female sex workers are exposed to a number of negative factors including abuse, health problems, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), isolation, social stigma, safety issues, life threats, sexually transmitted diseases, mental illnesses, rape, and higher rates of violence from customers and pimps (Love, 2015). Drugs and alcohol become a strong negative coping strategy (Gerassi, 2015). The lives of women involved in sex work tend to be filled with trauma and major challenges (Dalla, 2006). Barriers to leaving sex work include psychological traumas, drug addiction, mental illness, and financial deficits. Exiting sex work is difficult, and women tend to return to this type of work (Cimino, 2012).

Considering the substantial detrimental effects that sex work has on sex female workers and how difficult it is to leave this type of activity, it was relevant to explore how former female sex workers identify factors that contributed to their exit process. Exiting sex work is a process, not an event (Roe-Sepowitz et al., 2011; Williamson & Folaron, 2003). Sex

workers tend to have several attempts at exiting until they finally succeed. Understanding the contributing factors involved in exiting sex work is relevant to obtain a more critical evaluation of intervention efforts targeting this population (Dalla, 2006).

Factors associated with successful exiting included personal connections or relationships sex workers formed with their children, family members, or other survivors; accessing formal support services such as permanent housing, legal advocacy, and educational job training; and personal factors such as positive life skills and personal self-determination (Hammond & McGlone, 2014; Hickle, 2017; Oselin, 2010). Spirituality has been identified as one of the factors contributing to the exit process and a factor contributing to surviving during the sex work period among former sex workers (Dalla, 2006; Hickle, 2017; Oselin & Blasyak, 2013; Prince, 2008; Rand, 2014; Williamson & Folaron, 2001), but it rarely has been the main focus of research in this population (Su, 2012).

Most women engaged in sex work experienced trauma either before or during the sex work activity. Experiencing trauma may destroy a person's assumptive world and recovering from trauma involves creating and forming a new and enhanced sense of meaning in life. Spirituality is likely to offer an enhanced sense of meaning in life and may contribute to the meaning-making process related to improved outcomes among those who use spirituality as a coping and support system (Park, 2005, 2007, 2010). Although spirituality has been linked to leaving sex work (Dalla, 2006; Hickle, 2017; Oselin & Blasyak, 2013; Prince, 2008; Rand, 2014; Williamson & Folaron, 2001) and has been linked to overcoming trauma experiences (Blakey, 2016; Bryant-Davis et al., 2012; Bryant-Davis & Wong, 2013), little was known



about how former sex workers make meaning of the influence of spirituality in exiting sex work.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore former female sex workers' perceptions of spirituality during the process of exiting sex work. I sought to gain a deeper understanding of how women conceptualized, incorporated, and maintained spirituality in their lives through the process of exiting sex work. I also endeavored to understand the challenges and setbacks women faced in exiting sex work and how they related their spirituality to the process of overcoming adversity and exiting sex work.

I used the concept of spirituality as the phenomenon of the study. Religion refers to an organized practice that includes a system of beliefs invoking a higher power or God (Paley, 2008). Religion is the institution that recognizes a group of people who gather together regularly for worship and accept a set of doctrines relating the individual to what is taken to be the ultimate nature of the reality of being together (Chau, 2017). In contrast, spirituality is considered a state of peace and harmony with oneself and others, and it encompasses an understanding of the meaning of life and death (Newlin et al., 2002). Spirituality is seen as a way in which people live and perceive their lives considering their meaning and value (Muldoon & King, 1995). Historically, the concept of spirituality has been closely identified with religion. Although religion and spirituality have separate yet related roots and definitions, I used both terms throughout the study, following the example of previous related studies that used both terms (see Dalla, 2006; Hickle, 2017; Oselin & Blasyak, 2013; Prince, 2008; Rand, 2014; Williamson & Folaron, 2001). Participants in previous studies referred to

the influence of religion, God, or spirituality in any form (Dalla, 2006); the belief in a higher power (Rand, 2014); the use of prayer as a strategy (Oselin & Blasyak, 2013); religion as one of the top three motivators for exiting sex work (Su, 2012); or the strength that having faith gave them (Prince, 2008; Valandra, 2007). In the current study, spirituality was the term used, but it also encompassed the concept of religion.

### **Research Question**

The following research question guided this study: What are former female sex workers' perceptions of spirituality during the process of exiting sex work?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework informing this study was the integrated model for exiting sex work developed by Baker et al. (2010). This model explains the process for exiting sex work through six steps of human behavior. The first step is *immersion*, in which women are immersed in sex work with no conscious awareness or need to change. The second step is *awareness*, which consists of two parts: visceral awareness (“gut” feelings or feelings that cannot be articulated to exit) and conscious awareness (an uneasy feeling of consciousness or prebreakaway from sex work). The third step is deliberate *preparation*, in which women plan to exit. The fourth step refers to *initial exit*, which explains how women use support services to exit sex work. The fifth step is *reentry*, which describes being “stuck” or “trapped” because of failed attempts to exit sex work. The last stage is the *final exit*, which describes life-encompassing changes in identity, lifestyle, habits, and support sources for women exiting sex work (Baker et al., 2010).

The steps for exiting sex work described in this integrated model provided an understanding of the various influences, challenges, and procedures that women encounter in the exiting process. Spirituality is seen as a component or contributing factor that has the potential to help women navigate this exiting process (Dalla, 2006; Su, 2012). This model helped me conceptualize how spirituality is perceived and is embedded from immersion through final exit.

### **Nature of the Study**

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used as the research design in this study (see Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). I interviewed participants using a semistructured interview protocol consisting of questions aimed at uncovering former female sex workers' perceptions of spirituality in the process of exiting sex work. IPA is used to examine how individuals make meaning of their personal life experiences. The participants in the current study consisted of women previously involved in sex work located in rural and urban areas in the United States and Canada.

I contacted different organizations dedicated to support the recovery of former sex workers to recruit participants. I obtained email information of these organizations via the internet, and I sent them an email explaining the goals and procedures of this study. These were nonprofit organizations dedicated to supporting alternative lifestyles of former sex workers or victims of exploitation. Once the contact person of these organizations agreed to distribute the flyer of my study, I sent it by email to distribute among potential participants who met the inclusion criteria.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

*Religion:* An organized practice that holds a system of beliefs usually invoking a higher power or God (Paley, 2008). Religion is the institution that recognizes a group of people who gather together regularly for worship and accept a set of doctrines relating the individual to what is taken to be the ultimate nature of the reality of being together (Chau, 2017).

*Sex work:* An activity in which one or several services involving sex is exchanged for money or goods (Weatherall & Priestley, 2001). A broad range of activities are considered sex work including “street work, ship work, parlor work, escort work, working independently, mistressing, peep show work, stripping, telephone work and topless dancing” (Weatherall & Priestley, 2001, p. 324). Sex work tends to refer to voluntary sexual exchanges; the term does not encompass human trafficking or other nonvoluntary or coerced transactions such as child prostitution. However, the difference between human trafficking and sex work is a point of discussion among scholars (Barnett, 2016). Sex work is expected to occur among consenting adults who are of legal age and mental capacity (Lutnick & Cohan, 2009).

*Sex worker:* Those practicing or engaged in sex work. Earlier literature identified those involved in this practice as “prostitutes,” “street-walkers,” and “hookers” (Burnes et al., 2012); however, over time sex worker replaced the term prostitute. Prostitute is considered a more judgmental and stigmatizing term. In the current study, sex work and sex worker were used as all-inclusive terms to refer to these activities.

*Spirituality:* A way in which people live and perceive their lives considering their meaning and value (Muldoon & King, 1995). Spirituality is related to a state of peace and

harmony with oneself and others, and it encompasses an understanding of the meaning of life and death (Newlin et al., 2002).

### **Assumptions**

I assumed that former sex workers would be forthcoming in discussing their experiences in detail and would be honest in answering the interview questions associated with this investigation. I assumed that respondents would not consciously fabricate responses and would not provide intentional inaccuracies regarding their experiences. Finally, I assumed that participants would experience certain degree of reticence or embarrassment in discussing their experiences. I maintained a professional stance and reassured participants that I had adopted a nonjudgmental position.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

This study focused on understanding how former adult female sex workers perceived spirituality in the process of exiting sex work. Other factors, such as participants' health or family status, were not the focus of this study. Although these factors were relevant to understanding the impact of sex work, they were not the main focus or scope of this study. This study excluded minors and men engaged in sex work. I recruited in the United States, and the interviews were limited to English-speaking participants.

### **Limitations**

Although I assumed that participants would give candid responses to the interview questions, it was possible that respondents could have altered their responses in favor of more socially acceptable answers. I sensed that some participants felt apprehensive about discussing topics such as the abuse of substances; in these cases, participants quickly clarified that they

did not consume anymore. To minimize participants' feelings of discomfort, I assured them that the interview was confidential, that they did not need to respond to the question, and that they could switch topics if something made them feel uncomfortable. My statements seemed to reduce their apprehension.

Another limitation of this study included the use of phone or video interviews instead of in-person face-to-face interviews. In my initial proposal, I planned to conduct face-to-face interviews; however, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I changed the recruitment and data collection. Phone and video interviews did not allow for observations while conducting the interviews. Face-to-face interviews could have been more reassuring to participants, and they could have appreciated the rapport I expressed in my interviewer's role from a different perspective. At all times, I tried to convey empathy and foster a connection in listening to the participants' experiences. Limitations regarding transferability and dependability of this study are discussed in Chapter 5.

### **Significance**

I explored the phenomenon of spirituality in the exit process of sex work to provide a better understanding of how former female sex workers understood and overcame adversity and developed resilience. Results of this study may be used to generate psychoeducation and information about the cycle of early abuse, the forced entry in sex work, and the challenges of exiting sex work. This information could be made available to girls, women, and the general population at large. It is relevant to promote the message that children need to feel safe and protected from the negative effects of violence. Transmitting this information may have the potential to prevent young girls from falling prey to forced sex work. Multimedia campaigns

could be undertaken to educate the general population about the debilitating impact of sex work on children and adult women and their families, and to highlight that the trauma of sex work will last throughout former sex workers' lifetime. Additionally, results of this study have the potential to help in the creation and implementation of spiritually based prevention and intervention programs for this population.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided a general description of the phenomenon of interest in this study while also addressing the theoretical, conceptual, and empirical support for the research questions and purpose of this study. Key terms were defined in preparation for further discussion of these concepts in Chapter 2. The scope and limitations of this study were identified, leading to a discussion of the project's potential to bring about positive social change in the context of spirituality and exiting sex work. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature related to understanding sex workers' context and the use of spirituality in the process of exiting sex work.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Female sex workers' process of exiting sex work tends to be complicated and difficult (Baker et al., 2010). Several factors have been identified as effective in the exit process including having a strong social support, accessing formal support services, and showing resilient personal factors (Hammond & McGlone, 2014; Hickle, 2017; Oselin, 2010). Spirituality has also been identified as one of the factors contributing to the exit process and as a factor contributing to surviving during the sex work period among former sex workers (Dalla, 2006; Hickle, 2017; Oselin & Blasyak, 2013; Prince, 2008; Rand, 2014; Williamson & Folaron, 2001). Participants in previous studies described the use of prayer as a coping strategy (Oselin & Blasyak, 2013); identified the strength that believing in a higher power (Rand, 2014) or having faith (Prince, 2008; Valandra, 2007) gave them; identified religious factors among the top three motivators for exiting the sex industry (Su, 2012); and highlighted the strong influence of religion, God, or spirituality in any form (Dalla, 2006). Although spirituality has been identified as a contributing factor in exiting sex work, it rarely has been the main focus of research in this population (Su, 2012). Understanding spirituality as a contributing factor involved in exiting sex work is relevant to obtain a more critical evaluation of intervention efforts targeting this population (Dalla, 2006). The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to explore former female sex workers' perceptions of spirituality during the process of exiting sex work.

In this chapter, the literature search strategy that was used to examine the existing literature is presented. After explaining the strategy to complete a comprehensive literature review, I discuss the theoretical framework to promote the inclusion of concepts of interest in



the study. In addition to these targeted endeavors, I provide a general overview of the following topics: risk factors and pathways for entering sex work, barriers to exiting sex work, negative consequences of sex work, overview of the exit process, and spirituality as a contributing factor for exiting sex work. I conclude the chapter by highlighting the gaps in literature on this intersection, affirming the need for this research.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The search engines that I used for my literature search included sources and topics that supported the identified problem of my research. I used many different databases to complete this search, such as Routledge, National Center for Biotechnology Information, PsycARTICLES, PsycBOOKS, PsycEXTRA, PsycINFO, Academic Search Complete, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, and Google Scholar. Although I found various publications and related topics on my subject, I filtered my search to peer-reviewed documents. I used text references that focused on findings of women involved in trauma that were related to sex work and coping skills for women engaged in sex work. I reviewed the sources to ensure that researchers who had contributed to this topic had conducted validated and peer-reviewed studies. Key terms that I used in various combinations throughout these searches were *health, safety, public policy, sex work-exiting, abuse, treatment, violence against women, sexuality, resilience, sex work, trauma, spirituality and women studies, and women studies criminal behavior.*

The final portion of the search strategy included articles and book reviews that covered women involved in trauma related to sex work and coping skills for women engaged in sex work. I also conducted searches on topics related to my subject and developed a processed

framework that provided a model of identified concepts related to exiting sex work. As a researcher and advocate for social change, I explored the method of spiritual desistance for women exiting sex work as a productive factor of women reclaiming their life.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Integrated Model for Exiting Sex Work**

Baker et al.'s (2010) integrated model for exiting sex work was the theoretical basis for this research. This theoretical framework helped me conceptualize the influences, challenges, and procedures that women encountered in the exiting process. Spirituality was considered a component and contributing factor that might have had the potential to help women navigate this exiting process (see Dalla, 2006; Su, 2012). This theoretical framework also helped me conceptualize how spirituality was perceived.

In this model, the first step is immersion, in which women are immersed in sex work with no conscious awareness or need to change. The second step is awareness, which consists of two parts" visceral awareness (gut feelings or feelings that cannot be articulated to exit) and conscious awareness (an uneasy feeling of conscious or prebreakaway from sex work). The third step is deliberate preparation in which women plan to exit. The fourth step refers to initial exit, which explains how women use support services to exit sex work. The fifth step is reentry, which describes being stuck or trapped because of failed attempts to exit sex work. The last stage is the final exit, which describes life-encompassing changes in identity, lifestyle, habits, and support sources for women exiting sex work (Baker et al., 2010).

### **Prior Application of the Integrated Model for Exiting Sex Work**

This model has been used as a theoretical tool or framework in a variety of studies. For example, Wilson and Butler (2014) used the integrated model to explain a three-stage process for exiting sex work described as preentry, postentry, and peri/postexit. The study indicated that women trying to exit sex work faced significant challenges during the peri and postexit phase (no support from family, pimps were in contact with participants). Although there were no reliable statistics on the percentage of women who succeeded in exiting sex work, Wilson and Butler provided evidence of successful exiting.

Wilson and Nochajski (2016) viewed the integrated model as efficient and comprehensive in laying a foundation for women to continue the process rather than quit the process of change. Wilson and Nochajski examined the predictors of readiness for women to exit sex work in India, using the stages of change model as an underlying framework. Similarly, Hammond and McGlone (2014) focused on the form of human trafficking that includes sex trafficking and sex work. This study provided a context for prevention and intervention for exiting human trafficking. By using the integrated model six stages of change, Hammond and McGlone discovered that further investigation is needed within the sex trafficking exiting process. Hammond and McGlone investigated four points of interest of the integrated model: (a) the outgrowth of entry into sexual intercourse trafficking, (b) the progression once one is trafficked and prostituted, (b) the process for exiting, and (d) services for victims and survivors. Hammond and McGlone concluded with recommendations for service providers, health care workers, law enforcement officers, child welfare workers, and social services agencies to become involved in helping women in the exiting process.

Roe-Sepowitz et al. (2014) captured the core concept of the integrated model in a pilot study. Two groups were compared regarding diversion attendance: completion and sex-work-related recidivism. The Project ROSE group included women who were arrested for sex-work-related crimes, and the Plea Agreement group included women already placed in a sex work diversion program. The Plea Agreement group was the comparison group. After the data were collected, both groups showed no significant differences in the variables measured. The study highlighted the population hardships and stages of exiting sex work. Roe-Sepowitz et al. suggested that women exiting sex work should be provided with service that meets their personal and basic needs as an effective prevention plan.

Bowen (2015) examined the integrative model of exiting sex work by targeting 22 active women exiting sex work in Vancouver, British Columbia. Women exiting sex work were motivated to exit when factors such as self-destruction, unhealthy relationships, and structural deterrents were present in their lives. Community support, counseling, family emotional support, and information about the community and state resources promoted self-determination that helped women exit sex work.

Lastly, Holger-Ambrose et al. (2013) used the integrated model of change on a study that included 13 female participants in Midwest U.S. cities. The qualitative study was conducted based on a needs assessment for exploited youths who experienced sex work and wanted ways to exit sex work. Holger-Ambrose et al. explored participants' perspectives on how street outreach workers could provide outreach to this population. Participants did not show actual intention of exiting sex work. Participants' comments indicated that sex work was seen in a positive light and they were not ready for the process of change to exit sex work.

The participants viewed sex work to earn money and become famous as a reality television star. The participants in the study used the illusion they were making money through sex work to mask the painful truth that they were exploited because sex work was their only choice of income.

Researchers who used this model as a theoretical framework indicated that women go through a process of pre- and postexit. The model helped in identifying different stages with experiences and characteristics relevant to each stage. Researchers in these studies used the integrated model of change to illustrate how women in sex work could prepare and be ready for a change in sex work.

### **Relevance of the Integrated Model to the Current Research**

The focus of this study was to explore pathways of spiritual desistance among former female sex workers. I expected to gain a more in-depth understanding of how former female sex workers related their spirituality to the process of overcoming adversity and exiting sex work. This theory was relevant because it provided a framework for understanding the stages former female sex workers went through to successfully exit sex work. The stages of change the theory aided in understanding how spirituality facilitated the process of overcoming adversity and developing resilience.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Concepts**

There were various topics of interest that converged in this study. This literature review section is organized as follows: factors for entering sex work, barriers to exiting sex work, consequences of sex work, exiting process, and spirituality and religion as pathways for exiting sex work.

## **Risk Factors and Pathways for Entering Sex Work**

Women have an individualized, unique experience that connects them to sex work. Factors associated to engagement in sex work include childhood abuse experiences, economic need, substance use, and the influence of pimps. Other related factors associated with engagement in sex work are related to age and race.

### ***Childhood Abuse***

Child physical or sexual abuse has been identified as a precursor to entry into sex work (Miller-Perrin, & Wurtele, 2017). Women who had been abused sexually or physically as a child found it easy to exchange sex for money (Gerassi, 2015). For some women, prostituting as an adult was a survival strategy that emerged after running away from abusive situations in their home or an abusive foster care situation (Crosland & Dunlap, 2015). Women who have been sexually abused as children learn a distorted point of view about their bodies. Exposure to child sexual deviance may progress to adult sex work or using their body to make money (Miccio-Fonseca, 2017).

### ***Economic Need***

Economic need is another factor in sex work because sex work provides a means of supporting basic needs, children, or income for someone with limited education or employment skills. Economic need is also related to drug use or addiction. Not having access to financial and material resources to support the addiction may force women into the streets (Dalla, 2000). The sex work industry provides a means to help families cover medical costs, and to provide a way of living. The reality of accepting a low wage job that pays weekly or

monthly can feel stressful for women who spent years making money proving sex. Sex work has made women feel a sense of significant financial gain (Olson et al., 2017).

### ***Substance Use***

Research has suggested that there is an overlap between drug use and sex work. Due to the percentage of reported drug use among female sex workers, drug use has been identified as a key factor associated with the industry of sex work (Cusick et al., 2011). The cycle of abuse that women experience in their personal lives partially explains the overlap between sex work and substance abuse. Some female sex workers reported sexual abuse during childhood that led to consuming self-medicating substances. This led to more sexual trauma. Once women experienced repeated sexual trauma, this set in motion the transition to the sex trade field (Heilemann & Santhiveeran, 2011). Female sex workers are exposed to abuse, health problems, PTSD, isolation, social stigma, safety issues, life threats, sexually transmitted diseases, mental illnesses, rape, and higher rates of violence from customers and pimps (Hickle, 2014). Drugs and alcohol become a significant negative coping mechanism (Gerassi, 2015).

### ***Influence of Pimps***

*Pimp* is the colloquial term for procurer, which is best described as an agent for sex workers who collects part of their earnings (Garner & Black, 2004). A pimp is often violent toward women and uses manipulation, threats, and violence to control women. This method of control is used to keep women or those involved from leaving sex work or to recruit others for the business (Kennedy et al., 2007). The connection between pimps and women occurs when women enter sex work as an involuntary, nonpremeditated career choice. Pimps control and

recruit women in different ways such as love, emotional attachment, drug addiction, exploitation prior to drug addiction, manipulation into situations of financial indebtedness, threats of harm to family members, and threats to reveal sex work involvement to family members. Pimps use recruitment techniques and social influences from their community to convince women they have few alternatives of working outside the sex industry. Therefore, sex work can only be their source of income (Kennedy et al., 2007).

Experts argue that pimps control street sex workers at some point during their work in the sex trade (Dalla, 2002). Pimps are responsible for introducing women into sex work, which contributes to factors that lead to harmful and criminal behavior (Kennedy et al., 2007). Pimps use psychological manipulation and violence to prevent women from leaving sex work.

Five methods of socialization describe the psychological manipulation of pimps: primary, secondary, developmental, anticipatory, and resocialization (Stalans & Finn, 2016). Primary socialization involves teaching the values, norms, and behaviors that should be displayed to live according to the culture of sex work. Secondary socialization is used to control women and change their values, attitudes, and beliefs of sex work related to the norms of society. Developmental socialization is the learning process wherein the focus is on developing social and survival skills of the sex trade industry. Anticipatory socialization is the process of a pimp allowing women to practice or rehearse social relationships in the sex trade. Resocialization involves women rejecting previous behavior patterns by normalizing the profession as a sex worker and accepting new behavior that shifted from one part of life to another (Stalans & Finn, 2016).



Raphael et al. (2010) suggested that government and law enforcement agencies need to focus on how to prosecute pimps under the provisions of federal laws and state penalties. Women involved in sex work should not be prosecuted under state laws but be supported in the exiting process. Women should receive support from agencies that provide safe shelters, safe housing, and financial support.

### ***Age and Race***

Structural inequalities affect women's entry and continued participation in sex work. Age and race were two factors identified. According to Roe-Sepowitz et al. (2012), Black women may enter sex work at a younger age than White women due to cultural disparities and a history of childhood trauma (emotional abuse, emotional neglect, and physical neglect). Additionally, issues of racism, classism, and sexism as related forms of oppression are related to the entry in sex work. Women of color are at a higher risk for sex work because of the societal stressors (unemployment, uneducated and domestics abuse) they experience (Roe-Sepowitz et al., 2012).

### **Barriers to Exiting Sex Work**

Barriers to leaving sex work include psychological traumas, drug addiction, mental illness, and financial deficits. According to Baker et al. (2010), barriers to exiting sex work are divided into four general categories: individual factors, relational factors, structural factors, and societal factors.

### ***Individual Factors***

Individual factors are constructed from self-destructive behaviors such as, substance abuse, drug addiction and mental illness (Dalla et al., 2003). Street sex workers are likely to

experience some form of drug addiction and mental illness. In part, from physical abuse, women experience the psychological effects of sex work, arrest, violence from pimps and their life encounters of exacerbation (Ahn et al., 2015).

Constructs of self-destructive behavior have women living an unhealthy life and they find it hard to leave sex work; mainly because it connects to their personal life of drug addiction and mental illness (Neale et al., 2018). Poor physical health, unemployment, and a history of psychological traumas are personal barriers that limit legal employment options after a woman has left sex work (Andrews et al., 2015).

Women employed as a sex worker engage in risky sexual practices and they have a higher risk of sexually transmitted infectious diseases. Women who use intravenous drugs and live in homeless conditions further diminish their physical health by having unprotected sex with customers by force results in significant association with infectious diseases (Shannon et al., 2015).

### ***Relational Factors***

The relational factors involve coerced or forced relationships into street sex work by their friends, family or pimp. Women enter sex work because friends, family or pimp demonstrate and convinced them of the benefits of sex work. For example, strippers in a nightclub tell their co-workers that they can make money selling their body or becoming a stripper can be a wealthy business, and it is tax-free money. Women being around female sex workers with years of experience will help to normalize the experience of a sex worker and minimize moral objectives formerly established (Williamson & Folaron, 2003).

Women in the industry of sex work become a social network for other women as a strong psychological hold to keep women trapped in the industry. The psychological hold provides a strong community connection, which makes it difficult for women to exit sex work (Hankel et al., 2016). Therefore, associations with certain people like friends, family or pimps promote sex work by influencing women that love is the deciding thing that will keep them together. As mentioned above, women are forced or coerced into sex work by individuals that support and agree with sex work. Women that have relationships with people that promote or agree with sex work will delay the exiting process as they serve to support the idea that women remain in street sex work (Baker et al., 2010). Lastly, women seduce younger or inexperienced women into promises of love, money, security or nice place to live. Once emotionally attached, grooming takes place whereby pimps convince women that selling themselves is how they show love.

### ***Structural Factors***

The structural factors surrounding why women enter sex work described by Baker et al. (2010) listed examples of how woman born in a community with poverty issues, sexual or physical abuse, and unstable home environment find it difficult to escape. Further factors that compel women to continue in sex work are results of economic inequalities that have women in a situation of hopelessness and despair (Baker et al., 2010). The discouraging factors that women face find it hard to leave sex work because they are left with the only option of sex work. Women being involved in illegal employment cause barriers on personal and social levels that keep women trapped in sex work. Persons engaged in street sex work disproportionately experience poverty because women become vulnerable to exploitation and

violence as they take greater risks in the streets. The dangers women face are exploitation, robbery, violence, rape, and murder are all included in street sex work (Dalla, 2002). These factors mentioned above leads to drugs and alcohol playing a major role in increasing one's risk of violence, robbery, and sexual abuse because customers tend to prefer sex workers to be on drugs as their inhibitions are lowered, and they are easier to manipulate (Wagner & McCann, 2017).

### ***Societal Factors***

The societal factors include women exposed to an environment that has constraints against exiting sex work. There is a need for woman to have societal support with an ability to support self. Employment that allows on-the-job-training to allow woman to receive an education will prevent woman from entering sex work. For example, because women are not able to consider having legitimate employment, on the job training or free education they chose sex work because they have been told by former female sex workers it is an easy way to make money (Cooper, et al., 2017).

Employment with equitable wages may be a function of one's skills and qualifications but can influence a wider societal force like an economic recession where there are jobs available. Changes in our state welfare assistance programs can stop taking away assistance from sex work-exiting programs and give money to support and educate women to exit sex work (Morse et al., 2015). The availability of social services is independent of the intention or abilities and social need to address policies regarding sex work. There need to be change for the legal or other systemic barriers that cannot be remedied at the individual level for all women.

## **Negative Consequences of Sex Work**

Being engaged in sex work has several negative consequences for women. Common problems associated with sex work include physical and psychological health problems, violence and victimization, and involvement with the legal system.

### ***Physical and Psychological Health Problems***

Women who engage in sex work are at a higher risk of suffering posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD); drug related disorders, depression, dissociate disorders, and suicide (Hossain et al., 2010). The psychological problems women tend to experience were associated with factors that introduced women into sex work and factors that maintained them in that lifestyle, such as using their bodies for money, drugs, or material goods (Harcourt, & Donovan, 2005). Additionally, exposure to violence and victimization greatly contributed to mental health issues. Women who entered sex work were likely to experience traumatic events such as incest or rape, which lead to an increased psychological vulnerability (Hossain et al., 2010).

Several other situational risk factors may increase women's vulnerability to suffer mental health including growing up in an unstable or dysfunctional household, being exposed to childhood physical abuse, engaging in runaway behavior to escape abusive situations, being homelessness, consuming substances prior to entering sex work, experiencing different forms of violent assaults perpetrated by customers and pimps (Esteban-Vasallo et al., 2015). Women use strenuous psychological coping mechanisms such as, portraying a distorted reality of sex work, manipulating others, or engaging in deviant behaviors to survive the stress and strain of sex work and avoid feelings of anxiety (Esteban-Vasallo et al., 2015).

Women's physical health is affected from exposure to sex work; and women are at risk of experiencing several health-related problems including hepatitis B and C, general pain in the body, and HIV (Pinkham et al., 2012). These health-related issues are accompanied and exacerbated by extended drug use and unprotected sex. Due to contracting sexually transmitted infections (STI), women show an increased rate of visits to emergency rooms when compared to the general population (Pearson et al., 2017). They report chronic illness including physical problems that affected their physical health and caused women involved in sex work to unlikely follow up with care (Benoit et al., 2018).

### ***Violence and Victimization***

In the industry of sex work women have been subjected to violence, victimization, and exploitation. This violence was out of their control (Chase & Statham, 2005). Sex work involves some form of modern-day slavery, and there are disturbing reports of women being bought and sold around the world. There are also stories of abduction, confinement, and torture among female sex workers (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2017). Some may argue that sex work is an exploitation of women, and a form of gender-based violence that is controlled, encouraged, and reinforced by pimps or criminals who gain money from women's sex work (Weitzer, 2017). The reality is that women involved in sex work are amongst the most victimized group of people in society.

### ***Legal Problems***

While people have largely discarded the tone of moral and legal accusation around sex work; and law enforcement tends to focus on key questions related to the external social and situational factors propelling vulnerable children and adolescents into a lifestyle of trading sex

for money, female sex workers end up with criminal charges (Dodsworth, 2011; Pearce, 2009; Sanders et al., 2009; Raphael et al., 2010; Williamson & Folaron, 2003).

Most persons involved in sex work experience negative legal consequences. The increase of feeling isolated with social rejection. Criminal charges become another layer that forces women to keep in this type of activity as having criminal charges makes it difficult for women to gain legitimate employment, housing, or other services (Dodsworth, 2011; Raphael et al., 2010; Sanders et al., 2009; Williamson & Folaron, 2003).

### **Role of Spirituality**

Women recognize that leaving sex work is extremely difficult. Women often experience constant forces of discouragement clashing against forces of determination. It is only after losing some battles that they discover economic marginalization, substance addiction, and abuse in their personal lives (Cusick et al., 2011). Women who try to exit sex work experience several barriers such as few employment options, shame, mental and physical health issues, and financial hardship (Dalla, 2006; Baker, et al., 2010). Nevertheless, some factors have linked to the successful exit of sex work such as the development of positive life skills, personal self-determination, educational job training, permanent housing, legal advocacy, social support, and family reunification (Hammond, & McGlone, 2014). Spirituality has also been positively associated with the exiting process or it has helped in sustaining the decision of not returning to sex work (Cimino, 2012; Dalla, 2006; Hickie, 2014; Prince, 2008; Rand, 2014; Su, 2012).

### ***Spirituality and Religion***

There is not a one definition of spirituality in the field (Bruce et al., 2011).

Historically, a wide broad spectrum of definitions ranged from considering spirituality as the interconnectedness to God and nature (Goddard, 1995; Macrae, 2001), to a core aspect of a person, an inner unifying force (Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002; Hasse et al., 1992), to a state of direction and purpose in life (Muldoon & King, 1995). Thus, while historically the concept of spirituality was closely identified with religion (Chiu, et al., 2004), current views hold a stronger focus on personal aspects; and spirituality is defined as opposed to religion (Magura et al., 2003).

In their review of the concept of spirituality, Chiu and colleagues (2004) reported that the themes found across 73 peer reviewed articles included: existential reality (spirituality was related to an existential dimension that is invented through meaning and purpose in life), transcendence (spirituality is beyond contextual reality, and liberation from suffering related to transcendence), connectedness (spirituality in relationship to Self, Others, Nature, and Higher Being), and power/force/energy (spirituality was expressed in creative energy, motivation, and striving for inspiration) (Bruce et al., 2011). A broad definition of spirituality is currently favored, and spirituality is defined as a state of peace and harmony with oneself and others; and it encompasses an understanding of the meaning of life and death (Newlin et al., 2002). As Muldoon and King (1995) indicated, spirituality is seen as a way in which people live and perceive their lives considering their meaning and value.

In contrast to these conceptualizations of spirituality, religion refers to an organized practice that holds a system of beliefs usually invoking a higher power or God (Paley, 2008). Thus, religion is the institution that recognizes a group of people that gather together regularly



for worship and accept a set of doctrines relating the individual to what is taken to be the ultimate nature of the reality of being together (Chau, 2017).

### ***Role of Religion and Spirituality in Health***

Research has been conducted on the role of religion and spirituality in mental and physical health (Vieten et al., 2013). For example, religious and spirituality have been associated with successful stress management during difficult events or times (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Oman & Thoresen, 2005); to identity development of adolescents and adults (Magaldi-Dopman & Park-Taylor, 2010); to recovery from substance use disorders (Delaney et al., 2009); to restraint from engaging in risky behaviors (McNamara et al., 2010); and a positive sense of satisfaction and happiness (Pargament, et al., 2013). Additionally, research indicated that individuals engaged in spiritual or religious activities could refrain from criminal behavior (Visher et al., 2013). Also, spirituality has historically been considered as one way of improving quality of life for individuals that engage in criminal behavior (Dalmida et al., 2011).

Particularly relevant to this study, positive religious coping and spirituality have been related to a reduction of psychological distress in trauma-related situations such as victims of sexual violence and intimate partner violence, and survivors of child abuse (Bryant-Davis & Wong, 2013). Leaders in the mental health field have increasingly acknowledged and incorporated religious or spiritual interventions in trauma recovery. Religious and spiritual cognitions, beliefs, and behaviors have been incorporated into treatment for people who have suffered abuse and mistreatment (APA, 2013).

### ***Influence of Spirituality and Religion in the Exit Process***

Few studies have reported how women who exited sex work turned to spirituality as a source of support. This section addresses how spirituality was used or became a source of support among sex workers engaged in the exit process of sex work. Prince (2008) conducted a qualitative study to understand the meaning of resilience among 15 African American women recovering from sex work. One of the main themes in their results indicated that spirituality was described as a sustaining force during difficult times. Participants in Prince's study believed in a higher power, and although they did not describe a specific religious affiliation, they described how having faith helped them cope with difficulties experienced. The experience and the belief in spirituality helped these women in the transition process after exiting sex work.

Valandra (2007) conducted a study on specific healing needs of African American women sex workers. This qualitative research study consisted of eight African American women who were receiving culturally particular services at an Afro-centric agency. The data collected examined antecedents of entry into sex work, services received, and women's experiences and perceptions. The data analysis was a grounded theory approach, which resulted in a shared description of the women's experiences. The sample consisted of eight women ages 18 to 47 years, with an average age of approximately 34 years, and all had one or more children. The six women participating were 18 years and younger when they entered sex work. The number of years they were involved in sex work ranged from 6 weeks to 38 years, with an average 18 years. Four women credited their family and friends with help in exiting, and four women mentioned wanting to do something different because of being tired of the

duties of providing sex for sale. Six women attributed to their spirituality or faith as a source of strength in exiting.

The analysis revealed seven categories of experience: (a) a legacy of violence and underreporting of violence, (b) family and self-preservation, (c) kinship support and spirituality, (d) hitting rock bottom, (e) barriers to recovery, (f) helpful and harmful program services, and (g) prism of oppression. These women overcame with the program services from Breaking Free, along with other community agencies that provided mental health, chemical dependence, emergency shelter, and child welfare services. Valandra (2007) was able to identify women sex workers' experiences of social, spiritual, and religion changes in the exiting process as a commitment to the concept of fundamental beliefs. The correlations of various types of well-being, and people who have a moralistic view of life try to improve their behavior. In other words, social change, spirituality, and religion can give women a source of strength in breaking free and recovering from sex work. The role of spirituality and religion and its influence women's overall psychological adjustment as they transition out of sex work into a life redefined. In sum, the authors point out the need for recognizing culturally relevant services for exiting from sex work and recovering from sexual victimization.

Dalla (2006) collected data from 1998 and 1999 on 43 street-level women sex workers' developmental experiences. The study participated in sex work entry, maintenance, and exit attempts. Three years later, 18 of the original 43 participants were located and interviewed. The method included 18 women composed of the follow-up sample between 2001 and 2002, approximately 3 years after the initial interviews of 1998 and 1999. At the time of the follow-up interviews, participants ranged in age from 33 to 59 years, with an

average age of 41 years. Most were Black or Non-Hispanic White and they were divorced and had children. The average age range of entry into sex work was 11 to 31 years, and all but one sex worker reported current or prior chemical addiction. The data collection consisted of an audio-recorded interview on sex work entry and continued involvement, drug use, relationships with significant others (children, partners, and family members), residence and employment patterns, community services and assistance, and future goals. Interviews structured the emphasis those content areas or themes that emerged as most significant during the initial interviews of 1998 and 1999. The data analyses explored the exit process, with attention devoted to experiences and events that promote or inhibit exit success. Conclusions included the following: (a) five women successfully avoided sex work drug use, and other forms of illegality; (b) 13 women had experienced significant setbacks in their exit attempts; (c) nine had returned to both sex work and illicit drug use; (d) one had returned to sex work only; and (e) three others had violated parole and been reincarcerated after brief returns to the outside world. The finding concluded that of 18 women who participated in the study, only five had remained free of sex work and drug use. Their success denotes the consistency with which religion and spiritual rebirth were described by the five whose exits were successful because only two of the 13 who had not maintained their exits alluded to religion, God, or spirituality in any form.

Moreover, interviews with the 13 who had not successfully exited revealed a theme of mental health difficulties, which was not evident among the five who successfully exited. Therefore, Dalla (2006) arranged spirituality and religion in the exiting process as five women conveyed change identities, behaviors, and the use of forgiveness as a benefit factor from the

feelings of being forgiven. The meaning consist of those women could develop a sense of hope and optimism for the future. They also gained comfort and a sense of belonging through practicing meditation and prayer as part of their exit process, and their exit factors of spirituality and religion were successful.

Hickle (2017) conducted a study using a qualitative approach to explore the experience of exiting sex work from the perspectives of 19 adults formerly involved in sex work. The 19 adult women were recruited to participate in a study about exiting sex work. These women identified as White, Hispanic, Black, and Biracial. The age range was from 25 to 59 years, with an average age of 44 years. The entry of age range was from 13 to 31 years, with an average age of 20 years. The participants involved came from diverse helping services at the time of their interview. These services included court-ordered programming, 12-step groups, and mental health. The procedure included women who (a) were ages 18 years or older, (b) had some experience with selling or trading sexual services, and (c) self-reported a minimum of 2 years since they last sold or traded sex. Data collection began by providing a narrative approach and emphasis on lived experiences of individuals, how these experiences happened, and the time involved. Questions included (a) “Can you tell me about the people who helped you get out?” and (b) “What kinds of services were helpful to you, such as counseling, treatment, case management, safe housing?” Data analysis resulted in three factors that facilitated the exiting process. The connection, resources, and personal growth included the following subthemes: ‘survivor’ presence, children, and spirituality; resources included the development of networks; and accessing resources that provided structure and safety. Personal growth described feelings as empowerment and a fear of consequences. The

factors that serve and build resiliency, represent the personal, social, and physical resources of women that moved through the process of exiting. Therefore, Hickle (2017) described and used spirituality or a form of religious practice in the exiting process as one of the supportive behaviors of change for the women who had the desire to exit and did not know how. The positive working alliance is a sense of self-esteem, more significant levels of spirituality or a form of religion beliefs. This help was noted as a positive, effective method for individuals involved in the exiting process of sex work. Also, individuals engaged in the exiting process used factors of spirituality and a form of religious practice of beliefs in their daily life experience. This method helps provide individuals with hope and motivation for their sex work exit process.

Rand (2014) conducted a qualitative approach to explore feminist perspectives on a detailed description of how sex work and sex trafficking occurs using a lived experience approach. Data collection was a detailed observation of survivors and social service providers located in two agencies that provide direct services to adolescents and adults who are involved in sex work. Three categories that were included are as follows: (a) 18 years or older; (b) exchanged sex for food, money, shelter, housing, etc.; and (c) exited, or was in the process of exiting the commercial sex trade. Rand used a semi structured interview approach for the first interviewing technique.

The findings revealed five themes: critical agency partnerships, services delivered, challenges and limitations to serving a population of individuals involved in sex work, promising practices from the field, and defining success. These themes involved services including agency court referrals, crisis line, street outreach, jail outreach, and word-of-mouth.

The supported services included (a) social service, (b) mental health centers, (c) the criminal justice system, (d) transitional housing programs, (e) domestic violence shelters, (f) the health department, (g) drug treatment centers, (h) homeless shelters, (i) faith-based agencies, (j) multiservice agencies, (k) employment programs, and (l) food pantries. A multidimensional holistic approach can use basic supportive methods in meeting the needs of people involved in sex work. This approach could move communities closer to achieving social change for all people.

Su (2012) conducted a study of 50 adult women older than 18 years who were native English speakers, believed in God or a higher power, and could recall some traumatic experiences that occurred during their sex work experience. For example, women involved sex work (a) worked as sex workers trading sex for money or material goods, (b) worked as exotic dancers, or (c) worked as pornography actresses in the adult entertainment industry. The design analysis was a cross-sectional survey data with descriptive statistics and use of hierarchical regression statistical methods. Su's goal was set to enable the relationships between religious and mental health variables. Regression analyses were also used to test the effects of positive and negative (a) religious coping and religious commitment on the sex worker's levels of depression, (b) posttraumatic stress, and (c) posttraumatic event during current or past sex work that the participant could recall. The measures developed by an online survey required approximately 45 to 60 minutes to complete. The study had five sections, not including the initial screening survey: (a) basic demographics; (b) stage of exit; (c) exit factors (barriers and facilitators, faith helps); (d) traumatic events assessment; and (e) five standardized measures commonly used to assess religious coping, religious commitment,

depression, posttraumatic stress, and posttraumatic growth. The standardized measures consisted of (a) the RCI-10, (b) Brief RCOPE (c), CED-D scale, short form (IOWA version; Kohout et al., 1993), (d) PCL-S, and (e) PTGI-short form (PTGI-SF).

The procedure enabled participants to complete a survey on-line-link. The purpose was to find the influence of religion and spirituality on the mental health and exit process of women leaving sex work. Two predictor variables, religious coping and religious commitment, were examined in relation to three outcome variables: depression, PTSD, and posttraumatic growth. Analyses were conducted to investigate whether differences existed between women sex workers and exotic dancers with regard to psychological adjustment and the number of traumatic experiences order to evaluate potential changes across time.

The results were based on continuous versus categorical and were, therefore, valid for consideration in correlational analyses distinct from, but complementary to, the original hypotheses of this study. The impact of religion can eliminate trauma play a major role in helping women exit sex work successfully. The findings suggested that religious and spiritual involvement lead to significant mental health benefits and posttraumatic growth among women leaving sex work. Religious and spiritual commitment prompts a need for empirical research to draw from a psychology-of-religion literature base to reveal a more comprehensive and accurate model of the exiting process. Spiritual factors as necessary to be incorporated to account for the powerful and life-transforming religious and spiritual resources that many women rely on to initiate and maintain a successful exit from sex work.

The studies that I reviewed in this section suggested that spirituality and religion are critical factors in the process of exiting sex work. However, a more in-depth exploration of



spirituality among women who formerly engaged in sex work is warranted. It is relevant to explore how women experienced spirituality and religion in the exiting and the surviving processes (Hickle, 2014; Rand, 2014). It is not clearly established how these women articulate this influence through the entry to the exit cycle.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

In this literature review, I provided an overview of the current pertinent research on spirituality among female sex workers. Literature indicated a limited amount of research that discusses spiritual desistance among women with a history in sex work involved in the exiting process. As a result, the focal point of my study was to explore how former female sex workers perceive the role of spirituality in the exit process. Results of the study may inspire further research that will assist mental health professionals in exploring spirituality as a preventative method for individuals exiting sex work. In the next chapter, the methods used to respond to the research question were described.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this IPA study was to explore former female sex workers' perceptions of spirituality during the process of exiting sex work. Through this study, I gained a deeper understanding of how women conceptualized, incorporated, and maintained spirituality in their lives through the process of exiting sex work. I also gained an understanding of challenges and setbacks women faced in exiting sex work and how they related their spirituality to the process of overcoming adversity and exiting sex work. The intention of this study was to contribute to an enhanced empirical understanding of the unique experiences rooted in the complex dynamics of exiting sex work.

This chapter outlines the methodology that was used in this study and the reasons that IPA was selected to address the study's objectives. This chapter also includes an overview of the participants, the process for participant selection, and the criteria for participation. Data collection and analysis are outlined along with tools that assisted in obtaining the rich data in this investigation. Finally, strategies to enhance trustworthiness are presented, and ethical considerations are also described.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

The following research question guided this study: What are former female sex workers' perceptions of spirituality during the process of exiting sex work? Although the existing literature established a link between spirituality as a contributing factor for exiting sex worker among female sex workers (Dalla, 2006; Hickle, 2017; Oselin & Blasyak, 2013; Prince, 2008; Rand, 2014; Su, 2012; Williamson & Folaron, 2001), there was little in-depth empirical understanding of the experiences of spirituality among former female sex workers

and how they perceived its role in their exiting of sex work. This gap warranted further investigation to reveal the unique experiences of former female sex workers (see Hickie, 2014; Rand, 2014). Given that the goal of this study was to provide detailed and comprehensive accounts of those who had experienced the intersection of spirituality and the process of exiting sex work, a qualitative IPA approach (see J. A. Smith et al., 2009) was selected.

A qualitative method was selected as the most appropriate research design in this study. The qualitative design promotes an inductive approach, the uncovering of personal meaning, and the focus on a specific context and population (Patton, 2002). This design was a good fit for the goals of the current study. Having determined that a qualitative approach was the best fit for this study, I selected the IPA (see J. A. Smith et al., 2009) design as the best strategy to answer the research question. IPA originated within the field of psychology and has been used to explore experiences of transitional periods in life and psychology distress, making it a great fit for the phenomenon of interest in the current study.

The objective of IPA is to determine how participants make meaning of their experiences related to a phenomenon. The phenomenological approach is used to investigate how individuals perceive events, as opposed to describing the phenomenon using a preexisting system. In using IPA, the researcher must first understand the participants' view of a phenomenon; second, through an interpretative process, the researcher tries to decode that meaning to make sense of the participants' unique perspectives. The researcher moves through each participant's statements and compares their narratives to discover similarities and differences (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Although there is an individualized focus on the

data in an IPA study, IPA's analytical procedures help to generate theoretical transferability to reflect a larger human experience (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). These procedural underpinnings of IPA were consistent with exploring the meaning that former female sex workers placed on spirituality during the process of exiting sex work.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As the sole researcher in this IPA study, I designed the study, obtained approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Walden IRB approval for the study is 12-07-20-0319189. In my researcher's role I also located and screened potential participants, analyzed the findings of the study, and presented the findings in the final report. The main data collection tool consisted of video or phone interviews. Interviews were conducted via phone, Skype, Messenger, Zoom, and iPhone FaceTime. After each interview, I secured interview sheets, notes, and other confidential participants' information in a locked encrypted drive in my home. I was open and honest when establishing good rapport with each participant. Part of establishing rapport was to reassure the participants that their participation in the study would remain confidential from the beginning to the end and thereafter. Participants in this study received a \$10.00 digital gift card as a token of appreciation for their time during the interview.

### **Methodology**

#### **Participant Selection Logic**

The population of interest for this study consisted of women with a history in sex work. I used a purposeful sampling strategy to collect pertinent data from participants. Patton (2002) confirmed that a purposeful sampling strategy assists the researcher in selecting the

best participants or sites to understand the problem and research questions. Purposive sampling was designed to serve a particular need or purpose by allowing the recruitment of a specific group of individuals based on the objective of the study. I also used criterion sampling, which involves selecting cases that meet some predetermined criterion relevant to the study (see Patton, 2002). In phenomenological studies, criterion sampling works well when all individuals studied represent people who experienced a certain phenomenon (Creswell, 2009).

To be eligible to participate in the interviews, each participant met criteria including (a) being a former female sex worker, (b) having experienced spirituality as a strong force at the time of exiting sex work, (c) being 18 years or older, and (d) having fluency in the English language. To recruit participants, I contacted different organizations dedicated to support the recovery of former sex workers. I obtained email information for these organizations via the internet, and I sent them an email letter explaining the goals and procedures of this study. Once the contact person of these organizations agreed to distribute the flyer of my study, I sent it by email to distribute among potential participants who met the search criteria. Participants of this study were purposefully recruited from a sample of individuals responding to my email invitation. Additionally, I used snowball sampling. Participants of my study were asked to forward information about this study among other potential participants.

Fifteen women were selected to participate in semistructured interviews for this study. According to Guest et al. (2006), a sample size of 12 participants is appropriate when using a semistructured interview guide. Guest et al. indicated that most variation in the codes occurs between the first and 12th interviews. However, J. Smith (2004) suggested that IPA studies

use smaller samples (five to 10) because it is only possible to conduct the detailed analysis associated with IPA on a small sample. Supporting this recommendation, Creswell (2009) pointed out that samples in phenomenological studies tend to range from three to 10 individuals.

Considering these recommendations for sample size in phenomenological studies, I recruited 15 participants. Saturation would be ensured with this number of participants. Saturation refers to the point at which no new themes are emerging from a homogenous sample of participant interviews (Mason, 2010). This target sample size was selected given the likelihood of reaching data saturation with this number of participants from this specific group of interest.

## **Instrumentation**

### ***Demographic Questions***

Each participant was interviewed for 30 to 60 minutes to ensure that all necessary information needed from the participants was obtained. Before asking the participants any questions related to the research study and the specific interview guide, I began by asking them a standard set of demographic questions to not only get a clear picture of my participants and their context, but also in an effort to gain rapport that is open and honest. Appendix A displays the demographic questions.

### ***Semi-structured Interview Guide***

Engaging participants in conversation with a semistructured interview guide (Appendix A) allowed me to connect with them in real-time dialogue. This form of interviewing also provided space for original topics to emerge (see Pietkiewicz & Smith,

2009) and allowed follow-up questions during the conversation. I developed the semistructured interview questions based on related studies (see Dalla, 2006; Hickie, 2017; Prince, 2008; Rand, 2014), which addressed the process of exiting sex work among former sex workers.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

After obtaining approval of my proposal, I sought Walden's University's IRB approval. After obtaining IRB approval, I began recruitment of participants. Potential participants were invited to participate via different organizations dedicated to support the recovery of former sex workers. I gathered email information for these organizations via the internet, and I sent them an email explaining the goals and procedures of this study. These nonprofit organizations are dedicated to supporting alternative lifestyles for former sex workers or victims of exploitation. Once the contact person of these organizations agreed to distribute the flyer of my study, I sent it by email to distribute among potential participants who met the search criteria.

Interested potential participants reached out to me by email. I explained the goals of my study and the criteria for participating in the study. I screened potential participants via email to determine whether they fit the criteria. The four criteria for participation were (a) being a former female sex worker, (b) having experienced spirituality as a strong force at the time of exiting sex work, (c) being 18 years or older, and (d) having fluency in the English language. If participants confirmed they met these criteria, I sent them an email with the consent form. If they agreed to participate, I arranged to conduct the interview via phone, video, or audio media platforms at the participants' convenient time. The interviews were

taped; after the interviews, participants received a \$10.00 digital gift card for their participation.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

I used thematic analysis to analyze the content of the interviews (see Braun & Clarke, 2006), yet the principles and guidelines of IPA analysis were preserved (see J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Thematic analysis differs from other descriptive analytic methods because it is not connected to any preexisting theoretical framework. The researcher uses IPA to synthesize data through the extraction of themes and subthemes. According to Braun and Clark, thematic analysis comprises six phases:

1. Become familiar with the data. This first stage consists of transcribing data, reading and rereading the transcribed data, and noting initial ideas.
2. Generate initial codes. This second stage involves developing a systematic coding framework across the entire data set and collecting relevant data to each code. Both similarities and differences across the data set should be noted.
3. Search for themes. In the third stage, codes are organized and collected into potential themes. The first thematic map is outlined highlighting major trends that emerge from the data.
4. Review themes. In the fourth stage, themes are confirmed in relation to code extracts, and the thematic map is refined. The write-up of these themes that emerge should be logical, concise, and nonrepetitive.



5. Define and name themes. At this stage, themes are refined, and more specific and unique components of each theme are identified. Names for the themes are provided, and the general story of the data is more clearly described.
6. Produce the report. In the final stage, a scholarly report is created. The report should contain vivid and rich examples extracted from participants' transcripts. The results should relate back to the research questions and should be situated in the context of the literature reviewed on the topic or phenomenon of study.

Data extracted from the interviews were analyzed following these steps. Results were rendered into a coherent report. Minimum discrepancy emerged; I was able document the negative data to provide a realistic and valid perspective of the phenomenon under study (see Creswell, 2009). Conducting negative analysis and critically reviewing conflicting information had the potential to add credibility to the study.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is essential for ensuring quality in a qualitative study. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are considered the qualitative inquirer's equivalents of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) and Shenton's (2004) guidelines and recommendations to ensure quality in my study.

#### **Credibility**

Credibility refers to the congruency of the findings with describing reality (Shenton, 2004). To ensure credibility in my study, I conducted extensive interviews. I also used prolonged engagement, negative case analysis, and debriefing. I conducted in-depth interview

sessions that ranged from 30 to 60 minutes to ensure all responses to questions were answered in detail. Although I did not force participants to stay in the interview to cover this time frame, I gave participants plenty of time to express themselves. I used prolonged engagement as it related to spending enough time in the field to gain an understanding of the phenomenon in its context. I conducted 15 interviews to ensure data saturation.

I also conducted negative case analysis. Negative case analysis refers to taking special consideration and treatment of disconfirming or negative information. I identified data that did not fit the trending patterns and tried to understand why they did not fit. Disconfirming evidence was reported and included in the analysis. Finally, I consulted with my chair across all moments of data collection and analysis, and I discussed my reactions and issues related to processing each step in data collection and analysis. This provided another perspective on reviewing my procedures.

### **Transferability**

Transferability refers to the extent to which results of a study can be transferred or applied to similar contexts. To make transferability possible, the researcher should demonstrate enough depth and detail in data description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). One of the strategies that I used in this study was to enhance transferability through detail description. Providing rich description helped me establish the context and relevance of the data so that other researchers or readers would be able to use the results to make comparisons to similar contexts or situations. In this study, substantial description in depicting the natural setting, participants, analytic memos, and documents relative to the study was included. Additionally, I attempted to establish transferability by carefully and thoroughly identifying, coding,

analyzing, and documenting themes that emerged in the study. I provided thick and rich description using participants' quotations so that the reader would be able to make decisions regarding the applicability and transferability of the results (see Shenton, 2004).

### **Dependability**

Dependability refers to the stability and consistency of research procedures. The consistency, stability, and transparency are needed to ensure that a replication of the study with the same context, participants, and methods will result in similar findings (Shenton, 2004). To ensure dependability in my study I described the planning of the study, reported the details of data gathering, and reflected on the overall research process. The use of an audit trail contributed to establishing rigor in a qualitative study. An audit trail allows the reader to trace the path of the research step-by-step via the decisions and procedures followed (Shenton, 2004). I used an audit trail and included my field notes, interviews, reflexive journaling, and detailed data analysis procedure. The audit trail also allowed me to keep track of my research procedures and processes.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to comparable concepts of objectivity in quantitative research. It was attained by demonstrating that the study's findings represented the responses of the participants as opposed to the subjective predilections and interpretations of the researcher (Shenton, 2004). In my study, I used reflexivity to establish confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I kept a private reflexive journal and used memos to report the decisions, changes, and directions made throughout the research process. The reflexive journal allowed me to capture my thoughts, reactions, and biases. In turn, I debriefed these issues with my dissertation chair.

This helped me clarify my own biases and preferences and helped diminish potential side effects of these biases. I included detailed documentation of changes that needed to occur within the method, data collection, and analysis. The documentation was checked and re-checked throughout the process. I was responsible for describing changes that occurred in the setting and how it might have affected the study's approach.

### **Ethical Procedures**

At the core of ethical integrity stands the commitment to do no harm when conducting research (Smith, et al., 2009). To uphold this professional obligation various ethical considerations were put into place. Although participants in this study were not at risk of physical harm, the topic under investigation had the potential to bring forth psychological distress and emotional recall of a previous period of trauma. To address this issue, participants were informed about the nature of the study prior to data collection, and they were provided with resources in case participation in this study led to any psychological stress. Hotline numbers were provided. Additionally, in my role as the researcher, I made certain to take notice of verbal expressions and emotional responses indicative of stress during the interview, and I did not probe the participants in these situations. I was monitoring the course of the interview and if participants expressed intense emotions, I guided the interview to a different direction or let the participant discontinue the interview.

To keep the ethical integrity of this project, participants were informed about the study through the provision of a consent form. The consent form document outlined what the research process looked like, and participants were made aware of the ways in which their experiences and the subsequent outcome of the investigation were expected to be used. Each

participant had the opportunity to review the consent form at their pace and only after the participant had the opportunity to read, ask questions to me, and understand the content of the interview, the actual interview was scheduled. As detailed in the procedures section, the consent form was sent via email and only after participants consent to the study, the interview was scheduled. Once the dissertation is approved, a 1-2 page summary of results is expected to be shared. Information will be sent to participants' email address.

As a researcher in a qualitative study, maintaining true anonymity for the participants was impossible; nevertheless, all possible measures were taken to maintain participants' confidentiality. The interviews and other information collected for this study were only shared with the dissertation committee and it was de-identified to protect confidentiality. Field notes, audiotapes, and transcripts were locked in an office cabinet in my home office. Email communication, computer transcripts and other relevant information were filed in my computer that is password protected. To ensure participants' de-identification, each transcription was assigned a number and code, and all identifying demographic information was removed or generalized. Interview transcripts and other study's raw data will be destroyed after five years of completion of the study.

### **Summary**

This chapter discussed the selection and implementation of the qualitative research design for the purposes of this study. Within the qualitative tradition, IPA was described and introduced. The reasoning for this approach was noted, outlining the key features of IPA that fit with the objectives of this investigation. The description of participants' criteria for participation, the recruitment, data collection, and data analysis methods were presented. My

role in this study and ethical considerations were introduced. Steps taken to ensure the quality of the data and its subsequent findings were described. Having described the methodological framework for this project, the following chapter focused on the study's findings and results.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this IPA study was to explore former female sex workers' perceptions of spirituality during the process of exiting sex work. Through this study, I gained a deeper understanding of how women conceptualized, incorporated, and maintained spirituality in their lives through the process of exiting sex work. I also explored the challenges and setbacks women faced in exiting sex work and how they related their spirituality to the operation of overcoming adversity and exiting sex work. Fifteen former female sex workers were interviewed to answer the research question: What are former female sex workers' perceptions of spirituality during the process of exiting sex work?

In this chapter, I discuss the setting and demographic information representing the participants of this study. Data collection and analysis are also described along with evidence of the trustworthiness of this study. Finally, the results of this study are presented.

### **Study Setting**

I recruited participants by contacting different organizations dedicated to supporting the recovery of former sex workers. I obtained email information for these organizations via the internet, and I sent them an email explaining the goals and procedures of this study. These were nonprofit organizations dedicated to supporting alternative lifestyles for former sex workers or victims of exploitation. Once the contact person of these organizations agreed to distribute the flyer of my study, I sent it by email to distribute among potential participants who met the search criteria.

Once potential participants contacted me, I asked them to provide an email address to secure our exchanges. I screened them to verify they met the search criteria. If they did and

were willing to participate, I sent them the informed consent via email. If they agreed to participate, they sent me an email stating they consented to the study. Once the participant consented to the study and agreed to participate, I scheduled an interview time that worked best for the participant. Interviews were conducted via phone, Skype, Messenger, Zoom, and iPhone FaceTime. All interviews were scheduled within 2 weeks of the first email exchange with potential participants who expressed interest and met the search criteria. Once the interview was completed, I emailed a digital gift certificate for \$10.00 to each participant. Interviews were recorded and lasted from 30 to 60 minutes.

### **Demographics**

All 15 participants who were interviewed for this project were women. Although this study was intended to include a purposeful sample of participants who shared a similar life experience, participants represented a variety of demographic categories. Participants were African ( $n = 1$ ), Black ( $n = 1$ ), White ( $n = 8$ ), Biracial ( $n = 2$ ), and Indigenous ( $n = 3$ ). Participants were between the ages of 20 and 29 years ( $n = 3$ ), 30–39 years ( $n = 4$ ), 40–49 years ( $n = 2$ ), and 50–59 years ( $n = 6$ ). Eight participants were originally from Canada, four from the United States, and three were born in other English-speaking countries. At the time of the interview, all participants except one were living in the United States or Canada. The participants also varied in terms of their relationship statuses at the time of data collection. Participants in this study were divorced ( $n = 6$ ), separated ( $n = 1$ ), widowed ( $n = 1$ ), married ( $n = 3$ ), and single ( $n = 4$ ). Regarding pregnancies and births, participants reported experiencing children ( $n = 14$ ), abortions ( $n = 3$ ), miscarriages ( $n = 5$ ), stillborn babies ( $n = 2$ ), and crib death ( $n = 1$ ). The participants' educational status was less than high school ( $n = 1$ ),



some college education ( $n = 8$ ), college diploma ( $n = 3$ ), educational diploma ( $n = 1$ ), bachelor's degree ( $n = 1$ ), and master's degree ( $n = 1$ ). Active sex work years were 1–10 years ( $n = 11$ ), 11–20 years ( $n = 3$ ), and 21–30 years ( $n = 1$ ). Years after exiting sex work were 1–10 ( $n = 8$ ), 11–20 ( $n = 3$ ), 21–30 ( $n = 3$ ), and 31–40 ( $n = 1$ ). Participants' demographics are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1***Participants' Demographics*

Participant	Race	Age	Relationship status	Living children	Educational status	Active sex work in years	Exit sex work in years
FFSW 1	White	23	Divorced	0	Some college	6	01
FFSW 2	White	56	Widowed	0	Educational diploma	8	15
FFSW 3	White	49	Divorced	4	Some college	10	33
FFSW 4	White	52	Single	4	Some college	20	20
FFSW 5	Biracial (White/Mexican)	39	Divorced	4	Some college	26	05
FFSW 6	White	56	Married	2	Some college	8	30
FFSW 7	White	58	Divorced	3	Some college	15	07
FFSW 8	White	20	Single	0	Less than high school	2	02
FFSW 9	Black	37	Married	5	Bachelor's degree	6	19
FFSW 10	Indigenous	34	Single	0	College diploma	8	02
FFSW 11	Biracial (Hispanic/Black)	28	Separated	2	Some college	8	08
FFSW 12	Indigenous	51	Married	2	College diploma	15	25
FFSW 13	African	38	Single	1	Master's degree	2	5
FFSW 14	Indigenous	49	Divorced	1	Some college	8	30
FFSW 15	White	52	Divorced	2	College diploma	10	10

### **Data Collection**

Participants completed an interview. They had the option of a face-to-face video interview or a phone interview. The option to have a phone interview was offered after participants expressed hesitation or difficulties meeting on video conference. Three of the 15 participants chose a face-to-face video interview format, and the others selected the telephone conference format because they found it more convenient. All participants were provided a consent form via email that was later read aloud to them. Participants were able to decline to answer any question they did not feel comfortable answering. Participants were informed that the interview was expected to last 1 hour, but they were free to use more or less time if they desired. After each participant indicated that they had nothing else to share, they were asked to provide additional information to add to the discussion. Interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded. I transcribed the interviews and later listened to the interviews to verify the accuracy of the interview transcription.

The same interview guide was used across interviews (see Appendix A). Although the same interview guide was used, participants were encouraged to discuss points that were not asked in the interview guide; participants had the flexibility to add or expand on the questions asked. The interview focused on participants' entire sex work experience, and topics discussed included (a) the risks and outcomes of sex work, (b) individuals who supported their decision to leave sex work, (c) situations that might make the interviewee return to sex work, (d) whether they felt forced to engage in sex work, (e) skills that helped them leave sex work, and (f) barriers they faced in the process of exiting.

## Data Analysis

I mainly used thematic analysis to analyze the content of the interviews (see Braun & Clarke, 2006), yet the principles and guidelines of IPA analysis were preserved (see J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Thematic analysis follows an inductive approach, and it is not connected to any preexisting theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I synthesized data through the extraction of themes and subthemes. Core procedures in thematic analysis include transcribing data, reading and rereading the transcribed data, noting initial ideas, developing a systematic coding framework across the entire data set, and collecting relevant data to each code. Then, similarities and differences across the data set were identified.

Data analysis was mainly guided by thematic analysis, but principles of IPA analysis were contained in the analytical procedures in this study. Thematic analysis and IPA analysis both center on the analysis of patterns of meaning across an interview data set (Braun & Clarke, 2021), and methodologically they are considered to work well together (Spiers & Riley, 2019). They follow a somehow similar analytical process. Once the transcripts are obtained, both in IPA and thematic analysis, an initial noting of the data set follows (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). In thematic analysis, the first stage consists of noting initial ideas. A second stage in IPA consists of developing emergent or inductive themes, which is a similar process of developing codes in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The search for connecting the developing themes results in creating superordinate themes or concepts related to each participant (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2007). A similar process is used in thematic analysis in which themes are developed in relation to code extracts. A process used in the current study that is more typically used in thematic analysis than IPA was the creation of a

codebook. The codebook was used to map the developing analysis and helped me generate a framework for confirming emergent themes (see Guest et al., 2012). Because IPA is not described as a prescriptive methodology, the use of additional thematic analysis components not directly described in IPA seemed a good fit (see J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2007).

In following thematic analysis procedures, I transcribed the interviews from the audio file. Each interview was first transcribed into a Word document and later transferred into an Excel document to facilitate manual coding. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym (FFSW 01–15), and the transcription was saved according to the participant number of the interview. The modifications were made in transcribed data to mask geographical identifying information and identity information.

To keep the data organized, I created separate Excel files with each transcript, and each coding document was titled FFSW 01–15. The document had four columns (see Table 2). I copied the interview's transcription into the left column of each document. The middle column was used for line-by-line coding, and the third column was used to identify emerging codes. After all initial codes were completed across interviews, I created the fourth column and generated a second cycle of coding. The second cycle of coding was created with the insight gained through the initial cycle of coding and after comparing emerging codes.

**Table 2**

*Example of Coding System*

Transcription	Line by Line Coding	Code	Second Cycle of Coding
P:..I was pretty much taking care myself on the street I was pretty much played I was very vulnerable and that’s what the guy played on with my vulnerability see I lost my mom when I was 11 years old...	Living on the streets Being taken advantage of Feeling vulnerable Lost mother at 11 years	Initial context of the engaged in sex work FAMILY HISTORY: MOTHER DIED AT EARLY AGE CONSTITUTIONAL FACTORS	VULNERABILITIES IN ENTERING SEX WORK: EARLY ABUSE/VIOLENCE IN LIFE LACK OF RESOURCES (FINANCIAL, SOCIAL, SUPPORT)
P:..it was hard because... I had to take numerous beating and from someone I loved...because it went..um.....my relationship went from...it was kind went from one guy who I thought I was in a relationship with ...to having to get beat by him so severely. Because, I was... I was just tired of it like... I was tired because I was told when to sleep...when I could eat, when I can do whatever and I basically supported the hotel bill and... ah ...the drug-use-habit ...and on top of that ...I had to ...not only was I support myself...I was supporting him, his friend and his friends old-lady...	Being beaten hard Being fooled by someone I she loved Being beaten a lot Being controlled Being on drugs Supporting others with her sex work: Being taken advantage	The process of exiting DIFFICULTY IN EXITING: BEING BEATEN DISCOMFORT AND UNEASE WITH SELF DISAPPOINTMENT WITH RELATIONSHIP BEING CONTROLLED BY “PIMP” USING DRUGS SUPPORTING THE PIMP AND HIS FRIENDS	FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO EXITING: HAVING “ENOUGH,” BEING TIRED OF BEEN BEATEN, ABUSED, CONTROLLED, AFRAID, EXPLOITED PERSONAL FACTORS: SELF-DETERMINATION, BELIEVING IN HERSELF

At the end of the coding table, I created an area titled “Memos and Reflections” where I registered my perceptions of the interview and reflections on the interview and the participants. After the memo was created, I numbered and defined each code that was identified in the right column. For example, when the code “the process of exiting sex work” was listed, I then created a working definition of the code:

This code refers to how difficult it was for the participant to exit sex work. She was beaten by whom she called her predator, or her pimp. In order to discourage her from leaving, he almost killed her in a violent incident.

I based my definition of the code on the conceptualizations described in the participant's response. Although the definition of the code followed an inductive approach, I considered previous research on the topic. Based on the first cycle of coding, I created a codebook of each participant and compared the codes within and across participants. Once all codes for the interviews were listed and defined, I began the process of relating and grouping the codes into similar meanings. For example, one of the emerging final themes was the process of exiting sex work. I defined this theme as the instances in which the participants tried to exit sex work. After this theme was created, I went through the codebook and located all codes related to the overarching theme. I copied the defined codes that I determined were related to the overarching theme and pasted them under the identified theme with the intention that I could easily reference which codes composed the overarching theme throughout the data analysis.

The second cycle of coding allowed me to generate a comprehensive list of themes and subthemes. Once the list was created, I started to consider which codes and themes seemed to be most meaningful to the participants and how these codes and themes related to the research questions (see Braun & Clarke, 2021). I looked for recurring patterns or experiences, and I also took note of experiences that seemed to be more unique to an individual participant (see Braun & Clarke, 2021). I first considered the data as single interviews; then I broke them down into meaningful coded units and compared findings

within and across participants. This process of coding and comparing helped me to put the data back together to yield key, participant-informed themes related to the research questions.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

It was my goal as the researcher to maintain the quality of this study throughout the process of collecting and analyzing the information gathered. I followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) and Shenton's (2004) guidelines and recommendations to ensure quality in my study. I worked to demonstrate credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in this research.

### **Credibility**

To ensure credibility in my study I conducted an extensive interview with 15 participants. I also use prolonged engagement, negative case analysis, and debriefing. I conducted in-depth interview sessions that lasted from 30 minutes to 1 hour to ensure all responses to questions contained rich information. I gave participants plenty of time to express themselves. I used prolonged engagement by spending enough time in data collection to obtain an understanding of the phenomenon in its context. I determined that data saturation was achieved.

I also conducted negative case analysis. I examined information that did not fit the trending patterns. I particularly identified the experiences of one of the participants that seemed different from the rest. This negative case is presented after the results section, and the disconfirming evidence is reported. Finally, I used peer debriefing by consulting with my chair across all moments of data collection and analysis, and I discussed my reactions and



issues related to processing each step in data collection and analysis. This debriefing provided another perspective on reviewing my procedures.

### **Transferability**

One of the strategies that I used in this study to enhance the transferability was the use of detail description. Providing rich description helped me in establishing the context and relevance of the data, and other researchers or users of this study are expected to be able to use the results of this study to make comparisons in similar contexts or situations. In this study, substantial description in depicting the natural setting, participants, and documents relative to the study were explained and included. Additionally, I attempted to establish transferability by carefully and thoroughly identifying, coding, analyzing, and documenting themes that emerged in this study. I provided thick and rich description using vignettes or participants' quotations with the expectation that the reader would be able to make decisions regarding the applicability and transferability of the results (Shenton, 2004).

### **Dependability**

To ensure dependability in my study I described the planning of the study, reported the details of data gathering, and reflected on the overall research process. The use of an audit trail contributes to establishing rigor in a qualitative study. An audit trail allows the reader to trace the path of the research step-by-step via the decisions and procedures followed (Shenton, 2004). I used an audit trail, and I included my field notes, interviews, reflexive memos, and detailed data analysis procedure. The audit trail allowed me to keep track of my research procedures and processes.

## Confirmability

In my study, I used reflexivity to establish confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I kept a private reflexive journal and used memos to report the decisions, changes, and directions made throughout the research process. The reflexive journal allowed me to capture my thoughts, reactions, and biases. In turn, I debriefed these issues with my dissertation chair. This helped me clarify my own biases and preferences and helped diminishing potential side effects of these biases.

## Results

Three major themes emerged from the data analysis. The first theme referred to the process of engaging in sex work, the second theme to the process of exiting sex work, and the third theme to the role of spirituality in women's lives. Table 3 lists the themes and subthemes that are described in this section.

**Table 3**

*Themes and Subthemes*

Theme	Subtheme
Process of Engaging in Sex Work	Early Abuse and Violence in Life Use of Drugs to Cope with Abuse Running Away or Being Expelled from Home Lack of Resources Forced Survival Sex Abusers and Traffickers: Pimps, Johns, Daddies
Process of Exiting Sex Work	Challenges in Exiting Sex Work Factors Contributing to Exiting
Role of Spirituality in Women's Lives	Ambivalence Towards Spirituality due to Early Abuse Made Peace and Embraced Spirituality

**Theme 1: Process of Engaging in Sex Work**

This theme refers to how participants described their engagement in sex work. For the most part, the beginning of this engagement was involuntary, forced, and unwanted. A number of vulnerabilities signed the lives of these women and led them to this type of work. The vulnerabilities were grouped into the following patterns: Early abuse and violence in life, use of drugs to cope with abuse, running away, being kicked out, or living in abusing foster care, and general lack of resources (e.g., financial, social). These vulnerabilities ended with what the participants coined as survival sex. They were forced to have sexual relationships in exchange of food and housing or to avoid being beaten. This theme ends with a discussion of how women described the abuser or person who controlled them.

***Early Abuse and Violence in Life***

An overwhelming vulnerability that participants described was being sexually abused as a child. The abusers involved were fathers, stepfathers, boyfriends, siblings, relatives, friends of the family, or outside persons who forced women into sex work. The abusers took the form of rape, molestation, sexual torture, sexual pornography, and grooming. The participants were able to recognize that the overwhelming physical violence in their lives resulted in sex work. These participants experienced internal ravages of being hunted down, dominated, sexually harassed, and assaulted. This also included systematic methods of brainwashing, indoctrination, and physical control. The specific types of sexual abuse participants experienced are presented. It was not uncommon for participants to experience more than one type of abuse.

**Child Sexual Abuse.** Participants described child sexual abuse when an adult person had sexual contact or sexually molested them against their will. They described it as sexual touching or fondling of private areas of the body. For the most part, they knew the adult who sexually abused them.

- “At the age of 8 years old, my uncle started molesting me and I was being groomed for prostitution...next it was my mother’s boyfriend with molestation and sex...At the age of 12- 13 ...My mother’s sister husband started raping and emotionally and physically abusing me.” (FFSW14)
- “The vice principal would take me out of school I mean out of class and sexually abused me in his office.” (FFSW06)
- “Before the age of 2-years sexually abuse by biological –father and that is when the sex-trafficking started from age 6-16 years of age.” (FFSW03)
- “I experience molestation, and at the age 4-8 sexually abuse by staff from child agency that I was placed in...8 and a half and 9 years old I was being sexually abused by my foster brothers”. (FFSW12)
- “My mom took me to a pimp when I was eight.” (FFSW05)

**Rape.** It was defined as a type of sexual assault involving sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual penetration carried out against their will or consent. Rape occurred in the context of physical force, coercion, violence, and abuse of authority. In most cases, it also occurred below the legal age of consent.

- “My first sexual assault was at 8 and I had three very violent rapes, and in the last one I killed him. So. All of that cumulated into what made me vulnerable to be trafficked.” (FFSW0).
- “Well, I was groomed from like as long as I could remember and specifically the ages of 12, 13 that’s when it all escalated and stuff; I would say that I was like sexually assaulted or whatever you want to call it by a friend of my dad’s when I was 14.” (FFSW10)

**Sexual Grooming.** The grooming process involved engaging participants during their teenage years into sex work. Participants described being without supervision or much parental guidance, being bullied at school, or feeling lonely. This, in turn, led them to hang out with people who sexually abused them and engaged them in sex work. Grooming was described as a series of manipulative behaviors that the abuser used to gain access to participants, coerce them to agree to the abuse, and reduce the risk of being caught. Grooming followed a common pattern of behavior: the abuser selected victims based on their perceived vulnerability. They gave participants gifts and attention, and they promised them to earn a lot of money. Because grooming is a slow development of trust of a person, the abusers tended to frame their behaviors as a desire to help or protect them. The process of grooming involved mixing compliments with subtle insults, and trying to assert power, sexual humiliation, physical intimidation, or gaslighting.

- I was in school just about in September Um I met a young lady...Um that was kinda like was peer pressuring me to do different things such as you know um cut school with her and that was just process she to get me to say yes... I will be your

best friend and that meant a lot to me... so it was nice to have somebody I could talk to ...and somebody I could call a friend... and she recognized all my vulnerability ...She had already gone through a process with me like breaking me down ...teaches me how to drink, smoke cut school all of that it was like a process like conforming like to fit in with her... finally she was talking to me about my virginity ... she's really pressuring me hard about me being a virgin... so why don't you start wearing my cloths so let me get you involved in a way that you can get money...but the first day she took me out with her the first day she went to go get a John she had asked me to go with her to see the John and all I would be doing is to gain some money was to dance nude... and I am panicking like... so at this point full blown rape. (FFSW09)

- “These guys the psychopathology of sociopaths, they have any excuse, ability to smell and sense vulnerability. And I was a sitting target. And that's how he got me. For eight years. He trafficked me. But I was looking because I had had another life before.” (FFSW02)

**Stripping.** Participants were asked to work as strippers, or they decided to do it to survive. It is defined as a performer and or dancer who removes their or clothing in a sexually exciting way.

- “At 15 I was in a strip club in Miami to 15... Yeah we had the backroom and then the bathrooms was used for like Friday that you know he got a highball or people do whatever he wants you to money on the side that's kinda how that went.” (FFSW09)

- “I would say like four times... I would say about four times because I left my trafficker... I had to leave the strip clubs twice and my own personal I think was like, officially... So maybe like four or five times...thought that runs through my mind, though, especially when bills get short ...with only fans came out it’s like a thing now now it’s cool, you know, now it’s cool to be hoe ...back then it wasn’t.” (FFSW11)
- “So I had already been in the bar world as a dancer and just realized that I could make at bigger and quicker money if I slept with a few people... I first started as a masseuse what they call Rug-n-Tub and then escalated to the bars as a dancer and on the side every once in a while and so gentlemen on that side.” (FFSW15)

Finally, it is relevant to notice that not all participants experienced sexual abuse in their home. One of the participants indicated that she did not experience family sexual abuse early in life. However, she described being diagnosed with an oppositional disorder and a developmental disorder during her pre-teenage years. This led to turmoil and family conflict in which she was “kicked out” of home. This led her to meeting a person who abused her and involuntarily entered her into sex work. Thus, not having a safe and nurturing environment became a risk for engaging in unsafe activities.

### ***Use of Drugs to Cope With Abuse***

Participants found an unhealthy way of coping by consuming drugs. In many cases, their abuser also provided drugs. These women used drugs and subsequently felt the need for drugs. They expressed they needed drugs at physical and emotional levels to cope with the aversion toward the degrading aspects of their early abuse and violence in their life. These

findings showed the social and psychological distress participants experienced that lead them to choose drugs as a means of coping with the abuse and dysfunction of sex work. The lifestyle of street life, drug addiction and sex work were key components of everyday living for the participants. The coping mechanism of survival allowed participants to sustain the experience of sex work. From the use of drugs, participants experienced symptoms of depression, lethal suicidality, mood disorders, anxiety disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder, dissociative disorders, and chemical dependence.

- “Living on the street started using Heroin age 12-years of age and later started prostituting to financially support.” (FFSW01)
- “I was but not happy like I was smoking hash oil.” (FFSW03)
- “I was doing a lot of drugs and drinking a lot and I’d rather die than keep going.” (FFSW04)
- “Drugs and alcohol have always been a part of my life and because I divorced at the age of 38 I found myself homeless and I started using sex to pay bills.” (FFSW07)
- “But I went the other way that I ended up on the streets IV drugs at the age of 12.” (FFSW12)
- “My addiction came after so you know like they weren’t always involved it was once I would got into that life was when the addictions presented themselves because in that world drugs and alcohol were just handed to me for free constantly and glamorized and it was impossible to do it without being on something so my drug of choice became crack in the end but it started as like Coke and started



as E and drinking and stuff and then it later escalated to become a crack.”

(FFSW10)

### ***Running Away or Being Expelled From Home***

The participants stated the conditions in their home lead them to run away, which, in turn initiated their experiences of social, economic, and educational deficits that materialized the introduction to sex work for survival. Running away was an effect of women’s troubles at home which included emotional or sexual abuse, loss of guardians or parents, or negligence of adults in their lives. During their childhood most participants experienced different types of abuse such as emotional, sexual, physical, neglect, psychological, family conflict, and parental/caregiver mistreatment, that lead them to being expelled from home or running away. In general, participants were faced with the lack of protection, and residential placement by either family restoration or alternative living arrangements. The lack of care, parental guidance, and parental mistreatment lead participants to personal maladjustment and family conflict. This was the pathway to survival sex among participants who had run away or had been thrown out of their home or living situation.

- “On me it’s just pushing religion on me so I got to I got rebelling rebellious and I wouldn’t go and then I would run away an.” (FFSW01)
- “I was pretty homeless by 15 and the way I got out there for my being locked up. So a lot of juvenile justice.” (FFSW04)
- “I ran away because I was being sexually abused at home my home wasn’t safe I ran away because my home wasn’t.” (FFSW06)

- “I ran away from an abusive sexually abusive foster home and needed a place to stay so I stayed with someone that offered me a place to stay and that’s how it got started.” (FFSW11)
- “In 2012... In (foreign country), I was homeless. I had to go and depend on someone.” (FFSW13)

### ***Lack of Resources Forced Survival Sex***

The finding demonstrated that the lack of resources including family support and care, financial help, and the increase of sexual and physical abuse greatly contributed to initiating the exchange of sex for a commodity to survive. Participants traded a sex act for money, drugs, food, or shelter. Most importantly, other people who exploited participants such as pimps, boyfriends, family members, johns, or traffickers forced, coerced, or deceived participants to trade sex for a commodity. In other words, participants described survival sex as an exchange of sex for material support, and a form of prostitution in which they engaged in because of their extreme need to survive. Survival sex described the practice of participants who were homeless or otherwise disadvantaged in traded sex for food, drugs, residency or to cover their basic needs.

Participants experienced several deficiencies and lack of resources that shaped the need for survival sex. For some of the participants there were not initial housing programs, safe environment to heal physically, mentally, and emotionally, medical services that included gynecological exams, dental care, and physical exams, or post-traumatic stress and mental health counseling to protect them from any imminent danger or threat. Participants described they were forced to maintain sexual relationships out of fear, to avoid being beaten, or

because they ran away from home, and they needed shelter. Therefore, the initiation of a sex act in exchange of a material object perpetuated the sexual and physical abuse they experienced earlier in life.

- “I was told that I needed money and I in this and I wanted independence and I was like a teenager right so I was bold like oh you wanna job where you can make like up to like two to five to more like \$100 a night where you don’t have to do anything you can just party and at that time I wasn’t old enough you can also legally be working as an adult entertainment 18.” (FFSW10)
- “Raising a kid on my own and you know life experiences, brought me back. I felt like I felt like men all my life had wanted me to be the sexual object so I was going to be that object and I was going to make money off of it and I was going to be the best there was. So I went back into it on my own. To pay bills, or whatever. But it was also part of like a mentality.” (FFSW11)
- “But for me, it was the money and I knew that if I stepped back out there to make the money so I could survive.” (FFSW12)
- “Anyone could touch me molest me have it money started was as I got older oh you know it was like oh here’s \$50 or \$100 go buy yourself something nice so which I mean I know I understand all of that was grooming and conditioning.” (FFSW14)
- “So I had already been in the bar world as a dancer and just realized that I could make at bigger and quicker money.” (FFSW15)

- “I’ve never been in a church base that I didn’t get filled up. And. By the time I was 15, 16... I was homeless and on the Streets. It is pretty much a lot of survival sex.” (FFSW04)
- “Yeah even club trafficking myself...the Bible says yes exactly survivor...which is a form of prostitution.” (FFSW09)
- “I was getting out of prison...and I just decided that I want to be a statistic in the dumpster... Tired of the streets and tired of abuse...taking advantage in selling myself for so cheap, you know and selling myself worth my soul...obviously the addiction caused the sex work and trade to go on longer... right...boyfriend. Even if you tried to get cleaned up and you didn’t due to drugs.” (FFSW12)

### *Abusers and Traffickers: Pimps, Johns, Daddies*

Throughout the interviews, participants referred to their abusers with different names. A common feature was that they were described as abusers and as people who took advantage of them. For the most part, the abusers were described as males who forced them and used violence. However, in the initiation of sex work, some participants described the grooming person as female. A trafficker was described as a person who buys or sells people, sex or sex industry. Pimp or pimping was described as an individual who collected money, controlled prostitutes, and arranged clients for exchange for sex. John and daddy were defined as individuals purchasing sex from a prostituted woman or child.

- “My first pimp was Latino and my last two were black.” (FFSW05)
- “At that time you were kicked out of the home and you were at the bus stop where you met a trafficker and when you were 16 years old and we actually had a

predator you don't know that he was a trafficker he said he was a predator and you met him at the bus stop and at that point pretty much he kidnapped you and it was six months that your parents were not aware of your situation Um at that time you were into human trafficking and being prostituted at that time your pimp so happened to be Black and around 30ish we run this 30s Um at that time that's when he will use drugs of course to sedate you at the time of the trafficking are you pretty much supported you were the financial support for the pimp at the time is that correct." (FFSW08)

- "I said ok ...I can do that as long as you are going to do it with me...right ...and so I went to her and we get to the door of the JOHN happened here in (*place in New York*)... and we get to the JOHN house and I am panicking like ...the Holy Spirit comes over me and I was like I can't do this... I can't do this ...so she said put your big girl panties on ...and her whole demeanor had changed at this time at this time ...at this point ...so he opened the door short black guy and she Hi daddy...and walk straight back to the bathroom... anybody else ...you told..you basically...you told me you did not know this person and you just walked straight in and said Hi daddy... she walked straight to the bathroom and I tried to follow her and she told me no...go with him...he lead me to the left side of the apartment which was the living room...and in his living room he had like brass, pianos and all types of instruments, pianos ...trumpet and I saw a whole bunch of instruments ...and I also notice he had like a bar to the far end of his apartment of his living room and he had two dark drinks waiting there and soft music playing...ok...well

ok...you can get two drinks and I drank them and I called my friend to see if she would come out the bathroom cause she told me she was going to go in there and roll up some marijuana should come back out and ...things escalated really really fast...because things went from me ok now dancing nude and then also his demander had also changed ...it was no longer this nice guy who gave had a couple of drinking...welcome me in and talked to me really good about myself.”

(FFSW09)

## **Theme 2: Process of Exiting Sex Work**

This theme refers to how participants described their process of exiting sex work. However, women described the many traumas and challenges they experienced while engaged in sex work between initiation and exiting. Participants experienced several barriers from deciding to exit to do it, and it usually took more than one attempt at leaving sex work. This theme is organized under two major sections. In the first section, participants described the challenges they experienced in leaving sex work. In the second section, participants presented the factors that fueled their leaving sex work.

### ***Challenges in Exiting Sex Work***

Challenges in exiting sex work were grouped into three larger topics including lack of resources/poverty, being pressured to return, relapsing in drug abuse, and finally, experiencing several cycles until finally exiting. Thus, the challenges described resulted in exiting, relapsing, re-entering in sex work, and exiting again. Unfortunately, a parallelism or a continuum between how participants were forced to enter in sex work and how participants tried to exit could be drawn. Factors such as lack of resources, pressure to engage or leave sex

work, and the use of drugs were observed in both stages, the engagement and when trying to exit sex work.

**Lack of Resources/Poverty.** Most participants experienced the reality that most of what they earned in sex work was used and filtered by their pimps or controlling abusers.

- “I couldn’t do what I wanted to do, I had to do whatever he and my word didn’t mean anything, I had to look to him for my financing.” (FFSW01)
- “and...so if I was trying to deal with that at work for no money working at a bowling alley trying to make tips ...it just seemed better for me to go back to work.” (FFSW04)

**Being Pressured to Return.** A significant challenge that participants experienced was the pressure their abusers put on them to not leave sex work or to return to sex work after an attempt at leaving. The pressure took the form of manipulation through promises of love, but more often there was a more dangerous and real threat to their safety and their lives. They felt prisoners of the situation. Participant FFSW01 provided an example of the psychological manipulation participants described:

Um..like... he was...the dude was..he was mad he felt like I was letting him down and so he told me OK fine you wanna, you wanna go you wanna see you don’t wanna help no more it seems like down to make me feel bad about wanting to get out and...and be done with the whole process of everything.

Participants whose abuser was a family member had to make meaning of this relationship. In some cases, the abuser was a trusted family member. They had to separate the

love they had for their family member and see them as the abuser that they were. They still felt trapped into the relationship and the loyalty they felt for the family member.

The first time I ever remember thinking something wasn't right and it seems way too young...But, I know when it was because I had to ask my mother because I was only two years old like between 2 and 3.... But I'd ask my mom because we have a picture of the day and my dad was just fooling around on the front yard on the sled. And my mom was at the window waving and taking the picture and when she waved and smiled...I felt really guilty. That my dad loved me more than he loved her, which is really strange for someone that young. (FFSW03)

Or even when they were clear about the abuse in the family, they could not leave. Participant FFSW14 felt confined in the family circle because she was a minor and could not decide for herself to leave the family abuse.

Just that inner strength that I was not gonna put up with this and I... I had been planning this at 16 from 16 when I came out I knew here I had to wait until my 18th birthday because what I would be told if you feel that I could tell you F\*\*\* verbatim...if you F\*\*\* feel like you're gonna run away from this house your a\*\* will be dragged back ...end of story.

Participant FFSW02 provided an example of how she felt persecuted by her pimp to return to sex work.

So I went to the Salvation Army. He found me. I went back. Went back to Salvation Army. He found me I went back, went back to the Salvation Army and the third time he was there to chase me up, the fire escape alert security guard stuck something was



right and gotten behind a locked door. The social worker on the floor came to me and asked me what's up.... So, I still didn't know the word trafficking I just said he's hurting me. They called the shelter, who allowed me to come back.

And even when she got a safe place to live, she was reminded about her abuser.

So I was able to get into government housing. Having said that, within two months of moving in there my balcony was really low to the ground could jump on it easily and went on my balcony one night and I found bag and I had never seen before and when I opened it there were urgent rubber gloves, a gun and duct tape in it and I knew that I was being warned.

Participant FFSW05 endured the abuse of her abuser until he ended up in prison.

Um...Just him going to the Feds ...I wanted to leave before then but I had tried, and but he would find me, he would like beat the F\*\*\* out of me so I was too scared to leave like I think I ran like 3 times from him and after that like I just continue to stay with him for 10 years because he will beat me so bad when he caught me.

**Relapsing in Drug Abuse.** One of the challenges participants experienced was the need to use drugs to cope with the violence and abuse in their lives. Participants tried to quit sex work and quit the drugs around them. However, they still needed drugs to live in the chaos their lives were in. Relapsing in drug use was a contributing factor for them in staying in sex work.

- “Um and say it could be a mixture of like steak like synthetic Meth along with you could put Bleach in that it you could put Fentanyl in it just really a combination of different things on inside.” (FFSW01)

- “It’s...Nobody in particular...I mean ...because the drugs are surrounded by it and it is no interest you are introduced little by little and it’s like you know do you want more dope...of course you do...so is an and becomes accessible... when you accept all that S\*\*\*\* the way it is or the you know because it becomes OK... because It’s like going in and out of jail it becomes ok.” (FFSW07)
- “I tried 8 times to exit, I kept returning back to the pimp as mentioned because of the addiction of heroin and other drugs that I was using at the time because...I kept relapsing.” (FFW08)

### *Factors Contributing to Exiting*

Participants mentioned three major sources, events, or moments that helped them decide to leave sex work. The first one that participants mentioned was feeling that they had enough of this life. There was a moment in which they could not take this activity anymore. They had to quit doing this to survive. They realized the degree of exploitation they were immersed in and decided to quit. The second one was related to their personal strength and self-determination. It was a meditated decision and they felt they had the strength to leave. The third source was related to social or rehabilitation programs in which participants engaged. These programs helped them open their eyes to different alternatives and perspectives.

**Having “Enough.”** Participants expressed that there was a point in which they were tired of being beaten, abused, controlled, afraid, and exploited. Participants felt they were extremely constrained by rules and lack of determination in sex work. They were tired of

consuming drugs. Most of them experienced several cycles of exiting and returning, but there was a moment in which they were able to escape that abuse.

- I was tired of being beaten, and I was being lied to, I just I was tired of the whole situation being told what I could do what I couldn't do I couldn't see my family or hang out with my friends. (FFSW01)
- The violence, being pregnant, and the force of drug use. Having to use drugs all the time during the process of the sex work. (FFSW08)

**Personal Factors.** Self-determination and believing in oneself was a force that led participants to leave the life they were living. Having experienced so many challenges and hurdles gave participants strength to believe in themselves and project a future for themselves.

- “the police had offered a shelter and at that point I was like no I do have somewhere to go I just did not want to go into a shelter...I just felt ...the saving grace was that I had the strength and I felt like ok I am independent enough.” (FFSW14)
- “No one helped me...I packed my things and took a bus...and went to the train station.” (FFSW13)
- “when I finally found out that one of my friends who was also in human trafficking or prostitution passed away that's when I decided to leave altogether.” (FFW08)
- “I was getting out of prison...and I just decided that I did not want to be a statistic in the dumpster. I didn't want to be one of the ones that didn't make it. I was here for a purpose. Obviously, that was clear. I was still here. It didn't matter that I just

knew there had to be something better... something better for me out there.”

(FFW12)

Another personal factor was associated with having children. Participant FFW12 also mentioned, “It took about three times. And my last try was when I was six months pregnant.”

**Social Programs, Rehabilitation, and Social Support.** Some participants found help in social programs they engaged in because they were mandated to take them. For example, those who spent time in jail were required to attend them. The support of the exiting process also came from friends, family, co-workers, and community; even from people they did not meet before. Still, participants reported professional help from counselors and other related fields. All of them contributed for women to leave sex work.

- “narcotics anonymous and the caseworker from the agency and of course I had a support system at the agency in which my friends help me.” (FFSW08)
- “Exactly by going to jail many times...and there is a jail program called the Matrix House Program... It’s a drug rehab in jail...so if you are lucky enough ...not lucky enough...you are court order into it and went through it three times...But it like a behavioral modification ...But it gets you counseling and introduces you to the Alcohol Anonymous program and it takes what it takes and I got tired of and I wanted to live...I changed my mind ...I want to live and not die.” (FFSW10)
- “I did it on my own...I went to I got out of prison. The first thing that I did was I went to shelter for women ...to stay there...like to get some kind of assistance and being able to find a place to get a room”. (FFSW12)

### **Theme 3: Role of Spirituality in Women's Lives**

This theme refers to how participants described the role of spirituality in their lives. Spirituality was understood in a broad sense from participating in formal religious activities such as receiving instruction about faith, doctrines, and religious practices to a less formal spiritual activity such as experiencing and describing a connection with a higher spirit, God, or other living creatures. Spirituality provided the philosophy and mission of living a better life and striving to apply spiritual guidance in their personal life and throughout their life. While participants acknowledged that spirituality was a positive force helping them develop strength and meaning, this theme revealed two major outcomes: on one side, experiencing ambivalence towards believing in a higher God due to the suffering and abuse they endured early in life and during the sex work stage, and on the other side, making peace and embracing spirituality in their lives.

It is relevant to report that four of the participants mentioned they experienced abuse by church members or within the church context, which increased the ambivalence of embracing spirituality. Unfortunately, experiencing abuse by church members was one more layer of the several vulnerabilities participants lived early in life. These reports are included within the ambivalence section.

#### ***Ambivalence Toward Spirituality Due to Early Abuse***

The participants expressed ambivalence towards the belief of a higher God or spiritual force since they were exposed and experienced abuse in such a significant way both early in life and during sex work. Participant FFSW01 expressed how she turned away from the idea of God to returned to it and made peace with it.

In my entire life I always say for my growing up I was very active in church when my mom passed away, I hated God, I hated him for taking my mom away, I blamed him and everybody in the same so that's when I started using drugs... (*later in the interview*) I guess God does open doors and opportunities for me because at that time in a place of darkness and despair I didn't think he was ever listening like I was always in denial that he's not gonna help me, why would he help while he put me through all this and let me go through all this heartache and pain and losing my family when I've already lost so much at young age; but now he just told me a valuable lesson: to evaluate myself to evaluate how much my life means to myself how much I want a better life for myself that I have to evaluate every aspect of myself and my character and my personality and I have to look to him and lean on him.

**Experience of Abuse Within the Church.** The experience of abuse by church members happened in foster care or later in life when they traded sex for food and shelter. None of these types of abuse were legally reported. And, unfortunately, participants reported continued abuse through an extended period.

- “It was weird ...I had a foster family that I lived with for several years, and he was a preacher and I was like very into it, I was grew up very strict Christians Southern Christian like we went to church like four times a week, and twice on Sundays...My father was a preacher we always did like things in the church, we only associated with people in the church, you know... so I grew up very religious I love them. But my, my adopted foster parents were also pedophiles. So they adopted they've had an inclination to adopt black children and molest

them....While preaching at the church and the church knew about it and they kind of kept it a secret to for years...so I felt really betrayed.” (FFSW11)

- “These people receive receiving funding. These were all Christian foster homes...every last one of them was a Christian foster home. The place that ran these homes was a Christian organization who was well aware it was happening and did nothing to stop it. Oh, yeah. So, these guys would end, and their wives would go to, you know, abuse us throughout the week. And on Sunday would go to church and pray to God for absolution and forgiveness. They got it and started all over again Monday.” (FFSW12)

### ***Made Peace and Embraced Spirituality***

Participants felt ambivalent about the presence of spirituality or God in their lives, but yet they managed to still believe. Most importantly, the idea of the presence of God or a higher spiritual connection helped participants cope with the abuse, deal with the aftermath of the effects of the abuse and find meaning in what happened in their lives. Due to the abuse, pain, and suffering they experienced, they felt separated from their true self. This spiritual component helped them connect with themselves, with their true inner self and with others. For the most part, they made peace with the idea of God by believing that God had a purpose or plan when they suffered abuse, God wanted to show them something or helped them find their inner strength. Participants believe that they were better with the spiritual component in their lives, it gave them peace and calm.

- “But I still at the end of the day I trusted like even though it is not what I wanted or that I might not be what I wanted that time that like is it is still part of God’s plan.” (FFSW05)
- “I got involved in AA...this really opened up my spirituality and in open up a whole new world because of first I believe that I was atheist and I did not believe in God because of what has happened to me at a young age but now since I am working my 12 steps and with the 12 steps is all related to God and how God is blessing me in doing different things for myself I now have a new person in God and I know that God is helping me through this process now I am not only doing better I am on medication now and I am stable and I am also receiving counseling along with continue sobriety from drugs and alcohol and that’s how I relate to life now that I see that the God that I now know now is real to me... he’s alive to me and he’s changing my life and I am being blessed.” (FFSW08)
- “My relationship with God has really increased my relationship like me and God, like, I don’t know how I can put it...I have been misunderstood in so many incidents that when I always look up and say oh my... you are up there and you give me another chance, with God I pray one on one with him he is always my everything.” (FFSW13)

Participant FFSW12 who experienced abuse from people in the church turned this bad experience into a spiritual presence in her life:

Actually, it’s in every aspect of my life today. I, I do things like for myself every morning, I pray, I give things, gratitude, I feel, you know, with love and light inspired



to inspire others and be inspired by other people. And just, you know, having a personal creator and I call it universal creator because I'm more of a universal child, you know, so like universal creator, I do have my back and I am showing this again, and I've been showing it to like that although I may have been misled. You know, I was never really truly alone. I was, you know, God being guided through horrible experiences, you know, surviving something that in the end would better help humanity would better help other people understand and other survivors and victims. To understand and find their own strengths, so I know I'm like I'm one of those you know I like a skipping-stone that you throw into the water.

### **Negative Case Analysis**

Thematic analysis of all the cases considered in this study consistently yielded the key findings of this investigation. However, there were discrepancies between the details of the participant's accounts. Specifically, out of the 15 participants, one of them chose sex work after divorce at the late age of 40+ years. Dissimilar to the rest of the participants, this participant began sex work later in her life and she did not experience the types of vulnerabilities or abuse the rest of the participants described. While her entering in sex work was due to financial problems and thinking there was no other way to earn an income like most of the other participants; her decision to enter in sex work was not coerced as it was for the rest of the participants. She began working as a masseuse to what it is more popularly called Rug-n-Tug, which escalated to the bars as a dancer and, on the side and occasionally, she saw gentlemen as sex worker. While her job as sex worker increased over time, she had control and selected her clientele. She did not feel forced to perform tasks she did not want to

do. This participant's experience was unique when compared to the rest of the participants, and she demonstrated awareness of her situation being different. In her words, "because I had a child and I didn't have much work history, I felt this was an easy way to make a lot of money and not get caught...." Most participants struggled to leave sex work, but this participant left when she decided to leave without going through the cycles of exiting; and this was another important difference with the rest of the participants.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the context of the study, the data collection methods, and the data analysis procedures used to develop the themes from the interviews to former female sex workers. It also provided a description of what steps were taken to ensure quality and trustworthiness and introduced the results of the study. Semistructured interviews with 15 participants who met the project's criteria were conducted via conferencing. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, proofread, manually coded, and organized into major themes.

The purpose of this study was to explore former female sex workers' perceptions of spirituality during the process of exiting sex work. There was one foundational research question to address this phenomenon: What are former female sex workers' perceptions of spirituality during the process of exiting sex work? Three major themes emerged in this study. The first theme referred to the process of engaging in sex work, the second theme to the process of exiting sex work, and the third theme to the role of spirituality in women's lives.

The first theme that emerged in the results was the process of entering sex work. This theme revealed the many difficulties and vulnerabilities participants experienced early in life.

For the most part, these experiences led them to survival sex, exploitation, and forced or coerced sex work in their adult lives. The second theme revealed the process that participants followed to exit sex work. The participants described the factors that led them to finally exit sex work. In general terms, it was a process that took them several iterations and had a great personal cost. The third theme specifically addressed how women incorporated spirituality in their lives and how it helped them cope with their past abuse, vulnerabilities, and negative experiences of sex work. In the next chapter, the findings of the study are interpreted, limitations are noted, and implications for future research are described.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Female sex workers are exposed to many negative life events including abuse, health problems, isolation, social stigma, safety issues, life threats, rape, and higher rates of violence from customers and pimps (Love, 2015). Drugs and alcohol are often used to cope with these challenges (Gerassi, 2015). Even when women want to exit sex work, they face many barriers such as psychological traumas, drug addiction, mental illness, and financial deficits. In this context, exiting sex work is difficult, and women tend to return to this type of work (Cimino, 2012). Exiting sex work has been described as a process, not an event (Roe-Sepowitz et al., 2011). Spirituality has been identified by former sex workers as one of the factors contributing to the exit process and a factor contributing to surviving during the sex work period (Dalla, 2006; Hickle, 2017; Oselin & Blasyak, 2013; Prince, 2008; Rand, 2014; Williamson & Folaron, 2001). The purpose of the current IPA study was to explore former female sex workers' perceptions of spirituality during the process of exiting sex work. Participants in this study also described the process of engaging in and exiting sex work.

The 15 participants in this study self-identified as former sex workers. Interviews addressed how they interpreted their experiences and coped with the stressors of sex work. From the analysis of interviewed data, I identified three main themes. The first theme referred to the process of engaging in sex work, the second theme to the process of exiting sex work, and the third theme to the role of spirituality in women's lives. The following sections include an interpretation and discussion of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations for further research, implications for positive social change, and a conclusion.

## **Interpretation of the Findings**

The current study's findings confirm and expand the knowledge about former female sex workers' process of entering and exiting sex work. Participants provided insight into how former female sex workers use spirituality to exit sex work. All themes that originated from this project are supported by findings in the existing literature. By comparing the findings from this study to the foundational understanding of former female sex workers' processes of entering and leaving sex work, I provide directions for further research and practice.

### **Theme 1: Process of Engaging in Sex Work**

This theme referred to how participants described their engagement in sex work. Most participants described the beginning of their engagement in sex work as involuntary, forced, and unwanted. Entering sex work was supported by a number of contextual factors in the lives of these women, including early abuse and violence in life, use of drugs to cope with abuse, running away, being kicked out or living in abusing foster care, and general lack of resources (e.g., financial, social). These vulnerabilities resulted in what the participants described as survival sex. They were forced to have sexual relationships in exchange for food and housing or to avoid being beaten. Participants described their abusers as men.

The participants' description of the process of entering sex work as involuntary and forced is consistent with the literature. Participants in this study experienced risk and contextual factors that contributed to their initiation in sex work, including childhood abuse experiences (see Gerassi, 2015; Miller-Perrin & Wurtele, 2017), running away from abusive situations or abusive foster care (see Crosland & Dunlap, 2015), economic need (see Dalla, 2000; Franchino-Olsen, 2021), initiation in substance use and later abuse (see Cusick et al.,

2011), and the manipulation of pimps and other male figures forcing them into sex work (see Kennedy et al., 2007; Miccio-Fonseca, 2017). The findings of this study in conjunction with the knowledge in the field indicated that vulnerabilities in childhood such as experiencing violence, sexual abuse, neglect, lack of support from adults, running away, or being thrown away form a necessary breeding ground for the engagement in sex work (see Fedina et al., 2019; Franchino-Olsen, 2021).

## **Theme 2: Process of Exiting Sex Work**

The second theme that emerged in this data set referred to how participants described their process of exiting sex work. The theme emerged from two lines of analysis: one that related to the challenges women experienced in leaving sex work, and the other that related to the factors that supported their leaving sex work. Consistent with Baker et al.'s (2010) description of barriers to exiting sex work, current participants described individual, relational, structural, and societal factors. Among the individual factors, participants described self-destructive behaviors such as drug addiction (see Murphy, 2010) and the inertia of continuing to engage in sex work because it was what they were told to do. They also experienced violence from their abusers or pimps when they decided to leave (see Ahn et al., 2015). Participants' history of psychological trauma also acted as a barrier limiting their ability to engage in a different lifestyle (see Andrews et al., 2015).

Relational factors that precluded participants from exiting sex work included the forced relationships with abusers, pimps, or family members that kept them engaged in sex work (see Baker et al., 2010; Hankel et al., 2016). Separating love from pimp or family who abused them and experiencing the pressure to return once they decided to leave were strong

anchors to remain in sex work. Participants described the structural and societal factors that kept them in sex work, such as living in a context of poverty in unstable home environments or with dysfunctional families. The lack of support or the seeming impossibility of applying for a job discouraged women from exiting. Most importantly, being controlled by pimps and abusers precluded them from exiting (see Murphy, 2010). Participants in the current study went through various cycles until they were able to exit sex work (see Cusick et al., 2011; Dinse & Rice, 2021).

Factors participants identified as contributing to exiting included their personal decision and personal resiliency factors, having reached a bottom line, and receiving help from social programs. Participants described a moment when they could not take being beaten, abused, controlled, or exploited anymore and decided to leave despite potential consequences. Participants described themselves as strong when deciding the time of their leaving. The turning points participants described (e.g., having enough of the abuse, seeing other women in the sex industry die, exiting jail) were also described in previous research (see Oselin, 2010; Oselin & Blasyak, 2013). The turning points were eye-opening events that helped the sex worker see their life in a different perspective. Internal and personal factors have also been described in the literature; women are able to dream about the possibility of a new life and a new course for their lives. They can project themselves outside of sex work or the sex industry (Baker et al., 2010). Showing resilient personal factors and accessing formal support services have been identified as contributing to exiting sex work (Hammond & McGlone, 2014; Hickle, 2017; Oselin, 2010). Current participants received help from various social programs; for the most part, they ended up receiving help due to drug abuse or as part

of a jail program. These programs opened new possibilities and options for them. The role of social programs and their impact on sex workers has been well documented (Bowen, 2015; Roe-Sepowitz et al., 2014).

### **Theme 3: Role of Spirituality in Women's Lives**

The third theme referred to how participants described the role of spirituality in their lives. Spirituality was described in a broad sense from participating in formal religious activities to less formal spiritual activities such as experiencing and describing a connection with a higher spirit, God, or other living creatures. Spirituality impacted the participants' lives providing the mission of living a better life and striving to apply spiritual guidance in their personal lives. Although spirituality was perceived as a strong and positive force, participants described a period of ambivalence in which they questioned the purpose of their abuse and suffering. However, they described spirituality as a factor contributing to exiting sex work.

Findings of this study concur with considering spirituality as one of the factors contributing to the exit process and as a factor contributing to surviving during the sex work period among former sex workers (see Dalla, 2006; Hickie, 2017; Oselin & Blasyak, 2013; Prince, 2008; Rand, 2014; Williamson & Folaron, 2001). Participants in previous studies described the use of prayer as a coping strategy (Oselin & Blasyak, 2013); identified the strength that believing in a higher power (Rand, 2014) or having faith (Prince, 2008; Valandra, 2007) gave them; identified religious factors among the top three motivators for exiting the sex industry (Su, 2012); and highlighted the strong influence of religion, God, or spirituality in any form (Dalla, 2006). Current participants did not mention spirituality until the interview guide questions provided a prompt.



## **Theoretical Framework**

Baker et al.'s (2010) integrated model for exiting sex work was used as the theoretical framework for this study. The process of engaging in and exiting sex work was described in six steps of human behavior. Immersion is the first step in which women are immersed in sex work with no conscious awareness of a need to change. The second step is awareness, which consists of two parts: visceral awareness (gut feelings or feelings that cannot be articulated to exit) and conscious awareness (an uneasy feeling of conscience or prebreakaway from sex work). The third step is deliberate preparation in which women plan to exit. The fourth step refers to initial exit, which explains how women use support services to exit sex work. The fifth step is reentry, which describes being stuck or trapped because of failed attempts to exit sex work. The last stage is the final exit, which describes life-encompassing changes in identity, lifestyle, habits, and support sources for women exiting sex work (Baker et al., 2010). This model provided a template to understand current participants' process of exiting, the reentry process, and the various cycles of leaving sex work. Baker et al.'s first stage of immersion describes a moment in which women are totally engaged and embedded in sex work. Although current participants saw themselves in this stage—totally immersed in sex work—they acknowledged that the process of entering sex work was not a voluntary or selected one. For the most part, they ended up in sex work due to experiencing many vulnerabilities in their lives. Participants described the awareness model as a time in which they realized they were deceived by their abusers who controlled them with love promises or by getting tired of abuse and poverty.

The preparation and initial exit were usually described as difficult because participants lacked resources to materialize leaving sex work. It became clear to them to what extent they felt controlled by their abusers. In some cases, verbalizing the desire to leave or leaving generated more violence from the abusers who controlled them with more violence and restrictions. The desire to leave was experienced with the pressure that came from daily reminders that leaving could result in physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. Participants in this study indicated that they constantly adapted to maintain psychological stability and to deal with the stress they suffered from family or community exploitation and abuse. These coping strategies included alcohol and substance abuse, which fostered a deceptive lifestyle based on their work and background. Several participants reported that they attempted to leave, but they returned to sex work because they were beaten and forced to return. Others were working with a certain level of independence and were able to leave in their first attempt. Participants described the reentry stage with sadness and feelings of powerlessness. The use of spirituality seemed to be more evident in these stages of leaving and reentry because it was used to provide hope and strength. The final exit was cherished and celebrated by women, yet guilt and shame tainted their successful exit. After exiting and changing from a high-risk environment to one that was less risky, participants engaged in resources that included spiritual and religious education, church attendance, listening to music, and networking with friends who were in their recovery from the business of sex work. Participants found strength in their spiritual beliefs. Participants described this last stage as life-encompassing changes in identity, lifestyle, habits, and support sources. These findings are consistent with Baker et al.'s (2010) last stage.

### **Limitations of the Study**

I made reasonable efforts to ensure the accuracy and trustworthiness of the study. This study was conducted to identify the process of engaging in and leaving sex work and how participants made meaning of spirituality in this process. One of the limitations of this study was related to the change from in-person face-to-face interviews to audio interviews. The initial plan was to conduct face-to-face interviews; however, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the recruitment and data collection process changed. This could have led to the loss of relevant observable data. Body language or facial expressions were not observed. Face-to-face interviews could have helped me collect observable data to include in the analysis and interpretation of data and to improve trustworthiness. Additionally, the topics discussed in this study were highly sensitive. Face-to-face interviews could have been more reassuring to participants because they could have appreciated the empathy I expressed in my interviewer's role from a different perspective. At all times, I tried to convey empathy and foster a connection in listening to the participants' experiences.

Another limitation could have been related to social desirability. For example, although I did not ask whether participants used substances, the topic emerged in almost all interviews. I sensed that some participants felt apprehensive about discussing these topics or they quickly clarified that they did not consume anymore. At all times, I assured them that the interview was confidential, and that they could switch topics if something made them feel uncomfortable. My statements seemed to reduce their apprehension. During each interview session, I made every effort to build rapport with the participants to make them feel

comfortable talking about their personal experiences. For the most part, participants engaged in the conversation and shared their experiences with me.

The interviews focused on understanding the exiting process of sex work and how participants described spirituality in this process. Participants were asked how they perceived spirituality in their current lives; however, a more thorough and specific exploration of how they perceived spirituality at each stage of Baker et al.'s (2010) integrated model for exiting sex work could have provided a more thorough understanding of spirituality across the different stages in their lives. An exploration across the stages could have provided a clearer perspective on how spirituality changed or at what point it was incorporated into their lives. This could have provided a better understanding of how participants perceived the influence of spirituality in the process of engaging in and exiting sex work.

Finally, I expected that personal bias might be a limitation in this study. I had personal interest in the topic of investigation and the target population. However, I bracketed my biases and used a reflective journal to prevent my biases from interfering with participants expressing their opinions and describing their experiences. I reviewed my transcripts and analytical steps at every stage with my chair, who helped me debrief the process. I also remained open and curious to make meaning based solely on the participants' shared experiences in this study.

### **Recommendations**

Results of this study revealed that former female sex workers are usually forced to enter sex work as a survival mechanism and without choice, and the process of exiting is usually a traumatic, painful one. Sex work is associated with multiple negative consequences

for women and their families including the perpetuation of violence, mental health consequences, biased attitudes and beliefs toward women in sex work, and engagement in risk-taking behaviors. Results from the current study provided evidence of the legacy of structural factors that support the development and maintenance of oppression via sex work across the various developmental stages of women.

One of the participants reported a different pathway to sex work than the rest of the participants. This participant entered sex work when she was over 40 years of age. Although her entering in sex work was a smooth transition from being a dancer and massage therapist, her account of sex work was different. However, she realized this type of activity was not good for her or her family. More research is needed to understand the experiences of these women who entered sex work later in life.

Participants of the study indicated that spirituality was a force that helped them navigate the exit process; yet more research is recommended on how spirituality was embedded in each of Baker's (2010) stages of change. While participants of the study were asked how spirituality was included in their current lives and how spirituality differed after the exiting process, a more specific line of inquiry about how spirituality was or was not part of their lives and journey at each stage of Baker's stages of change is recommended. This line of inquiry would provide a more thorough and exhaustive exploration of how spirituality transformed or changed in former female sex workers as they moved through the different stages. Some participants expressed how they struggled with the fact that they experienced trauma; and felt spiritual forces were absent in protecting them from trauma. Hence, a more specific and thorough exploration of spirituality at the different moments of engaging,

experiencing, and exiting sex work could provide an overview of the dynamic and changing presence of spirituality in their lives. A qualitative approach is recommended for this type of exploration.

More research is warranted on the relationship between resiliency and spirituality. Participants clearly indicated spirituality was currently present in their lives; and it helped them in the new sense of self they developed after exiting sex work. Spirituality provided hope, meaning to the new direction of their lives, and a sense of peace with what they did and where they are at in this moment. Spirituality has been identified as contributing to resilience (de la Rosa et al., 2016); yet a more through exploration of this relationship is needed targeting former sex workers. Additionally, the focus of this study concentrated on women and more research should be conducted on males who engaged in sex work activities.

Finally, as expressed in the limitations section, the interviews for this study were conducted via video conference or telephone contact. Future researchers could meet with participants in face-to-face format without compromising their confidentiality and obtain even more relevant data. Studies could also be conducted at community agencies that help former female sex workers to understand and explore how these agencies support women's processes of exiting and full recovery.

### **Implications**

The major problem that has led to the exploitation and abuse of formal female sex workers worldwide is that sex work tended to be perceived as a non-victim crime by law enforcement agencies, and the United States and other countries are no exception. The communities in most countries see sex work in the same way, a crime that has no actual

victim, because the exploiter, trafficker, and the sex worker are perceived as offenders in the eyes of the law (Serie et al., 2018). This has contributed to the reason sex workers are widely victimized by society. It created an ambiguity in determining exploitation and abuse in cases of violence against sex workers because sex workers were also considered to be criminals and substance abusers. In countries where sex work is a crime or the laws against it are vague, law enforcement agencies often exploit sex workers, especially since they are a criminal population already relegated by state laws (Howell, 2018). The reality of formal female sex workers that have exited the industry is that they experienced an unfair treatment in society; and in many cases, they were prosecuted (Dodsworth, 2011; Raphael et al., 2010). There is a need for the social change agencies, churches, faith-based agencies, communities' agencies, civil organizations, government agencies, and the local city and state to present policies and laws on at-risk populations. There is an urgent need for local, city, and state agencies to review the law enforcement procedures when dealing with sex workers, traffickers (pimps), and those controlling women in sex work.

Policy and prevention efforts should focus on identifying at-risk female children who witness violence or experience trauma at any stage of their children and adolescent years. Children who are not supervised or who experience neglect in their families and contexts should be monitored to avoid abuse and trauma that can lead to a forced entry in sex work. Couples and family-focused intervention efforts such as couples or family therapy or psychoeducational workshops should become available at no or low cost to prevent violence at home, reduce stress, and avoid children's subsequent trauma. Children should be able to understand what abuse is and how to report abuse to other adults in their lives.

Counselors and clinicians who treat women who engaged in sex work can intentionally implement counseling models that are contextualized around the psychosocial experiences of women who developed or grew up in family systems where trauma and abuse were present. Results of this study may also be used in recognizing and addressing the challenges that former female sex workers experienced including stigma and guilt. Clinicians can become more aware of the long-lasting effects for women who participated in sex work; an understanding of these effects is relevant in treating adults who experienced trauma during their childhood years and later engaged in sex work. Additionally, clinicians working in implementing prevention family violence programs may use the findings of this study to support the justification for developing and implementing these programs.

Psychoeducation and information about the cycle of early abuse, the forced entry in sex work, and the challenges of exiting sex work should be made available not only to women or families where sex work engagement happened, but also to the general population at large. The message that children need to feel safe and protected from the negative effects of violence is essential to prevent modeling, learning unhealthy coping skills, and falling prey of forced sex work. Multi-media campaigns should be taken to intentionally educate the general community about the debilitating impact of sex work on children and adult women and their families. Community awareness can be effectively strengthened through these campaigns.

Furthermore, this study has implied that the exploitation and abuse that formal female sex workers experienced increased the risk of public health problems in society. The strategies that many sex workers adopted to cope with exploitation and abuse such as substance dependence are counter remedial. These strategies led to mental health problems and low self-



esteem. Professional psychological and emotional prevention and intervention strategies should be encouraged to help treat, promote prevention, and motivate sex workers with psychological and emotional issues rather than marginalize them in these situations.

This study also highlights the need for social change and community agencies' training of psychologists, therapists, advocates, and educators on human rights. A law enforcement bureau should be established whereby sex workers can freely report exploitation and abuse cases without being stigmatized or ignored. The local and city government should sensitize the society towards establishing sex workers as an at-risk population that should get compensation and rehabilitation from a psychological and emotional deficit lifestyle to which they cannot help but surrender. The church, religious agencies, medical facilities, and legislature by laws should protect sex workers from any form of exploitation and abuse by traffickers (pimps), family, friends, and community agencies. The results of this study have the potential to add to the existing body of knowledge related to the social, psychological, and familial risk factors that contributed to the exploitation of youth who later engaged in sex work. This potential contribution to the already available body of knowledge may further inform and empower the practices and procedures that advocates, counselors, social workers, and other professionals utilize to combat the consequences of sex work.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined the experiences of engaging and exiting sex work among female former sex workers; and how they used spirituality or religion to cope with the stress and trauma of sex work. Results of this study revealed the factors that contributed to early exploitation and abuse, which subsequently ended in survival sex. In time, this prolonged into

their adult lives in which they finally felt trapped and engaged in sex work. For the most part, they felt controlled by their abusers, and it took several iterations to exit sex work. At the time of exiting these women's lives were in chaos and despair with shame and guilt for the lives they lived. Exploitation and abuse of sex workers are a trend and many in society remain silent about it. Female sex workers tend to be perceived as criminals or stigmatized.

This study indicated that the trauma and stress of sex work caused former female sex workers to adopt strategies to cope with the psychological and emotional strain they continually suffered from when reminded about their past. One of the main coping strategies they described in their current lives included the use of spirituality or religion. Spirituality provided not only the faith but the philosophy and mission of living a better life and strive to achieve spiritual development. Yet embracing spirituality was attained with ambivalence. Participants who experienced abuse initially rejected concepts of religion or the belief in a superior God. In time, they found a path to believe and felt enriched by spiritual beliefs. Participants have begun to reflect the faith in words and actions long after leaving sex work.

There is an undeniable need for further studies that investigate the impact of various factors on sex workers. This research provides support to the negative impact of sex work on women and their families; and has the potential to inform the development of therapeutic models, programmatic interventions, community programs, and various other forms of interventions and preventative measures. Policy makers and stake holders should find ways of de-penalizing sex workers and penalizing abusers who lead to women's forced sex work. In turn, these interventions can play a critical role in curtailing sex work. This research study contributed to the collective knowledge based that relates to the psychological development

and functioning of young women. This added knowledge can potentially assist educators, therapists, and social scientists in their efforts to improve the life outcomes of developing women who are exposed to violence and abuse. By increasing the breadth of empirical understanding of the developing young women experiences with sex work, stakeholders will be made more competent at identifying and bringing to a resolution the unresolved issues related to prolonged submersion in sex work. Lastly, a socially changed society can meet the needs towards establishing that sex workers are an at-risk population that should get treatment and rehabilitation from a traumatic emotional way of living that spanned from childhood through adulthood.

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## Appendix: Interview Schedule

### **Demographic Questions:**

1. What is your age?
2. What is your ethnicity?
3. What is your marital status?
4. What is your educational level?
5. How many years were you involved as a sex worker?
6. How many years since you left sex work?
7. Do you have children? If so, how many?

### **Interview Questions:**

RQ1—What are former female sex workers' perceptions of spirituality during the process of exiting sex work?

1. As I described it to you in our initial communication, this study is about the exit process of sex work, but I would like to get some context from you and ask you if you can comment on how you engaged in sex work.
2. Please tell me how you decided to exit sex work.

Probes:

- a. How was the process of exiting sex work?
  - b. What made you decide to exit?
  - c. What factors contributed to exiting sex work?
  - d. What helped you in exiting sex work?
  - e. When you decided to exit, were you able to exit in the first time?
  - f. What were the circumstances surrounding the exiting process?
  - g. Which was your support system in your exiting process?
  - h. What were the skills you used in exiting sex work?
3. How do you relate spirituality or religion to your exiting process?
 

Probes:

    - a. How do you define spirituality in your life?
    - b. How is spirituality currently included in your life?
    - c. How does your belief about religion or spirituality ideas differ after the exiting process?