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## The Influence of Significant Others on the Course of the Process of Leaving Sex Work

**Abstract** The purpose of the article is to present the barriers to leaving sex work which are related to the influence of significant others on decisions made by sex workers. The analysis was applied in the case of two categories of significant others (organizational and intimate), which through interactions in escort agencies and on family grounds, respectively, may exert a destructive influence on sex workers' intentions, referring to their life and the act of leaving sex work. Therefore, the relationships with significant others described in the article interfere in the process of these women's identity transformation, hindering the development of a self-concept outside prostitution. The article is based on qualitative research carried out in escort agencies in one of the biggest Polish cities.

**Keywords** significant other, sex work, prostitution, symbolic interactionism, qualitative research, identity

### Introduction

Scientific deliberations over prostitution are usually focused on one of two stages - entry into or leaving prostitution. There have been numerous studies devoted to the conditions that are advantageous for the decision to get involved in the sex business,

and social, economic and personal variables may increase the probability of this step. Interest in the process of getting involved in prostitution results, to a great extent, from heading towards the implementation of prevention programs, which aim at protecting women and girls - who come from the "imperilled" surroundings - against falling by the wayside and becoming a prostitute. For the same reasons, great efforts were made to encourage women already involved in prostitution to give it up and start a "normal" life. Both types of actions (prevention and rehabilitation) have been carried out for decades, first of all by religious organizations or secular committees established by community workers, or more recently state bodies (such as the police or social care), and they are not necessarily based on scientific knowledge. They are often based on an ideology, which at the same time explains the rea-

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sons for getting involved in the provision of sexual services, and determines actions that are indispensable to "get those people out" or "save" them.

The subject of interest in this article is the process of leaving sex work, and first of all the circumstances that result in it ending in failure. It would seem to be an especially significant field, both for social researchers (who deal with this phenomenon less often than with the notion of getting involved in prostitution), and practitioners operating in the sex workers' environment. It is clear that it is worth taking a scientific look at the situation of those who cannot leave sex work, to support any potential help within this scope.

The article will present the results of chosen studies on leaving prostitution which emphasize both some of the stages of this process as well as its barriers. The findings quoted from others researchers will be compared with the results of personal research performed among women providing sexual services in escort agencies in Poland. This will allow me to complement previous findings with additional dimensions related to the transformations of the identities of female sex workers and the influence of significant others on their decisions and choices.

### Leaving Prostitution in the Light of Previous Research

Although scientific knowledge on women leaving the sex business is fragmentary, based first of all on street market research, and it is rarely the main topic of studies (Sanders 2007:76), there is a possibility to distinguish two main factors responsible for

the fact that women stay in sex work which actually appear in all studies devoted to this notion. These are, first of all: economic needs, drug addiction and the lack of alternative employment options, especially where individuals have convictions (Sanders 2007:76). This image is complemented by findings of employees from organizations that carry out outreach projects among sex workers, supporting them in the transformations of their lives. They highlight the significance of such trapping factors such as: poverty, lifestyle, poor access to proper services and emotional and identity anxieties, which accompany and may hinder the process of leaving prostitution (Women's Health in Prostitution 1999 as cited in Sanders 2007:76).

Highly interesting research related to the process of leaving prostitution was performed by Månsson and Hedin (1999). This was a life-history study of 23 sex workers, mainly street based (the most common form in Sweden). The raised problems were related to the intensive debate that was taking place in Sweden at the time, referring to the legal changes which had been introduced into the sphere of prostitution. One of the important objectives of the debate was to create a system of supporting women who desired to leave the sex industry, which would complement the interventionist Swedish prostitution policy. In relation to those notions, the topic of the research by Månsson and Hedin was provided by the manners of leaving the industry and coping with interconnected challenges. According to those authors, existing prostitution is not *one* event, but many - it often takes place over time and in many different phases (Månsson and Hedin 1999:69). As a result of the research, Månsson and Hedin presented an "exit

model,” where they highlighted that the process is influenced by factors which are structural (e.g. access to work, housing, education and welfare benefits), relational (connected with support which the women may get from individual remaining in their social networks), and individual (both those related to the exposed destructive behaviors and the ability to dream and fantasize). They also pointed out the fact that the “emotional commitment” of individual women is the most influential factor that renders the act of leaving sex industry a success or a failure (Månsson and Hedin 1999:75).

The latter statement is opposed by Teela Sanders, who highlights that great significance for the course of this process is also borne by structural, political, cultural and legal factors which trap women into sex work (Sanders 2007:77). On the basis of the research conducted among both indoor and outdoor sex workers in Great Britain, she distinguished four routine pathways of sex work: *reactionary routes out*, a reaction to significant life events (pregnancy, violence, health issues); *gradual planning* to leave sex work; *natural progression* and the *yo-yo pattern*, which is characterized by frequent movement in and out of sex work (Sanders 2007:81). While describing these patterns, Sanders pointed to so called “triggers” (slightly different for street and indoor sex workers), which push the women to change their lives and make an attempt to leave sex work. What is more, the author strongly emphasized that the process of leaving prostitution and social reintegration is highly dependent on the legal framework in the United Kingdom that criminalizes many aspects of sex work (Sanders 2007:92). It would appear that this conclusion may be expanded also to other coun-

tries where the current legal systems are based on solutions derived from prohibition or abolitionist systems. Such solutions support the fact that the deviant status and identity of sex workers is maintained during and after their involvement (Sanders 2007:93). In other words, criminalization is one of the trapping factors, hindering the act of leaving prostitution.

Highly interesting results are brought by the research performed by Julie Bindel et al., which was focused on going beyond the barriers related to leaving prostitution, both in the on-street and off-street groups in Great Britain (2012). The researchers highlighted the nine most difficult barriers which make it harder for sex workers to leave prostitution. These were: problematic drug use; problems with housing; physical and mental health problems; having had experiences of violence as a child (childhood violence, including emotional, physical, verbal and sexual violence); criminalization; conviction for crimes connected with prostitution (as many as 49% of those researched); the role of money (managing debts or high levels of disposable income); experiencing coercion from others (a partner, pimp, relative or another person, being a victim of human trafficking) to remain in prostitution; a lack of qualifications or training; and entering prostitution at a young age (Bindel et al. 2012:7-9). As observed by the authors, the listed barriers were often present together, strengthening one another, hence the support to women desiring to leave prostitution ought to be coordinated and holistic (Bindel et al. 2012:7). As a result of the research, the process of leaving prostitution was also reconstructed, taking place in phases that begin at the point at which women be-

gin to express an interest and take steps, however tentative, towards exiting, through to the final stage in which the women come to adopt a non-prostitution related identity and develop a new sense of self (Bindel et al. 2012:11). Furthermore, the researchers highlighted the significance of formal and informal networks of support, and if those are insufficient, also on the possibilities to use more intensive forms of institutional aid (e.g. treatment programs) (Bindel et al. 2012:12). In particular - as found out by the authors - the majority of the researched women who were eager to leave prostitution achieved their aim relatively quickly, on condition they got appropriate support, thus, there is a need for formal exiting services to help women out of prostitution (Bindel et al. 2012:3).

Interesting conclusions can be also drawn from a literature review related to the best practices supporting the process of leaving prostitution, prepared for New Zealand’s Ministry of Justice by Pat Mayhew and Dr Elaine Mossman from Victoria University of Wellington. First of all, many - but by no means all - sex workers want in principle to exit. For some women, sex work is a preferred career, which gives them satisfaction or the best occupational option. It offers flexibility and a source of good income (Mayhew and Mossman 2007:5). Secondly, the course of this process may be greatly influenced by the experienced social stigma (street workers are eager to exit more frequently). Thirdly, it is difficult to exit, as among the barriers to exiting sex work, next to economic factors, drug addiction and inadequate housing - often pointed out in the research - there are also other barriers emphasized by the authors relating to the social surroundings of sex workers.

Partners of sexual workers may want (or insist) that they continue their involvement. Sex work can become an entrenched lifestyle. There can be a loss of social support networks to ease transition into ‘normal’ society - but, on the other hand, some sex workers gain social support *within* sex work (Mayhew and Mossman 2007:7)

A review of the cited, selected research proves how many factors may influence the process of leaving prostitution, highlighting that it refers to sex workers who are willing to take such an action. These factors refer to numerous levels of social life: macro-social conditions (e.g. connected with legal solutions, socio-economic situation), mezzo-social (e.g. policy carried out by support organizations), to micro-social (related to interactions in small social groups). Each of these dimensions is worth being examined, however, in the article I would like to focus on one of them, i.e. on the level of interaction with significant others. It is important, as in comparison with the research focused on macro- and mezzo-social factors, this perspective is seldom adopted by researchers. However, it may provide significant explanations for remaining in prostitution, especially by those sex workers who would feel a need to change their lives but are incapable of doing so.

### A Theoretical Perspective of the Research

Not wishing to devalue the meaning of structural, macro-social factors resulting from the imperfections of current legal or social solutions which hinder the realization of the process of leaving sex work, I would like to highlight one of the micro-social conditions of this process, related to the

influence of significant others on the self-concept and, as a result, on taken or non-taken actions, in this case the change of a life career. Therefore, the purpose of the article is to analyze the influence of significant others on the course of the process of leaving sex work. In my deliberations I focus on those aspects of the influence that limit the process of leaving, mute it and cause individuals to stay in sex work for a longer time. Hence, the topic of the article is not composed of “objective” features of the social situation of sex workers, but rather their identity which results from particular actions and interactions with social actors from the closer and further social surroundings. Although in the literature of the subject much attention is devoted to the criminal side of the sex business, related to keeping women against their will and forcing them to provide sexual services with violence and threats, this phenomenon does not constitute the main field of interest in this article. The article will refer to far more subtle processes which are interconnected with the redefinition of sex workers’ roles and their self-concept in such a manner that, against their desires, they remain in prostitution, and are incapable of performing the process of leaving effectively.

In the research referring to the process of leaving prostitution and to the barriers in its realization, factors relating to interaction and identity are often treated far more superficially than the “hard” indexes pointing to the percentage of addicted sex workers, the level of poverty or the mismatch of their educational profile to the requirements of the labor market. However, much as the process of getting involved in sex work is of a collective charac-

ter (Ślęzak 2014), the act of leaving is closely related to the social surroundings of a given sex worker – professionally (connected with the kind of prostitution, which she is involved in), as well as with her family and origin, relationships with a partner or husband, and the circle of friends from outside the world of the sex business. In other words, to render the process successful it is important who the significant other for the sex workers is, and what influence they exert on making and realizing the decision about leaving. It is important whether a given worker has support networks, allowing for a relatively smooth leaving process, or whether she feels she has been left to her own devices and has no strength to take up this challenge.

A theoretical concept that is especially useful to explain the process of the influence of others on the decisions (taken and abandoned) in the process of leaving sex work is symbolic interactionism. This perspective, from the beginning of its existence, is interconnected with the performance of research which is focused on the processes of change, status passages, turning points and role changes (Månsson and Hedin 1999:68). According to this theory, it is assumed that “human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them,” “the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction than one has with one’s fellows” and “these meanings are handled in, and modified through, own interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters” (Blumer 1986:2). Therefore, this perspective provides a set of principles that seeks to find understanding about the world and social interactions by exploring the meaning that

people attach to their behaviors, interactions and experiences (Sanders 2007:77).

The adoption of such an analytical perspective allows us to notice the process of leaving sex work, first of all its barriers, in another light. As in the article I will be dealing with those processes that are created through interactions with significant others, I would like to focus on this concept a little closer here.

The concept of *other* has a long tradition in interactionist sociology, which is based on the assumption that a human learns a definition of himself, as well as definitions of other social objects, within the course of interactions with various social classes of others, among which there are individuals that play the especially important role of significant others. Their influence is not limited to the process of primary socialization (Berger and Luckman 1966), but it is visible also during secondary socialization throughout the whole life of an individual (Ziółkowski 1981). Significant others provide a cognitive perspective, which allows an individual to define, i.e. to classify and evaluate the world, acting in accordance with those definitions of situations (Shibutani 1962). These are the ones that the individuals are identified with, thanks to which the significant others may exert some influence on the shape of their identity (Hughes 1958; Kuhn 1972). In an adult’s life, an individual may interact with various people who become significant others for them, which usually results from the individual’s biography and transformations of their identity (Hughes 1958; Shibutani 1962; Denzin 1972).

It is worth highlighting that within the course of the empirical research, two dimensions of the notion of significant others have been distinguished. One of them is *orientational significant other*, i.e. a person who provides an individual with a cognitive perspective, maintaining certain stability in time, and exerting some influence on their biography. The individual is strongly connected with the person who plays that role, in an emotional and psychological respect. This person is a source of crucial notions and categories applied in relation to themselves and to others, and the identity of the individual is maintained or changed within the process of communicating with that orientational significant other (Kuhn 1964:18).

Another dimension of the significant other is the *role-specific significant other*. This notion refers to the influence exerted by other people on the currently played and situationally conditioned role of a social actor (Denzin 1972:195). However, as a result of the conducted research, N. Denzin put forward a hypothesis that, in some cases, the role-specific significant other may gradually, under the influence of biographical transformations, change into an orientational significant other. A reverse situation is also possible (Denzin 1972:196-197).

The concept of a significant other inspired the analysis of collected empirical data. In the article, I will distinguish two categories of significant others which I developed for the needs of the analysis. The first one is posed by the *organizational significant others*, who may be compared to role-specific significant others. They are first of all the workers and visitors of escort agencies, who are guides to

novices in becoming familiar with and building the sex worker's role. Their influence is, first of all, connected with this single role, however, in the case of longer experience in sex work, it may also exert a considerable influence on the self-identification of the individual.

Another category is provided by *intimate significant others*, coming from the family-friends circles (this term has been derived from A. Golczyńska-Grondas 2014:137). They have considerable influence on the biography and identity of an individual (in this sense, this concept is closer to the orientational significant other). In the article, I will first of all deal with destructive significant others, whose influence on a person's biography is not constructive - they are responsible for starting the trajectory processes in the biography (Golczyńska-Grondas 2014:137).

Interactions with significant others are strictly connected with the process of building and transforming identity (Strauss 1997). Each newly established concept of oneself undergoes the reckoning of significant others, who may acknowledge it or deny acknowledgment. All discrepancies in this respect require an individual to take actions - to adopt a self-concept imposed by other, to reject it or to make an attempt to make actions of compromise. However, an individual is not always capable of ignoring the reckoning of significant others and risks separation (Berger and Luckman 1966; Strauss 1997). Therefore, in the article I will draw much attention to such situations. The process of leaving sex work may be interpreted as a biographical action scheme (Schütze 1981) that a given individual needs to imagine, formulate, plan, and

build a new vision of their role and identity. The success of this process depends on the image kept in their minds and communicated in interactions with their partners, especially the significant others. Confirmation or, the opposite, deconstruction of the biographical plans of an individual, and providing them with alternative propositions (e.g. remaining in prostitution for some time longer) may interfere considerably in the process of leaving sex work.

### Techniques and Methods

The article is based on data collected during empirical studies that I performed in escort agencies in one of the cities in the province in Poland between 2007 and 2013. The project was qualitative field research, based on direct contact with the subjects and flexible actions taken by the researcher. It was significantly important in the light of the main topics, which for some were difficult and highly emotional. At the same time, the concept of the research was to schedule it in a manner allowing the individuals who provide sex services - who do not often take part in the process of production of knowledge about them, or influence legal notions or social policy - to freely speak about their experiences and reflections.

The project was realized in whole by the author, from the planning stage, through the phases of collecting data, transcribing them, analyzing everything and preparing a report.<sup>1</sup> It was performed in

<sup>1</sup> The transcription was performed according to the principles proposed by B. Poland (Poland 2002:641 as cited in Rapley 2007:57-58).

accordance with the procedures of grounded theory methodology, where notions and categories appear within the course of systematic field research, with application of the constant comparative method, theoretical sampling, coding, writing and sorting theoretical notes (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990; Konecki 2000).

The main techniques of data collection comprised overt observation conducted in four escort agencies and unstructured interviews with their workers. For the purpose of this article, I will refer first of all to the data collected among the women who provide sexual services (56 interviews), with varied experience in the agency and prostitution as a whole (from a week to 14 years), age (from 18 to 56 years old, most of them in the range between 20 and 35), achieved earnings (from several hundred to several thousand PLN per month, even more in some periods) and the level of satisfaction with this manner of earning money. The sample, thanks to theoretical sampling, encompassed both women who, during the research, did not think about leaving sex work, as well as those who planned this step or wanted to realize it in the future, but who were not fully capable of finding out how to do it. This enabled the constant comparative method to be achieved, which is one of the basic procedures of grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss 1967) applied in the research.

The main source of knowledge about the subjects' plans related to their future in sex work and the moment of leaving was provided by the interviews. They were an opportunity for the subjects to deliberate and develop justifications and rationaliza-

tions. Especially beneficial for the research in the topic of leaving was the application of long-standing participant observation, following to the principle of peripheral membership (Adler and Adler 1994). Thanks to the observations performed through numerous years, it was possible to observe (often crucial) transformations in the attitudes of the researched women, in the scope of their future plans and circumstances, in which these changes took place. Therefore, the declarations and deliberations constructed during the interviews, adopted a dynamic dimension.

In the article, I will refer first of all to the unstructured interviews (in some cases multiple ones), and the conclusions drawn from the observations of the women who, despite some problems relating to the provision of sexual services (e.g. emotional, related to addictions) and the open desire to abandon this manner of earning money, did not manage to realize their plans within the months or years during which I carried out my project. Hence, the conclusions presented below refer to women who had some difficulties with leaving the sex work. Regarding the character of the conducted research, it is hard to tell what part of the examined population was made up of women who struggled with the problems described below. The answer to that question would require much broader research. On the basis of the project I carried out, I may state that barriers to leaving sex work related with the influence of significant others on the process touched, first of all, the slightly older women (over 30 years old), with longer experience in sex work (more than 5 years), who had distorted networks of social support, and were often rather unsuccessful

in dealing with the stigma related to prostitution, obscuring it with for example psychoactive substances. However, it does not mean that the researched group was not comprised of women who did not experience similar barriers (at least during the research), or, despite their existence, the barriers did not pose an obstacle which would render it impossible for them to leave sex work. The article does not claim any rights to describe the situation of all women leaving sex work, only the experiences which belong to a portion of them, entangled in specific relationships with significant others.

### Significant Others in the Specific Landscape of Social Relationships of Sex Workers

While deliberating the social surroundings of the subjects involved in prostitution for a longer time, its considerable erosion may be observed. Most of the researched women were willing to maintain a closed awareness context (Glaser and Strauss 1972), where nobody outside the agency knew about the work. As a result, for many of them, the commencement of sex work caused a limitation or the breakdown of relations with family members or friends for them to be able to keep the secret. In turn, some interviewees' lack of (or dysfunctional) relationships that created the support networks posed a factor that encouraged them to get into the sex work. In such cases, the women often perceived this step as the only effective manner to manage in a difficult situation:

I like earning money and I would like to provide my child with a normal existence. And this is my high-

est priority. If I can't earn it as an average person in Europe, I need to deal with it another way. For me it's not really a good idea to sit in a corner and start crying, or ask my family for help. I'm a grown-up, so I shouldn't go to my parents and burden them with my issues. [R32]

An especially clear indicator of the lack of the support network which undermined the basic feeling of safety of the respondents was posed by losing the roof over their heads:

My husband always used to say: "Where're you gonna go? Where will you have better conditions [than here with him - note by IS]?" It was like I was never brave enough to leave the house. Because it's true, my mum died two years ago, [pause] my brother is in jail, I've never had a father, at ALL. These clients that come here are even better than my father. Drunkard. So I DIDN'T HAVE a father. I left with almost no cash, I couldn't afford a hotel, so I came here, I bought a newspaper, I called the first place and said: "come what may" [with desperation] The advert said: urgent! Accommodation! The accommodation was most important for me. Because where would I sleep? In a station? [R48]

The results of research by other researchers also point out that women experienced housing problems and homelessness during their involvement in prostitution. These problems became visible through for example being forced to seek an apartment from pimps or abusive partners to prevent homelessness, or involvement in prostitution to pay the rent or a mortgage installment. Apartment problems cause the feeling of isolation and result

in living far from family support networks, or staying together with women involved in prostitution (Bindel et. al. 2012:8) who may to some extent take on the role that should be played by relatives.

On the other hand, the group of researched women encompassed plenty of such people who not only believed that they could not and should not count on their family, but even on the contrary, they are the ones who should support them (first of all in the financial respect), through their involvement in sex work. In such situations, relationships with relatives did not always go according to the pattern of the closed awareness context (Glaser and Strauss 1972). In numerous cases, it was an open awareness context (where both sides of the relationship knew the truth about the work carried out in the agency), or a mutual pretense awareness context (where both sides, despite being aware of the truth, behaved in a manner as if the sex work did not refer to them). In the relationships of the researched women, these situations adopted a form of various pressures to continue the sex work, even against the will of the interested parties.

In a further part of the article I will discuss those two basic patterns, focusing on the relationships of the researched women, first of all with organizational significant others, i.e. workers and visitors of escort agencies, which cause them to stay in sex work. Afterwards, I will move to a discussion of the relationships with intimate significant others, family members and partners who apply more or less subtle manners of exerting influence on women trying to leave sex work.

### Organizational Significant Others

Women who, upon starting to work in an agency, break any ties with their relatives fill the resulting social emptiness with people met in the world of the agency. Regular interactions, remaining in the same space, sharing analogous problems and challenges related to everyday work in the premises and to their personal lives, bring the workers closer. As a consequence, they stop seeing each other in a stereotypical manner, through the prism of internalized and socially common beliefs on what a "typical prostitute" is like. Each position in the society is related to a collection of social expectations towards the people that occupy it. They describe stereotypical definitions of features ("auxiliary characteristics of status"), which, according to social beliefs, are held by a given individual (Hughes 1958:102-115). In the case of people providing sex services, these are comprised of, among others, a "dysfunctional" family, problems with addictions, vulgar manner of behavior, no education, and pleasure from sex work. However, as a result of intensive interactions, a new worker redefines her previous beliefs on the auxiliary characteristics of the status related to the status of a "prostitute" (at least regarding some of her coworkers). "Women from the agency" actually turn out to be similar to her, *normal*, they become her friends. From the perspective of protecting their own identity, it is not crucial to distance themselves from them anymore, emphasizing their otherness. On the contrary, good relationships with coworkers may provide a springboard for the difficulties of work with clients, and help them to deal with negative consequences:

It can really seem weird, but I have better friends here than I had in a NORMAL job. Because all the girls here are OK. They will always HELP, one will listen to what the other has to say. [R6]

The meaning of relationships maintained with co-workers from the agency is greater, as in the face of narrowed support networks outside the sex work, the women usually talk about their problems only with other sex workers or with clients. Being restricted to the small circle of the agency provides the workers with the possibility to interact with people who share their interpretative perspective, thanks to which the agency becomes what Goffman described as a “back place,” where there is no need to conceal one’s stigma (cf. Goffman 1963:81). For the women who hide from their relatives the fact that they are prostitutes, it may provide a great relief. However, the interactional “safety” experienced in the agency environment may, in the long run, close the workers only in this particular circle of friends, and incline them to limit their relations with people from the outside. Establishing and maintaining relationships outside the agency may be perceived as risky, for example regarding the anxiety of evaluation and rejection.

A highly significant element of the shared perspective is provided by the justifications and rationalizations which are created and maintained in the group of workers and which enable the development of involvement that supports the worker’s presence in the agency. This process is especially intensive in the case of the socialization of a novice by a more experienced worker who becomes an organizational significant other for her. She may encour-

age the woman to stay in sex work, or even torpedo attempts to leave it, discouraging her “charge” directly, listing reasons for which the woman should stay in prostitution. There are several actions of that kind that may be distinguished here.

The first of them is *taming prostitution as work*, which is carried out for money and because of money (Ślęzak 2014). Thanks to removing the odium from this social activity, the novice learns that the sex work may be continued without damaging one’s own identity. Living proof for that belief is the fact that other women, seen as “normal,” “decent” girls, stay in the agency. If they are able to reconcile the sex work and a “normal life,” the doubtful worker starts to convince herself that, even if it is hard, she may overcome her feelings and continue her involvement according to the principle ‘what works well in the case of the other, will also work well in my case’.

When I’m here, ok, everything’s alright, but when I go home, I sometimes wonder, holy shit, what am I doing, how can I CHANGE it, go to a normal job? And I say it when I’m home, I WILL DO IT. But I come back to work, and it’s alright after a day, not the first day, but a day later. Especially since we talk normally with the girls here, it’s not like you can see in a movie or on the streets, but we talk like normal girls who study, who have normal families and are generally normal, at least in those clubs which I worked in. [R33]

The active measures taken by organizational significant others, destigmatizing and normalizing prostitution, which should help resolve doubts related to this manner of earning money, may be interpreted

from two perspectives. First of all, it can be seen as support to women who need to deal with emotional and identity problems during their work in the agency. Secondly, it reassures the significant others that staying in prostitution is the right thing to do.

In this context, special significance is adopted by predictions (Strauss 1997:96) regarding the further course of their involvement in sex work. They are formulated towards novices, to help them in their first period of work, to deal with doubts and stay in the agency:

A while ago a nice girl started working here, she comes from far away, she has large debts, and she comes here for the weekends, and she’s VERY shy, [...] she sometimes asks me if it had been so tough in the room for me, so I tell her: “it will PASS.” [R10]

The predictions may also be formulated towards those women who, within the course of their work, plan to leave the sex industry. In such a situation, the sex workers who play the role of organizational significant others make them realize that leaving is a very tough challenge. At the same time, they familiarize new workers with the thought that sex work may be their path for a longer time, for many months or years. These predictions are often illustrated with examples of their own, encompassing an element of diagnosis, suggesting to the friends with shorter experience that some symptoms of long-standing involvement in sex work are also visible in their case:

M. came to us almost a year ago. And she had some debts when she came here, like most of us. And she

says that she came here just for several months. Then I said to her: “remember, I’ll remind you of this in a year.” And she said recently: “you were right” [wistfully]. Because when you start earning money, you also start to immunize yourself, there are moments when you’re fed up with it, and you’d like to resign, kick it all in the ass, but you work on. Despite the fact that she paid off a part of the debt that she wanted to at the beginning, she still works here. It’s HARD to leave, I myself have been sitting here for five years. [R20]

A confirmed prediction may provide a turning point, as a result of which the worker starts thinking of herself in a different manner, accepting the transformation of her identity (Strauss 1997:96). Although she previously thought she had a plan of a limited-in-time involvement in sex work, it turns out in the agency that it is seldom the case that they leave prostitution quickly and without any problems. Therefore, the worker starts to gradually perceive herself as a representative of this group of women who may not be successful in leaving, according to her plan. This belief, properly strengthened by organizational significant others, may become a self-fulfilling prophecy:

I’m most terrified when I hear that if you work here for a long time, several years, there’s no way back. There are ladies who get out of here for some time, but they return later. It’s shocking for me. I’m afraid of it the most. I also planned to stay here just for a year. [R17]

Workers who are significant others are also representatives of a comparative reference group for their coworkers, to which they compare their situation

and social position, estimating the level of their desired involvement in prostitution.<sup>2</sup> This is a group similar in various terms (“normal” women with similar life situations), at the same time being able to direct their life in a more advantageous manner, i.e. achieving (first of all in a financial dimension) - thanks to prostitution - more than a given interlocutor. While making comparisons, the researched women usually considered easily noticeable and “measurable” criteria (e.g. a well-kept look - frequency of visits to the hairdresser’s, cosmetician, solarium; regularity and expensiveness of shopping for themselves (jewelry, clothes, cosmetics) and for others (e.g. a child), additional goods - an apartment, a car). Comparing the standard of living of the coworkers with their situation from before the provision of sexual services (when they were often dependents of their husbands or used to work in unpaid jobs) turned out to be in favor of sex work.

There really are nice girls here. We talk a lot, because very smart girls come here. When I imagined a brothel, I thought it would be full of country cousins. But we have well-educated girls here. And NICE looking. Young. What’s more, they have much MORE than I DO. I’m older and I have almost nothing [wistfully]. And they’ve got that and clothes, it’s a SHOCK. [R48]

Therefore, the coworkers become a reference group which determines the scope of financial aspirations, showing the standard of living that may be achieved

<sup>2</sup> In the concept of symbolic interactionism, the reference group provides the individual with a cognitive perspective and a system of values (Shibutani 1962:128-147). Hence, it is a group through the eyes of which the individual sees, classifies and evaluates reality and themselves (Ziółkowski 1981:76). Here, I make a reference to the concept spread by R. Merton (1968).

if you stay in sex work. At the same time, it is worth highlighting that within the comparisons the interlocutors did not consider the negative consequences of prostitution (harder to notice at first glance in their friends), for example emotional burnout, health issues, etc. Although they notice these symptoms in their case, they put the blame on lack of experience, i.e. a transitional factor, temporary, which loses significance together with an *increase* of involvement in sex work. In other words, since workers with longer experience continue their involvement in work in the agency, it needs to be advantageous.

I observed an especially interesting situation in the case of the older workers, whose social networks were significantly limited. In such a situation, functioning in the agency and the relationships with its workers and visitors often completely replaced other bonds, not present at a given stage of their lives. Even if they justified spending more time in the agency with financial reasons (which, although it may seem to bring the woman closer to leaving sex work, it actually strengthens her involvement), also social aspects were of great significance. The coworkers with weak social networks provided each other with mutual companionship, especially significant in the face of the loneliness they experienced:

I worked in the agency in November and December, and I went there in December, on Boxing Day. Only A. was with me that time, because I had nothing to do at home, I was alone, my son was at his girlfriend’s or somewhere else, why would I stay at home, I’ll go, sit with A., maybe someone would come so I could earn something. [R30]

The agency is gradually becoming a place of not only earning money but also fulfilling social needs. In the case of women with long experience in sex work, it may be the beginning of creating a strong support network, which is an answer to the lack of support coming from family, formal or institutional networks. Such relationships hold a woman in sex work even to a greater extent, as leaving may equal loneliness:

I’ve got several friends that I’m really close to. And even when I didn’t work [because of depression after her child’s death - note by IŚ], W. called me when I was in the hospital and said “pull yourself together quickly and come back to work! You still have another baby!” And, there was one time she called me and said she’d give me some money. Because I lent her money once, and she was giving it back, but then I counted it up and realized that she’d already given all of it back. But I say to my son: “do you have something to eat?” And he says: “not really.” “If you don’t have any money to buy food, go to W. and take it from her, I will settle with her later.” [R10]

For the described process, also actions taken by other actors of the world of agencies matter, namely the clients, are important. Since interactions marked with violence (physical, mental, emotional) often pose an impulse to leave the agency, or even stop providing sexual services, pleasurable contacts with clients may definitely postpone the moment of leaving sex work. Such a situation may take place when women meet with clients who they believe are attractive, rich, and treating them at least kindly during their sexual interactions. Some of the workers felt desired, admired or appreciated, which, in

the case of many of them, was untypical, not present in their previous relationships. Paradoxically, they found recognition - which was not shown by someone close to them - in commercial sexual relationships (cf. Ślęzak 2014). As a result, the interviewees were inhibited from leaving the agency and giving up these bolstering relations, even if they took place irregularly, were seldom or just a fraction of all interactions:

I boosted my self-esteem here, as a human being, my self-esteem was boosted by men, because my first husband was a shit. He was incapable of boosting the self-esteem of his woman. He really had a problem with himself, as he just could raise my self-esteem. [R45]

It also needs to be emphasized that some women, under the influence of interactions with clients, started to perceive the agency as an opportunity to find a partner or a husband (Ślęzak 2014) who would help to solve their problems, which provided the trigger of entering into prostitution (i.e. first of all, provide the given woman with financial, existential and emotional security):

When I worked there [...], there were some relationships where a woman met a man and they are together, he just pulled her out of this slough. The client simply fell in love with this one or that one, and they lived happily ever after. They have a child, they also got married. It happens. [R46]

Summing up, the social emptiness, the lack of significant others outside sex work, mean that the only close people (regardless the actual quality of those

relationships) are the workers and regular visitors of escort agencies. In such a situation, leaving sex work is equal to breaking these bonds, the only ones which are available to the woman at this stage of her life. Therefore, if she decided to take this step, apart from the anxieties and difficulties interconnected with this process, she would become threatened with going back to the situation of not having social bonds and the feeling of being left completely alone. The social stigma related to prostitution, which is deeply internalized also by sex workers, triggers anxiety against the establishment of new bonds, as well as against reactions of new friends on the particular woman's past (it is worth emphasizing that each interactional failure strengthens these worries, cf. Månsson and Hedin 1999:73). At the same time, the workers who restrict their relationships only to the circle of the agency limit their social roles drastically. Actually, apart from the role of the coworker or the companionship of a client, other roles are hardly available for them. The partners who they experience regular interactions with strengthen their self-definition as sex workers, in a way facilitating the construction of their increasing involvement in the role rather than encouraging them to leave.

However, it ought to be noticed that organizational significant others may also keep the women in prostitution in a considerably more direct manner. It consists in the women being forced, blackmailed, terrorized or violated by their bosses (less frequently by their coworkers). In these cases, changes in identity are brutally forced, and as a result, a woman may become a victim, incapable of taking effective actions in her defense. What is disturbing is the fact that the group of my interviewees comprised

women who in the past were influenced by such actions, and despite it all, after regaining freedom - directly or after a break - they would often return to prostitution, often regardless of the problems they would have to deal with mentally from previous experiences (cf. Szulik 2006).

### Intimate Significant Others

The second pattern of the discouraging influence of significant others on leaving sex work refers to a situation where the interviewees had a network of social contacts (especially family) outside prostitution, however, they were characterized by numerous dysfunctions. The distorted relationships between family members (both in the families of origin or marriages and relationships, where the women remained during the research), frequently posed an element that encouraged the commencement of sex services, and afterwards hindered the decision about leaving prostitution and changing their lives.

The sources of destructive influence of intimate significant others on the process of leaving sex work may be found in the family structure, which the researched woman is a part of. The data collected during the performed research suggest that, before the provision of sexual services, the interviewees often occupied a lower position in the family structure. The situation frequently changed upon their commencement of work in the agency, together with the obtained earnings and investments that a given woman was able to make to the family budget. In this pattern, relationships with relatives are first of all based on what a woman can provide her family with in the financial respect, which means

that her position is decided on the money she earns and spends:

That is why I came here [sighs], it's clear, for MONEY! I want to LIVE BETTER, I want to be comfortable, it's obvious I can't count on my parents, they just have their pensions, so what should I do? I'm an adult after all, I'm 30, so it would be nice. I won't go to my mother and say: "mum give me some money because I don't have any to buy shoes for the child," it would be HORRIBLE for me if my child couldn't afford ANYTHING. I'M GLAD that e.g. today I earned 80 PLN, I go to the shop. I will buy the best shoes, the child is really happy and I'm really HAPPY. I'll buy her some sweets, and the kid is incredibly happy. [R3]

Such relationships trigger transformations in the identities of the women involved in prostitution. We learn to value ourselves for what others value in us. Therefore, a woman becomes convinced that recognition (or even love) of the family, which she could not count on before, may be gained and maintained thanks to the earned money. Breaking with the sex work, which would mean at least a temporary (often permanent) decrease in income, poses a threat to a given woman's position in the family, even to her relationships with relatives. What is more, as a result of interactions, the worker learns that thanks to the earnings obtained from the provision of sexual services, she is perceived by intimate significant others as brave, resourceful and strong. She is mobilized to greater involvement in sex work and encouraged to obtain higher earnings.

An example of such relationships may be provided by the biography of one of the subjects. She came

from Ukraine, from a family with multiple children, looked after by her mother because the parents got a divorce very early. Since her early youth, my interviewee felt responsible for the material well-being of her family, so she used to go for seasonal work in the Czech Republic and Poland, and she felt proud to hand the earned money to her mother. When she was incapable of finding a job in Poland for a longer time (neither legal nor illegal), she decided to get involved in sex work, because this was the only way to keep her family at the same level and remain in the role of a hero daughter and sister:

And when I started working, I started to earn money, and when I came home, I helped my mum, my sister and, in general, I supported my home when I got back. Nobody knows what I do, my mum always asks me on the phone if I work, if I have a job, so I lie all the time that I have a job, I work in a sewing facility for example, in gardening in the summer, no one knows. And I worked here because my brothers were getting married, there were receptions. I organized them with my money. So I wanted to earn something [...] not to go back empty handed. I said to myself, it's misery in my home, so I needed to earn some money. And it stayed as it is. [R7]

As the patron of her family, a generous sister and daughter, my interviewee developed a high position in her family throughout all the years. Of course, at no time could she tell her relatives that she is unable to support them anymore, as it would be related to necessary explanations, disappointment, maybe even reluctance of the relatives who had got used to the help during those years. From the perspective of my interviewee, leaving sex



work and ceasing to financially support to her family was harder than staying in the agency, although at the moment when the interview was conducted, she was deeply tired.

On the other hand, the potential act of leaving sex work is related to the anxiety about the necessity to reconstruct the identity and to learn to value oneself and others for different features than the material success achieved in the agency:

Thanks to that I achieved A LOT, VERY MUCH, I can say, without modesty, that as of today, I'm RICH. At MY age, the people I know, my friends who work normally, will NEVER achieve it in a normal job. And I achieved A LOT. MUCH. I'm in a GOOD POSITION, in some sense. I really am. Because if it weren't for this job, if it was a normal job, I DON'T KNOW what it would be like. I don't know if I could afford anything. [R3]

In the case of the cited interviewee, the comparative reference group is located outside the agency. It is created by friends or family members, with "normal" jobs, and apart from that, when compared to her standard of living, they had achieved less. Such a situation is a source of pride experienced by herself and her family, which means that she finds it hard to plan and carry out the change of her professional path.

At the same time, the relatives may take more or less subtle actions, which are intended to steer the workers away from the attempts to leave sex work. It is related to worries of family members about their own standard of living. Regarding the fact that the

relationships with significant others often remain in a mutual pretense context (Glaser and Strauss 1972), these communications are not necessarily expressed directly. Actions that are designed to keep the woman involved in sex work often adopt the form of never-ending pleas and financial needs, which can be fulfilled only by the women who the whole well-being of the family depends on. In the situation of the previously cited interviewee (R7), it meant numerous episodes of dramatic financial needs of separate members of the family, which - as they seemed to believe - she was able to finance from temping and seasonal jobs. Taking it as something obvious that my interviewee should constantly play the role of a 'lifeguard' to all her family members who get into financial troubles, and send any amounts of money to Ukraine, nobody thought about the costs of that help that she needed to burden.

I called home, and my mum started crying, asking me to help her [the sister - note by IS]. And it was like two thousand dollars, so that I could get her away from her husband, bring her here from Ukraine, and return the money for her. I didn't have so much money, but I managed to return it for her in dribs and drabs. But when I brought her here, I needed to get her a passport and everything. [R7]

The women's stories about their husbands or partners provided plenty of similar examples. They often believed that they need to work for them, especially when they constantly had trouble finding and keeping a regular job. One of my interviewees, who had worked in various agencies for eight years at that point, subordinated her leaving sex work from earning a sum of money which would allow

her to equip her house to a proper level and finance a transport company for her husband who was incapable of dealing with his full-time job. The other woman (whose husband had been her client in the past and knew the truth about her job) was the one who kept all family. Her husband played the role of her driver, bringing her to the agency or the client. She didn't plan to leave prostitution in the nearest future.

There is also a need to notice that, regardless of the awareness context, where interactions with intimate significant others take place, their attempt to keep the women's involvement in sex work are perceived as ambivalent. In the case of the open awareness context, some workers talked about certain grievances towards relatives, who despite knowing the costs related to prostitution, accept and encourage the woman to continue on this path. Therefore, although in this case there is no mental burden related to the need to hide the truth about working in the agency, which is painfully experienced by the majority of workers, the lack of disapproval for the manner of earning money may be experienced as depressing. With the mutual pretense awareness context, the workers often complained about the hypocrisy of the relatives who expect them to provide financial resources, but at the same time they do not want to know how they are obtained (regarding opportunities on a labor market):

I don't want to keep going back to the agency. I came back here because I borrowed some money, but my mum said, when she came with that money - it's not that I blame my mum - "God forbid, no," but it came about this way because I asked my mum to

take a loan, because I had some debts in my apartment. So my mum went for a loan, but I said to her: "you know, mum, I will be able to find 200 PLN for 18 months," because she took the loan for this period. 4000 PLN. And she came with that money and said that she would pay this loan on her own, but she needed 4000 in July, because she wanted a gravestone for my father. And what would you do? Not that you went to the brothel, but what would you say? I think that if I had never worked in such a place, I would have said: "mum sorry, but I asked you to take the loan, I told you I'd pay it back, and now you're telling me that you need 4000 by July." And this is this bias by my parents. I do not feel any grief or grudge, do you understand me? I really love her, but you know [pause], I'm liking it less and less. I'm sometimes forced to do it by life. People are willing to lend me some money, they know that I will take it, but I don't know how they think I'm gonna find the money to pay them back. [R45]

Relationships with intimate significant others may also adopt the form of more direct obligations, revealed as threats and violence, including physical, sexual, emotional and financial, as a manner of maintaining power over a woman, to force her to continue provision of sexual services (Bindel et al. 2012:9). As a result, it may block the attempts to leave sex work and stay in destructive relationships with the relatives. A frequent pattern was also leaving a violent relationship, which at the same time strengthened their involvement in sex work, for example living in the agency. In the face of a very weak support network which a given woman has at her disposal, it may be one of the best available manners of dealing with a difficult situation.

## Summary

Involvement in sex work is related to the transformation of identity, a change of the manner of thinking of oneself, which takes place processually, as a result of interactions and experiences collected during the provision of sexual services. Each phase of this process is related to specific challenges for a person's identity. When starting the sex work, the workers provide strong justifications (first of all to themselves) why they need to do it. The act of leaving requires a reversal in the manner of thinking from the first period of the job, and reassuring themselves that it is necessary and worth it to stop providing sexual services. Leaving is not a one-off process, rather is a sequence of starts and stops. On the one hand, there are incentives to stay at work, but on the other hand, the uncertain benefits of doing so, without any guarantees of formal and informal support, may tip the scales in favor of staying in prostitution (Mayhew and Mossman 2007:7). Barriers in the process of leaving are "objective" conditions, discussed in numerous studies, but there is also the influence of significant others which may block the transformation in the concept of self. As a consequence of relationships with organizational and intimate significant other, the process of leaving sex work may be stopped. Instead of supporting the process of identity transformation from the role of a deviant into the role of a non-deviant (Sanders 2007), these relationships "freeze" the self-concept of a sex worker, i.e. a person who in some respects (slightly different depending on whether we're dealing with organizational or intimate significant others) should or must stay in sex work. As a result, the researched women perceived themselves, first of

all, through the prism of roles related to sex work,<sup>3</sup> and it was hard for them to imagine an effective reconstruction of self-concept, and change that role into another professional function, even though it would provide comparable earnings (material ones, but also in the sphere of social support or relations with relatives).

This phenomenon is strengthened by the feeling of social inadequacy - no proper education, lack of qualifications employers look for on the labor market, the feeling of having a non-standard biography, the feeling of time running away which postpones the perspective of "organizing" their lives, and eventually the belief that it is extremely difficult to realize plans for changes in such numerous dimensions of life. Interactions with significant others (from the agency but also from the family) may strengthen those doubts and encourage them to push away the thoughts and plans connected with leaving sex work thanks to concentration on the current benefits related to this work. It allows them to keep the status quo in relationships with relatives and coworkers. However, these relationships come with a certain ambivalence, as the worker is aware that the significant others value her for her financial resources, which she is able to earn (and, on that basis, occupy a proper place in the hierarchy of workers - Ślęzak 2014) or spend (e.g. fulfill-

<sup>3</sup> The meaning of constructing and keeping the new identity in the process of leaving prostitution permanently was also emphasized by Bindel et al. (2012). Women, who at this stage made attempts to build a new lifestyle, created new relationships with friends, partners and coworkers, took part in new forms of employment, training or education, felt more sure in the process of leaving prostitution, trusted in their abilities to a greater extent and took more effective actions not to go back to prostitution (Bindel et al. 2012:12, c.f. Månsson and Hedin 1999:72).

ing the family needs). However, the very manner of earning the resources itself may be used during a quarrel as an argument that depreciates a given woman (which I witnessed in the agency, and heard of during the interviews, when women talked about family disputes). Therefore, even if the organizational and, most importantly, intimate significant others discourage the workers from leaving prostitution, it does not mean that the relationships will become a source of further identity problems. If the relationships took place in a closed awareness context, the interlocutors often doubted whether their relatives would react in the same manner, if they knew the source of the money they got. In the case of the open awareness context, some interviewees asked me rhetorical questions - why their relatives accept sex work so easily, not thinking about its consequences for the woman herself. In turn, the relationships taking place in the suspected and mutual pretense awareness contexts provoked the workers to the questions of what their relatives *really* think about them and their manner of earning money.

The purpose of the article was to present the hindering influence of significant others on the process of leaving sex work. It is obvious in the literature of the subject, and in my research, that the opposite

influence may also be observed. In numerous cases, a child or a partner posed a factor of transformation, motivating a woman to leave sex work (Månsson and Hedin 1999:74; Sanders 2007). It's interesting that in the interviews that I conducted there was no mention of social workers or streetworkers from organizations that support women providing sexual services, who would play the role of a strongly positive figure (e.g. a significant other), balancing the destructive influence of organizational or intimate others described above. A highly interesting element of the leaving sex work program, although practically not realized in Poland, would be peer-support for sex workers. It would support the creation of the vision of leaving as real and achievable (Bindel et al. 2012:14), which for many women may not be obvious. Peer educators would provide a counterbalance for the influence of significant others who encourage these people to stay in sex work.

It is worth emphasizing that such organizations have a lot to do in Poland, both in the scope of counseling and supporting actions, but also those which are of a more structural character. If the process of leaving is to end successfully, it is worth working through the various kinds of barriers, as they overlap and strengthen each other.

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## Wpływ znaczących innych na przebieg procesu wychodzenia z prostytucji

**Abstrakt:** Celem niniejszego artykułu jest zaprezentowanie barier wychodzenia z prostytucji, które wiążą się z wpływem znaczących innych na decyzje podejmowane przez osoby świadczące usługi seksualne. Analizie poddano dwie kategorie znaczących innych (organizacyjnych i intymnych), które poprzez interakcje odpowiednio w agencjach towarzyskich oraz na gruncie rodzinnym mogą wywierać destrukcyjny wpływ na zamierzenia związane ze zmianą swojego życia i odejściem z pracy seksualnej. Tym samym, opisane w artykule relacje ze znaczącymi innymi interweniują w proces transformacji tożsamości kobiet, utrudniając zbudowanie koncepcji siebie poza prostytucją. Artykuł opiera się na badaniach jakościowych zrealizowanych w agencjach towarzyskich jednego z dużych polskich miast.

**Słowa kluczowe:** znaczący inny, sex work, prostytucja, symboliczny interakcjonizm, badania jakościowe, tożsamość