

## Summary

Under the umbrella term ‘prostitution’ lays a variety of activities known as sex trade. Most often the term is used to describe the street sex workers subcategory. Among other things, this confusion is due to the fact that street prostitution is the most visible form of sex trade, although it is well known that prostitution has many other subtle, less visible and even hidden forms. On this matter, Weitzer argues that street prostitution represents only a small part of the sex work industry. For example, in United Kingdom, Netherlands and United States of America, only between 10-30 per cent of all sex workers perform their activity in the street (Weitzer, 2005b: 214).

In this paper I focus on motherhood, as experienced by female street prostitutes. In academic literature this phenomenon is described as ‘the most degrading form of sex work’ in relation to other forms of commercialised sex such as escorting, travel companionship, massage saloon work or brothel industry (Maher, 1996, cited in Dalla, 2001: 1067).

By its nature prostitution is an activity that leads women to pregnancy and maternity. In this specific context, the experience of pregnancy is not always accompanied by positive connotations and

it often leads to emotions intensified by doubt, frustration, fear etc. Even though it is not a rule, the birth of a child whose biological parent is a sex worker, in comparison to a mother whose job is a more common one, may be followed by an increased difficulty in adjusting to the demands of parenting and thus to adequately meet the child's needs. The explanation for this lays in the fact that the pregnancy preceding the birth is not always a desired, planned event and the material resources the mother possesses are very limited.

During my research I noticed that the negative effects of sex work are not solely addressed to the person directly involved in it, but also interfere with their maternal (or paternal) responsibilities that come with the desire of looking after the new-born baby. In this regard, previous studies have concluded that the negative effects of the employment of women in prostitution are perceived by their children when getting in contact with customers, by having access to their drugs and needles (if there is the case), by separating children from their families and by facilitating an inadequate or inexistent relationship between child and father (McClelland, Newell, 2008: 442, Sloss, Harper, 2004: 333).

The reason I chose this topic for my PhD research thesis is based upon the findings I previously made while working with young mothers and their children. They were considered at risk and

usually they were part of a one-parent family. Therefore, my job allowed me to consider the relatively high number of women coming from a low social sector who engage in prostitution. Most of these women did not enjoy a harmonious familial atmosphere and they continue by raising their children in an unfavourable environment which facilitates the risk of deficient physical and psycho-social development. Another reason behind the choice of my topic was the insufficient previous research done in the field of sex work that takes into account the experience of motherhood.

Although I dedicated a significant part of my thesis to the analysis of prostitution, my main research objective was the influence that the sex worker status of a mother has on children's rights. The novelty of my study is the very direction of research, the findings bringing to attention information concerning the life circumstances of children whose mothers are street sex workers. In addition to this the study is focused on the risks these children are exposed to and the chances to have their rights respected once the mother decides to raise them. My intention to obtain a more complete picture of the issues related to children's rights was possible by involving in my research four categories of participants: women engaged in prostitution, their children, individuals involved in child protection and professionals who have handled cases of sex workers and/or their children.

The doctoral thesis “Assuming the maternal role within the context of practicing prostitution” is divided into four chapters as follows: Chapter I - Socio- juridical perspectives on sex work phenomenon, Chapter II – Social and legal considerations about children and childhood, Chapter III - Research methodology in assessing the acknowledgement of rights of children whose mothers practice street sex work and Chapter IV – The impact of the activity performed by a sex worker in the realisation of her children’s rights.

The 1st chapter brings into attention the existent theories on prostitution, the health and psycho-social implications directed to one who practices it, policies and the competing legal systems and framework on street sex work in Romania. Thus, one of the main directions my study took is the understanding of the concept of street prostitution and the position it occupies in the hierarchy of sex work, along with the displaying of the female sex worker’s status, status deriving from the regulation of this activity within Romania’s legislative structure. Regarding the negative implications presented in this chapter, I highlight the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, physical and sexual abuse from partners, customers and authorities, drug and alcohol consumption, financial and housing instability etc.

In the 2nd chapter of the thesis, which has been assigned to issues regarding children and childhood, I approached the dominant theories targeting children, the origins of the ‘childhood’ concept and the new sociology of childhood, as well as its influence on children’s rights, and the legislation on the protection and promotion of these rights in an international context- in terms of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Romanian Constitution. Understanding children and childhood is inextricably linked to the abandonment of the ‘incomplete’ being attributed to the youth by the developmental psychology and the recognition of a socio-cultural discourse, as the basis of procedures concerning children. In the same chapter the agenda on the protection of children’s rights (in both an international and national context) ensured the consistency and logic of this study by outlining the legal framework we can relate the field findings to.

The 3rd chapter was dedicated to both the methodology used and the ethical dimension of research. The first part of this chapter illustrates the methodological framework and presented the methods and techniques used for data collection, the participants’ sample and the research process. The second part was entirely allocated to the ethical implications of the research. Two main ethical issues I brought to attention were the moral considerations specific to general socio-human research and the ethical challenges

I was faced to when collecting data from the two vulnerable groups of people who took part in the study: the mothers working in the sex industry and their children.

I dedicated the 4th chapter of my thesis to presenting the findings of the undertaken research. I mention that in my study I looked at two Romanian counties (Iassy and Bacau) and the achievement of the final goal was possible after undertaking two separate stages, both in the research methods used and the distinct groups of participants.

Starting with these observations, the PhD thesis „ Assuming the maternal role within the context of practicing prostitution” aims at the analysis of the impact a woman’s engagement in street prostitution has on the observance of her children’s rights. In reaching this general purpose we want to analyse the following specific objectives: *the analysis of the pregnancy and maternity impact on woman’s engagement in prostitution; the determination of the relation between practicing prostitution and the accomplishment of parental responsibilities; identification of life circumstances for children whose mothers practice prostitution; identification of risk situations these children are exposed to; determination of the extent to which the rights of these children are observed.*

Initially the research involved a process of one to one interviews, on one hand with the mothers engaged in commercial sex and on the other hand with professionals who handle such cases. The topics addressed in the individual interviews were the dynamics of prostitution, the determinants of engaging in these practices, the effects sex work has on fulfilling the maternal role and further in the children's development and last, the support services that mothers who practice street sex work can benefit from.

The experts in the field argue that pregnancy has rather little impact on the dynamics of prostitution, and according to them the women continue the commercial sexual activity even during pregnancy. Unlike this stage childbirth generates certain life changing incentives arising from the incompatibility between the two roles which they have to fulfil: the mother and the sex worker. At this point the field experts highlight the need for support directed to these women, in order to materialise their maternal impulse.

From analysing the personal history of mothers engaged in commercial sex it came out that sexual abuse usually preceded their work choice. Another possibility is the transition from exploitative, involuntary to voluntary sex work. The interviews with the mothers revealed that pregnancy does not necessarily acquire a positive

emotional charge, thing which allows them to continue being active within the sex industry. Unlike the experience of pregnancy childbirth seems to raise compatibility dilemmas between the maternal role and that of women engaged in the practice of prostitution. However, the internal conflict does not lead towards a change of life style in the sense of abandoning sex work, but towards the establishment of a symbolic barrier between the two distinct performances the women need to balance.

The theme regarding the motive behind engaging in prostitution – researchers have identified a history of dysfunctional family life combined with precarious living conditions as the common aspects of the path they decide to engage in. In addition to this it has been found that prostitution represents an activity which is transferred from one generation to another by imitating the maternal model. Regarding the motivation behind selling sexual services, the interviews with the experts reveal financial aspects related to pressure on the behalf of the partner and peers. These interviews revealed that child support obligations do not represent a motivational factor in this regard, although the money earned can be directed to cover the basic needs of children.

The interviews with the mothers confirm the need to obtain financial gains through the sale of sexual services, but also that the choice of this practice is preceded by a history of dysfunctional

familial environment. In addition, although prostitution has emerged as an alternative for earning a living, many of my interviewees admitted that their partners and family members had a major influence on this, in most cases selling sex representing the main source of income for the family. The birth of the children of many of these women emerged after the engagement in sex work, which leads us to conclude that child support does not represent the motivate why mothers engage in this activity, but as most of them argued, practicing prostitution allows the coverage for the material needs of their children.

Exploring the impact of prostitution on the maternal role was focused on identifying the viewpoint of the two groups of respondents on the compatibility between the mother role and the duty as a sex worker, as well as how the ‘investment’ of personal resources in their job affects fulfilling the responsibilities of motherhood. I found that the specialists regard the two roles as rather inconsistent, the psychological effects of prostitution such as low self-esteem, frustration, anxiety, etc. affecting the availability and ability of mothers to fully commit to their obligations towards children. In addition to this, specific aspects of their life style such as alcohol abuse, entourage they belong to and their promiscuity seem to interfere with the parental duties. Another important factor brought to attention by portrayal of sex workers is the internalised

maternal role, which in association with prostitution is affecting the parent experience.

The mothers' perspectives on the theme researched do not match the specialists' in the sense of the normalization of their work. Obtaining financial resources needed to cover the children's material needs highlighted as a criterion in assessing the compatibility of the two roles that they perform. Although in most cases the mothers do not question this incompatibility, their answers regarding the involvement in raising their offspring revealed their focus on covering their material needs as a way of compensating for their inadequacy in the maternal role performed.

Regarding the way prostitution practiced by mothers affects the development of children, the interviews with the two categories of respondents revealed the risks they are exposed to. The specialists brought into discussion the danger presented by women's choice of working as street sex sellers and the separation of children from mother and family, either caused by measures of special protection taken by authorities or through leaving the children in the guardianship of close friends or family for a long period of time without following any legal procedures. The unclear situation of these children, the unrecognised paternity, the neglect of their educational needs in opposition to the focus on meeting their basic needs, stigmatisation and the health risks they are

exposed to are only a few of the dangers the offspring of sex worker mothers are liable to.

Researching the life experiences of mothers who work in the sex industry the separation between children and their families got confirmed again by both the specialists and the mothers interviewed. The risk of separation is also potential through the incarceration of mothers, either charged by selling sex services- which at the time of conducting the research represented a crime- or by other crimes often associated with prostitution. Different arrangements that the mothers made when performing street work proved to put at risk the safety of children. Cases of abuse were identified both in relation to their life partners and to their customers. A common aspect in my interviewees' experiences is unrecognised paternity of their offspring and the neglect of children's educational needs, especially before they are enrolled into school.

The last two themes covered in the interview guide were presented together for a more coherent analysis. The consensus between the two groups of respondents put the focus on the deficit of social services aimed at helping the vulnerable category of persons researched in the two counties I looked at. As revealed by the interviews with the specialists the cases where women voluntarily engaged in the practice of prostitution is not as treated

with the same responsiveness on the behalf of authorities as if the women were involuntarily exploited in the sex traffic industry. Despite the lack of social services, the issue has been proven to be the negative attitude the sex workers have towards accessing such services addressed to them. In this respect, the lack of information and reluctance, their fears and convenience were illustrated by specialists as hindering their inclusion in supportive intervention programs. In this context the interviews with the sex workers indicated the rejection of all forms of support services and the focus on identifying solutions for problems faced either on their own or through support provided by their partner or other family members.

The second stage of the research was aimed at the two focus groups composed by specialists from the Social Assistance and Child Protection Directorates, who handled cases of women involved in commercial sex and/or their children. The topics investigated in the two focus groups were the child's right to be raised by his parents and to maintain family relationships, child's right to education, health and to protection from abuse and neglect and the welfare of the child.

As it emerged from the focus group research when the woman practices prostitution it is highly likely that there is the case of single-parent family (consisting of the mother and her child or

children) or of families where the relationship between the two partners is based on consensual union. In the case of sexual activity with multiple partners, the right of children to grow up with his parents seems to be affected from a paternal perspective, unrecognised and even unknown paternity. From the interviews it shows that even in the case of recognised paternity, the moral and legal obligations are superficially assumed by the father in the form of guarding the child when the mother is out in the street for work. When the child remains in the care of the mother, the parental duties meet a veiled form, in the sense of a delegation of these responsibilities to other members of the family. The absence of the mother is usually being compensated by the financial resources they bring in, as they normally claim to be the only breadwinner in the household.

Respecting the child's right to education seems to be conditioned by certain characteristics of the mother and not by the commercial activity performed. Certain intellectual and educational development of the mother allow them to support the educational needs of their children. Even so, support provided is strictly limited to providing access to material resources needed to attend an educational institution; the provision of effective support in accomplishing the tasks included in the educational process is out of question. If the right to formal education is respected by the

child attending an educational institution, informal education seems to be strongly affected, in this context that sex work interferes with the familiar environment in a negative manner by promiscuity, foul language and child exposure to people of questionable morality. As it emerged from the individual interviews conducted, formal education could be affected by some deficiencies the child acquires in early years and which can be perceived when the child is enrolled in an educational institution.

From the focus groups conducted I could identify a significant failure in respecting the children's right to health in the context where they are born and raised in a household where the mother is engaged in street sex work. This failure occurs once with the child's conception, during pregnancy in terms of engagement in sexual relationships with multiple partners, the lack of monitoring the health status during pregnancy and the use of threatening substances such as alcohol, drugs, or cigarettes. After childbirth the continuation of prostitution brings the risk of sexually transmitted diseases and a violation of children's rights through the mother's refusal to breastfeed. Within the same topic, the specialists interviewed talked about the child's mental health, which may be affected by its awareness about the nature of their mother's work. Psychological dysfunctions such as anxiety, guilt or shame may

have at their origin the socio-emotional climate of a family in which the mother works within the sex industry.

Regarding the children's right to welfare the focus group research also revealed the failure to provide it as street sex work does not normally represent a form of obtaining satisfying earnings. This may be explained by the intervention of third parties such as procurers that hold a large percentage of their earnings. Respondents admitted to the difficulty of meeting the basic needs of children and ignoring their higher material desires, in this sense being brought into focus the food shortages the children experience.

Street prostitution is often associated with the failure to respect the children's right to protection against abuse. The most frequently mentioned type of abuse was the sexual kind. The women engaged in this activity are described as having fewer opportunities to fulfil their obligation to protect children from various forms of abuse. The main arguments are the long periods of time they are away from the child, high tolerance to violence or the externalization of accumulated frustrations from work in their relationships with the child. There have also been brought to attention situations of child neglect on the behalf of the mother, either directly by the inadequate satisfying of children's needs or indirectly by delegating their responsibilities to a person who is in

charge of providing mere guarding of the child, without adequately responding to the needs.

By conducting the focus groups I was able to conclude that in a family where the mother works as a street sex worker there are certain children rights that are violated due to the nature of the maternal figure's work, but also some rights which only attract certain risks regarding their fulfilment.

The second phase of the research also involved carrying out five case studies of children whose mothers have practiced street prostitution. Despite the fact that the main themes analysed were the children's rights mentioned before I also tried to obtain a picture of child development from their birth until the moment I conducted the research.

Based on the five case studies I conducted I can argue for the little importance that is given to the person responsible to raise the children during the time when the mother temporarily or permanently unable to care for the child, either by performing street work, by deprivation of liberty or by her death. The importance of family support network is noticeable through the decision of keeping the baby, in opposition to placing them in an orphanage, in the case when the mother's behaviour or her life

experiences prevent her from fulfilling the child's needs and the maternal role.

Starting from the principle of combining the qualitative with the quantitative social research, in this study I conducted quantitative analysis of information obtained through focus groups and individual interviews with experts. In this sense establishing the frequency of keywords in this body of data has been transposed as a family model (where the mother practices street sex work). The quantitative data added extra knowledge and information to the research conducted.

The model presented in this study indicates that sex work creates a particular family environment in which parental responsibilities are undertaken in a dysfunctional manner, this having implications both for short and long term for child development.

In conclusion, I can argue that the development of a child born and raised in a family in which the mother is a street sex worker is strongly influenced by the specific of mother's occupation. This has negative implications based on the individual path that the mother follows and consequently on the availability and accessibility to maternal resources. The findings of my research are reflected in the increase of knowledge on prostitution.

Addressing a different side of this social phenomenon, namely the rights of children whose mothers are involved in commercial sex and extent to which this activity has an impact on the violation of these rights, draws attention on a category of children who are not so visible due to the obscurity of their mothers' socially disapproved occupation. I consider that the study undertaken represents a breakthrough in the work field on prostitution, the findings are important in establishing the relevant issues of the of the existence of these children, the risks to which they may be exposed and also on the need of support of mothers who practice street sex work.

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## **Articole**

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