Article

'We all have one': exit plans as a professional strategy in sex work

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Julie Ham
The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Fairleigh Gilmour
University of Otago, New Zealand

Abstract

The idea of 'exiting' the sex industry plays a powerful symbolic role in the feminist debates around the morality, legitimacy and regulation of sex work. Drawing on interviews with 39 women sex workers in Australia and Canada, we explore three key contrasts between dominant narratives and interventions that frame 'exiting' as escape from trauma or exploitation, and sex workers' assessments of 'exiting' as a personal or professional strategy. First, we explore sex workers' perceptions of sex work as temporary work. Second, we analyse the symbiosis between exit *plans* and current work *practices*. Third, we examine workers' assessment of the value of 'exiting' sex work in the context of changing market forces within the sex industry, the 'square' labour market (or non-sex work sectors) and exiting interventions (i.e. programmes to assist workers in leaving sex work).

Keywords

employment transitions, exiting, exit plans, sex work

Introduction

The idea of 'exiting' the sex industry (or ceasing employment as a sex worker) plays a powerful symbolic role in the intense debate around the morality, legitimacy and regulation of sex work. The symbolic power of exiting sex work draws in part from its position

Corresponding author:
Julie Ham, Room 9.08, Department of Sociology, Jockey Club Tower, University of Hong Kong, Centennial Campus, Pokulam, Hong Kong.
Email: jham@hku.hk

as a compromise between the conflicting feminist views on sex work that influence public debate (for summaries of this debate, see Outshoorn, 2005: 144–9). While there is increasing nuance in recent sex work research, the two main sides of this debate remain the anti-prostitution abolitionist approach and the sex worker rights or labour approach. The abolitionist approach considers sex work as a gendered form of exploitation against women and argues for the elimination of all forms of sex work (e.g. Jeffreys, 1997). The sex worker rights approach views sex work as legitimate labour and therefore argues that sex work should be decriminalized and sex workers' rights defended as workers (e.g. Chapkis, 1997; Pheterson, 1989).

Both anti-prostitution abolitionists and those working from a sex worker rights perspective generally agree on the importance of supporting individuals who do not want to work in the sex industry to find other means of employment. However, there is increasing evidence that the idea of exiting can be used to foster the growth of a 'rescue industry' premised on the idea of naïve, passive victims requiring 'rescue' or 'saving' from the sex industry (e.g. Agustín, 2007). 'Exit programmes' range from holistic support services to coercive interventions, and are implemented by a range of bodies: NGOs, government funded health and support services and church groups. They are sometimes run with police involvement. The practices and outcomes of specific 'exit' programmes and approaches have been the subject of some critique. For example, Project ROSE in Arizona, which involves the arrest of sex workers who are then offered assistance in exiting sex work as a diversion approach to the criminal justice system, has been extensively criticized for violating ethical standards (Wahab and Panichelli, 2013: 346). In the UK, the publication *A Coordinated Prostitution Strategy* (Home Office (UK), 2006) saw the official endorsement of exit programmes. This approach has not been uniformly welcomed. Scoular and O'Neill (2007: 764) argue that the increasing salience of exiting in the 'renewed welfare approach' are better understood as attempts 'to increase social control under the rhetoric of inclusion, through techniques of risk and responsibilisation'. Despite these critiques, a public understanding of 'exiting' approaches as inherently benevolent nonetheless remains and continues to shape policy approaches, as a gesture of compromise, or as a strategy to rationalize punitive responses to sex work.

There is a growing body of literature on employment transitions in a range of work sectors (e.g. Cameron, 2009; Dick, 2010; Sabelis and Schilling, 2013), including women's transitions in what Bowen (2013, 2015) calls 'square work' or the labour market (e.g. Gash, 2008; Jenkins, 2006; LaPointe, 2013; Maher, 2013; Pollert, 2003), yet there is a dearth of research that examines the transitions of indoor sex workers and there is even less on current sex workers' transition intentions. We aim to address this gap by investigating how sex workers themselves view 'exiting', including how labour market conditions inform decisions to transition in or out of the industry. There have been recent, valuable analyses of movements in and out of the indoor sector from a labour perspective (Bowen, 2013, 2015; Law, 2013, 2011; Maher et al., 2013; Sanders, 2007) and it is this literature we aim to contribute to. Exiting programmes for sex workers occupy an unusual position in the career transitions field. In exit programming, the focus is typically on getting workers *out*, in contrast with traditional career transition programmes which are more likely to focus on assisting individuals' *entry* into a new occupation.

We should note that this article does not attempt to explore barriers to exiting the sex industry. Rather, we explore three key contrasts between dominant exiting narratives and sex workers' assessments of 'exiting'. First, we explore workers' views of sex work as temporary work and how this shapes women's exit plans and strategies. Second, we analyse how exit *plans*, exiting *intentions* and previous experiences of exiting shape workers' current business practices. Third, we examine how workers assess the value of 'exiting' sex work and exiting interventions. In particular, we examine how changing market forces within the sex industry, and analyses of the 'square' labour market (or non-sex work sectors), shape career plans and transition intentions within the sex work sector. We conclude with a discussion of contrasting conceptualizations of 'exiting' as it relates to mobility and rescue.

Methodology

This inquiry is grounded in two sex work research projects conducted in 2012–2014: one in which exiting was not the main focus nor used as recruitment criteria, and one in which exiting was both a focus and a criteria for participation. The first project utilized a sex workers' rights approach and focused on the work experiences of 65 immigrant, migrant and racialized women sex workers in Melbourne, Australia (*n*=30) and Vancouver, Canada (*n*=35). Participants included women in the indoor sex industry (27 brothel workers, 25 massage parlour workers and 13 independent escorts) who fit one or more of the following criteria: workers who were legally identified as migrants, self-identified as migrant or immigrant, were often assumed to be migrants (e.g. racialized workers), or performed exoticized ethnic identities as sex workers. 'Exiting' issues emerged in interviews with 25 out of 65 (38%) women interviewed in this study, 13 in Melbourne and 12 in Vancouver.[1] The diverse conceptualizations of 'exiting' that emerged in this sub-sample are included in this analysis. This sample included 13 citizens (nine through naturalization, four by birth), three permanent residents, three student visa holders, two Working Holiday visa holders, and four women whose status was unknown or ambiguous. The majority of women in the sub-sample were ethnically Asian, including East Asian, Southeast Asian and South Asian (*n*=20). Other ethnic identities included Brazilian, European, Middle Eastern and Indigenous.[2] The inclusion of this sample is in part to acknowledge the diversity among sex workers but we should note that, for the purposes of this article, differences in experiences and perspectives are not necessarily located in racial, ethnic or status differences. While analyses of these dimensions are important, we argue that there is space to consider the experiences of immigrant, migrant and racialized sex workers that do not hinge on or do not have to be explained by race, ethnicity or migrant status, in the same way that analyses of white sex workers' experiences and concerns are not necessarily expected to centre around whiteness. Ham (2016) offers an account elsewhere of how race, ethnicity and migrant/residency status do shape the experiences of this sample.

Semi-structured interviews did not include specific questions about 'exiting' but rather focused on women's work-related decision-making and perspectives on best work practices. Discussion about 'exiting' or employment trajectories emerged in responses to questions about advice research participants would share with others who may be

considering working in the sex industry. These interview questions elicited a great deal of discussion on strategizing one's success in the industry, work management strategies and managing one's mobility within and outside the industry. A point of interest (and an impetus for this article) was the lack of significant differences between women who raised exiting issues during interviews and those who did not. Women who raised issues of exiting (whether as an intention, as a possibility, as an inevitability, etc.) reflected a wide range of opinions or orientations towards sex work. Exiting was discussed by women who were critical of or had grown weary of sex work (as might be expected), but also women who enjoyed working in the sex industry and women with neutral attitudes towards sex work itself but very strong perspectives on the benefits or risks resulting from sex work.

The second project also utilized a sex workers' rights approach and examined the career trajectories of 14 current and former sex workers in three Australian jurisdictions: the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales and Victoria. Participants in this study were white Australian (*n*=12) and mixed race (*n*=2) and were all Australian-born or New Zealand-born citizens. Research participants were recruited on the basis that they had already left the industry, were in the process of doing so, or planned to leave the industry. Leaving the sex industry, or the intention to do so, was therefore a key aspect of all 14 in-depth life narrative interviews. Participants included women who had worked in the indoor sex industry (all had experience working in brothels and nine had experience working as independent escorts) although three women had also worked on the street. Five participants were still working, four were in the process of transitioning, and five had fully left the industry. Recruitment flyers were posted online (both on sites for sex workers and on sites not specifically for sex work). Participants initiated contact with the researcher. Snowball sampling was also used, through participants' recommendations to other potential interviewees. Former workers are a particularly hard to reach population. Four of the five former workers interviewed had no further contact with the industry, and three were not 'out' or in any way visible as former sex workers. It is difficult to ascertain if those who were willing to engage in the interviews were in some way different from former workers who would not be willing, and this impacted on the generalizability of the findings. Participants were asked to describe their work history, both in and out of the industry, in open-ended interviews. We analyse data from these two research projects in order to illuminate the diversity among sex workers' experiences and perspectives. The analysis that follows is based on a combined sample of 39 women (25 from the first project discussed above, 14 from the second).

Sex work as temporary work

In both studies, the views of sex workers diverged sharply from the abolitionist view of exiting as an occurrence that requires forceful intervention by the state or by what Laura Agustín (2007) calls 'the rescue industry'. The 'rescue' framework suggests that exiting sex work is predominantly achieved by coaxing or forcing women out of sex work. However, mobility or movement in and out of the industry was perceived as an expected employment trajectory in sex work for 32 (or 82%) of the 39 sex workers across both studies. Women in this study simply and matter-of-factly stated that sex work 'wasn't

forever' for diverse reasons and/or discussed limited employment trajectories in the sex industry. Personal timelines within the industry ranged from, at the time of interview, one week to 25 years. Interestingly, even sex workers planning a long-term career in the industry still employed a range of strategies such as dual careers, contingency plans (e.g. further education, substantial savings) and an expected end date (e.g. at age 50).

Working in the sex industry was often understood to be relatively short-term and/or goal-oriented. Some entered the industry in order to finance a specific goal. For example, Donna[3] described needing to pay off debts and being unable to find 'square work'. Once she had achieved these two goals, she left the industry. She observed:

> I got a part-time job at Coles and so with uni and Coles, I just stopped doing it. … I still had enough money to go out or hang with friends or that sort of thing. But I didn't have my debt. Cos it was really the debt that was like, 'I need to get out of that debt!'.

> (Donna, Australian-born citizen, white, country NSW, brothel worker, worked in the industry for six months, left the industry seven years prior to interview)

Others described working briefly to fund specific purchases, in order to study, or while their children were young. Kristen, a former sex worker who now works in social support and advocacy, observed that while a minority of workers do have a long career in sex work, short-term goal-oriented approaches such as the one described above were the norm for many in the industry:

> They've got something in mind that they want to buy. So they want a deposit on their house, they want presents for this year's Christmas for the kids, they've got rent or a mortgage payment due. Or they want a deposit for their new car or they need to get a new computer. So it's a very … they're very focused on: 'This is my goal, this is what I'm getting my money for, and then I'm outta here'.

> (Kristen, Australian-born citizen, white, Canberra, brothel and independent worker, worked in the industry for seven years, left the industry seven years prior to interview)

While the majority of participants in our two studies appreciated the advantages sex work offered as flexible, temporary work, women also noted that workers needed to prepare themselves for the precarity of sex work. In dominant exiting narratives, the sex work market can often be portrayed as an ominous, exponentially expanding entity that ensnares vulnerable women into risky labour. Yet, in discussions about the transitioning out of the sex work sector, eight women suggested that protecting oneself in sex work included the need to prepare oneself for potential exclusion *from* sex work. Ada, a naturalized citizen of Middle Eastern descent and an independent worker in Vancouver who had been working for two years at the time of interview, explained 'I love my work. And I'm trying to learn it better', but she went on to observe 'it's not going [to] be always there for me'. The narratives from these workers implied that it was, in a sense, safest to ensure one was in a position to leave the industry before it left you. This sentiment is not meant to be reductive, as workers are in a position to shape the market (in terms of rates, services, etc.) in addition to negotiating established norms, but it does recognize that sex

work does value particular bodies, femininities or masculinities, and services within any specific context.

Some participants' view of their sex work career as temporary relates to what Escoffier (2007: 174) describes as 'the retrogressive dynamic', or the perception that the 'longer a person works in a sexual occupation, the less one is paid, and the lower the status of the work venue'. As Neda, an Australian-born citizen who worked as a private worker in several Australian locations for 18 years and left the industry five years prior to the interview observed: 'It's like a dancer's career – you get a sprained ankle and it's gone at 30'. We are not arguing that Escoffier's proposition describes the experiences of all sex workers. There are diverse trajectories within the industry, including the experiences of workers who increase their success with time as their experience and knowledge builds. Rather, we note Escoffier's argument here to indicate that age is one dimension that workers consider when determining their approach in the industry. While the impact of ageing may be more pronounced for career longevity in a profession where appearance is particularly central, the intersections of age, gender, class and ethnicity can impact on, and limit, career opportunities and trajectories for ageing women in many industries (Duncan and Loretto, 2004; Moore, 2009).

The role of age in some participants' plans was evident. Mathilde expressed her surprise at her longevity in sex work:

> So it's just a great job for me and I'm … I'm nearly 50 now so I think there has to be a use-by-date but every time I think there has to be one, it shifts, and it becomes later and later.

> (Mathilde, Australian-born citizen, white, independent worker, had been working in the industry for 13 years at time of interview)

Mathilde perceived her sex work career as finite and this affected her career planning, which involved professional employment plans and property investment. Similarly, Neda described how her awareness of the effect of ageing on earnings had a significant impact on her career planning. Prior to leaving the industry, she decided that she wanted 'a career that's going to last beyond my 40s, beyond my 50s'. Her realization that her career in sex work had an endpoint was a factor in her decision to complete Year 12 (in Australia) and go to university as a mature age student:

> I knew it had a use-by-date. That was always in my head. Because you see your numbers. You know, it's so easy to be skinny and beautiful at 21. It's not so easy to be skinny and beautiful at 28 … And, you know, you're advertising in the newspaper. At 21, you're putting down 'Stunning 19-year-old'. At 28, you're putting down 'Stunning 25-year-old'. And you're noticing how much – God, my phone used to ring a lot more often … So you can see your finances changing. And your clientele changing. And I just thought, 'Righteo, this is only going to get worse; um, better start planning an escape route, you know, better start planning'.

Feeling the effects of ageing on one's earnings also featured in the narratives of women who had entered and left the industry at a relatively young age. Kim, an Australian-born citizen who worked for a year in her early 30s, and left the industry one year prior to the interview observed that:

A lot of the women were saying that: 'I'm going to have to stop doing this soon because I'm getting too old and I'm not getting as many clients, I'm not making as much money'.

The perceived unsustainability of sex work was sometimes linked to workers' assessments of their own longevity in the industry; for example, how age or familiarity might affect their ability to attract clientele. However, one worker was strongly concerned that she might be 'forced' to leave sex work due to market changes within the sector. Ella had worked in Vancouver's sex work sector for more than five years and had taken long breaks for a range of reasons (e.g. new relationship, travelling). In the past, she had found it relatively easy to transition back to sex work when she wanted. However, she was extremely concerned about, and critical of, the market's turn towards providing more emotionally intimate services, with Girlfriend Experience[4] being perhaps the most visible example:

Every time it was easy coming back [to sex work after a long absence] … And then all of a sudden, it just went like this (motions straight downward) … Like it just got competitive. Suddenly and so fast. So for the last five years, it's really hard to work. … It frustrates me, like inside. And I feel, even if I wanted to, I don't think I could work this job for more than another year. Because it's just gonna get worse. … Price-wise, service-wise, girl-wise. And the customers' expectation-wise.

(Ella, naturalized citizen, Asian, Vancouver, massage shop worker)

Some workers guarded against the perceived unsustainability of sex work by maximizing income generation, and undertaking training in other fields. Exiting plans were not only strategized as a response to fluctuations within the sex industry, but, as the following section discusses, exiting plans also functioned as a tool to shape work practices.

Using exit *plans* and exiting experiences to shape work *practices*

Intentions to work in the sex industry for a limited time period shaped interviewees' strategic approach to sex work, their work practices and their engagement of a specific worker identity. In interviews, participants indicated the utility of exit plans in ensuring that sex work ultimately facilitated one's mobility (e.g. social, economic, educational, etc.). Lily, an Asian independent escort in Melbourne, who had been working in the industry for 10 years, did not express an intention to exit sex work but observed:

If you are [in it] for the money, you have to have very clear goals. You have to come up with a specific number of what you want to make. And from that number you can deduct how many bookings you would have to make. And how much time you can spare to be involved in it. You have to make the choice whether you do it on the side and it takes a little bit longer, or you actually just throw yourself in full-time and try to make as much money as you can in as short amount of time as you can.

As the above comment suggests, exit *plans* and work *practices* can be symbiotic. This presents a significant departure from dominant exiting narratives that posit exiting in

opposition to working. Interviewees' reflections on work strategies and decision-making reveal that exit plans can be used to strengthen one's work practices and one's success in sex work, regardless of if or when one actually leaves the sex industry. This was evident, for example, in exit plans that fostered goal planning, and provided an anchor or framework to guide work-related decision-making. When asked how potential workers might prepare or plan their trajectory in the industry, Lily shared an example that highlighted what a planned, thought-out approach to sex work could yield. The story below provides an example of how workers may approach their transitions in and out of sex work:

> I know of one case where an escort went in and she knew exactly what she wanted. She wanted enough money to buy a condo. And she set herself up, she had a very professional website done. ... she started interacting on the bulletin boards, the discussion forums, to get people's attention. She quickly got good reviews of herself up on the internet and the rest basically followed. She knew exactly what kind of services she was comfortable providing but she also knew what kind of services she would have to add to get even more people interested, especially the ones who would pay high dollars. So she basically really did her homework, in terms of how much she could charge, how much she felt herself was worth. In terms of look, presentation, attitude, she knew her own appeal. But also she lucked out in that she met a couple of influential, so to speak, clients who would post reviews of her which were just glowing and captured a lot of attention from the other clients. And within a year, she was out. So that was one success story, you could say.

In addition to shaping work practices, exit plans can also function as a self-care strategy or a strategy to affirm one's autonomy in the face of continuing stigmatization and discrimination. Workers spoke frankly about the toll of stigmatization and the consequences this could have on their mobility and safety. In this context, women argued that it was important to remember why one was working in order to deal with stigma, as Emma explains below:

> [Think about] how much you want [to] earn and how much the way you won't do. Just do it, don't need care about another person thinking [or judging you]. … Then after, you just quit this job because actually this job cannot [go] for longer. You need to try to thinking [about] your future, what you need to do and saving enough money for what.

> (Emma, international student, Asian, Melbourne, licensed brothel worker, had been working for one week at the time of interview)

The temporariness of sex work may allow resistance to a potentially stigmatizing identity by positioning sex work explicitly as something one does for a limited period, rather than as a master status or identity. Multiple strategies were employed by interviewees in order to ensure power to define one's trajectory in and out of the industry. These included pursuing dual careers in and out of the industry, engaging in tertiary study, and specializing in the industry, particularly training in BDSM (bondage and discipline, sadomasochism and masochism) skills. These strategies were also used to increase one's safety and power *within* the industry. For example, maintaining employment in 'square work' provided participants with a 'cover', which facilitated efforts to avoid disclosure. Mathilde observed:

I only actually weaned from nursing quite slowly because that gave me good cover. And as I became more interested in my job (sex work) as a job and as a helping profession – my job as a sex worker as a helping profession – I wanted to be a sexual health nurse. I wanted to move into sexual health nursing from where I had been working. I couldn't get a job so I thought I'd just do some study so I enrolled in a Master's programme. I started a business as well. So I work and I do that one day a week and still work as a sex worker two days a week currently.

Dual career trajectories and tertiary study facilitated participants' mobility beyond the sex industry. Participants often viewed eventually leaving the industry as inevitable, and thus anticipated broad plans for the future, even if they were still unsure about their specific goals:

I did my diploma (in nursing) while I was still working. I was doing at least one shift a week or two shifts a week … I did casual shifts as well. Just to make sure I had the skills so I wouldn't get stuck … I decided that I was going to do one shift a week. Because I wanted to keep my skill level up so that I was employable at least if I wanted to leave the industry. So I wasn't quite sure what I was doing, I was just doing two things at once.

(Veronika, Australian-born citizen, mixed race, Canberra, brothel worker, worked in the industry for 18 years, had left the industry three months prior to interview)

It (tertiary study) is a safety net. It absolutely is a safety net. If girls are working and not building a safety net then they're dumbasses.

(Neda, Australian-born citizen, worked in the industry for 18 years, had left the industry five years prior to interview)

Veronika and Neda, assisted by their strategic career planning, both successfully transitioned into 'square' careers and were no longer working in the sex industry at the time of the interview. Exit plans can guide work-related decision-making in sex work. For example, plans for temporary employment in sex work may necessitate reduced visibility or carefully containing one's presence in the industry and/or boundaries with clients. Maria, who had been working for approximately one year at the time of interview, explained how she instructed the manager of the brothel where she worked to exclude her information from any online advertising, given her intentions to work for a short time period. She also acknowledged that her plans to quit soon meant she could afford to pay less attention to maintaining good client relations:

I'm not after repeat business – this is a short term, you know, situation. If I was wanting to use this as a business, I might be able to be a bit nicer to people and a bit more flexible in, you know, the things that I do to have that repeat business. But I'm happy to see them once and then they can leave.

(Maria, Australian-born citizen, European, Melbourne, licensed brothel worker)

Maria further added that she found this very freeing and enjoyed how frank and honest she could be with clients as she no longer felt the need to invest in maintaining worker–client relations:

I think that in any employment situation … when you know that you're gonna go, your mind's already saying 'you're outta here'. And you're getting excited and so your level of tolerance might be, you know, might be a little bit different. … If you know, I'm chatting to someone, they're kind of saying, 'Oh, my wife's at home'. … I don't really have time for any conversations.

Intentions for future career transitions thus shaped work practices for participants still working in the industry. Interestingly, exit*ing* or previous experiences of leaving the sex work sector also acted as a catalyst that could strengthen work practices or change one's attitude towards sex work upon re-entering the industry. Nine workers discussed previous experiences of exiting the industry. These movements in and out of the industry reflect the mobility that is characteristic of sex work (Maher et al., 2013), challenging the supposed need to 'exit' women from the industry. These movements also allowed participants to reflect on their relationship to sex work and 'square work'.

Evaluating exiting

Workers who had re-entered sex work revealed that their experiences with exiting fostered a critical analysis of the stigma surrounding sex work. Time spent outside of the industry provided space to think critically about work practices *in* the industry as well as the stigmatizing attitudes present *outside* the industry. For example, Jasmin had previously left the sex work sector because 'I wanted to stop doing this work'. She moved to another country and found what she called 'a normal job' but realized 'I'm working so hard, eight hours a day and I can make the same amount effortlessly [in sex work], that's what I was telling myself". After this realization, she sought out employment in the sex work sector. She explained her progression from working in sex work, leaving and then returning to sex work:

I think back, then I kind of internalized this idea that what I was doing was terrible. … If you're going to be a prostitute, it can only be negative. My mentality's changed a lot since then. … I study social sciences as well. I study anthropology, history, gender studies – and I know the history, how sexuality was constructed, you know, in certain norms and stuff like that. So I don't feel what I'm doing is wrong. I think the problem is society and the stigma against us.

(Jasmin, Canadian-born citizen, Asian/European, Vancouver, independent worker, had been working for eight years at time of interview)

For Candy, this critical analysis emerged after participating in an exiting programme for sex workers (one of three participants across both studies who had participated in such a programme). She explained that her interest in participating in an exiting programme was partly shaped by 'Other people making me feel guilty about what I was doing. So I was like, well, maybe I am, maybe I am wrong, maybe I am bad. So let's try to be 'not bad' and then maybe people will like me.' Instead, participation in an exiting programme revealed some of the hypocrisies and contradictions grounding social attitudes surrounding sex work:

[I] realized this 'square-ing' thing is for the fucking birds, man. Cause one of the lessons was (laughs) in order to save money, to like, not go for Starbucks coffee. And I was like, so in order for me to square up, I've got to give up my Starbucks special coffees? Well then, how does Starbucks, like, have a coffee shop on every fucking corner? And why is it that when we all go for breaks [while attending this programme], we go to Starbucks? And then come back to the programme and talk about how we've got to save our money by not drinking Starbucks!

(Candy, Canadian-born citizen, white, Vancouver, independent worker, had been working for 20 years at time of interview)

Participation in exiting programming also allowed her to realize:

I don't have a problem. Like, I just want to fit into society. But if that's my problem, well then, I can solve that by going home and like, you know, problem ended. … And then also in those types of [exiting] programmes that are put on by the government, you learn about hierarchy. And I was like, that's the reason why I'm a ho. Cause I'm not gonna be under any rule of thumb, thank you very much.

There was significant variation among participants as to the utility of exit programmes. For participants opposed to exit programmes, a crucial concern was the potential for further discrimination and stigmatization in such programmes, and the likelihood of success in finding alternative employment. Neda, when asked if exit programmes were a good idea, responded:

No, I don't think so. I think that – as somebody who works in community service programmes now – I think it's stigmatizing it. I think that funding can go towards, perhaps, family planning clinics or women's support groups.

The potential for discrimination is a very real concern as the dominant exiting paradigm (advocated within an anti-prostitution framework) relies on a social construction of sex workers as hapless victims needing rescue from an exploitative industry. Georgiana argued that exit programmes were 'absolutely not' a good idea and further elaborated that:

I don't think there's any reason to exit the industry. And I don't really think sex work is any worse or better than other jobs, it's just sort of different. So I think it really needs to be about choice.

(Georgiana, Australian-born citizen, white, Sydney, brothel worker, had been working in the industry for 25 years at time of interview)

Interviewees were not only very critical of the construction of sex work that emerged from exit programmes – what Kristen described as the 'save the poor prostitutes' approach – but also of the 'square worker' that exit programmes (intentionally or unintentionally) aim to produce (i.e. workers that could easily be integrated into low-paid, feminized, casualized work:

We don't need [saving]. We can save our damn selves … A lot of those 'save the prostitute' people, they want to teach us how to sew. For 10 dollars an hour.

Janey described her experience of working at a job which she was connected to through a support service, and the poor working conditions that shaped her decision to re-enter sex work in order to complete her tertiary studies:

I got one of the worst flus of my entire life and nearly got pneumonia. And then I went back after a couple of week's break … They change you every hour to a different machine usually and I was asked to go on this other one which was hauling huge blankets and flipping them in. And I said – I'm not sure I'll be able to do it because my lungs are still really wonky from the flu. Do you mind if I stay on this one? And the supervisor started screaming at me, saying, 'Well if you're sick, it's not my problem!'.

(Janey, Australian-born citizen, white, Melbourne, brothel worker, had been working in the industry for 25 years at time of interview)

Discussion about exiting did not only emerge during interviews, but also in response *to* interviews. Referrals for exiting programmes were offered in five interviews, in response to workers who shared conflicted or negative feelings about sex work.[5] Although exiting programming is often provided by anti-prostitution organizations, there are organizations in Australia and Canada that offer exiting support services from a sex workers rights perspective, and it was referrals for these organizations that were provided. These interactions elucidate how workers might assess the value of exiting when presented with intervention options. They include the concerns workers have about exiting programmes, but also some of the elements that might be welcomed by sex workers looking to transition into other employment.

It was interesting to note that when referrals to exiting programmes were provided to workers who unambiguously expressed strong critiques of sex work and their involvement in it, workers nevertheless demonstrated a strong wariness of exit programming. Workers received referrals politely but wanted specific information about the types of alternative employment that would be offered, the potential loss of income in transitioning out of sex work, the risk of de-skilling or transitioning into downwardly mobile work, and how one's anonymity or privacy would be protected. For example, when presented with a referral, Nancy, an Asian-Australian citizen and licensed brothel worker in Melbourne, laughed and asked if she would be offered a job cleaning toilets.

Another participant, Bee, an Asian permanent resident working in a licensed brothel in Melbourne, expressed negative feelings about her involvement in sex work but nevertheless refused a referral to exit programming. She clarified that her conflicted feelings about sex work were not based on feeling inadequate or unprepared for the 'square' labour market. She listed previous jobs she had held outside of the sex industry and argued that she was fully aware of how capable she was of finding work in a number of fields. Rather, the struggle for her was to understand why she chose to remain in sex work despite her conflicted feelings about its morality and legitimacy. This example demonstrates that the decision to work in or transition out of sex work can be a highly personal decision influenced by a diverse range of motivations and experiences.

Participants were concerned about the potential for discrimination that could be entrenched in exit programming, but also reflected on the potential redundancy of exit programming. The high level of planning and work-related decision-making into and within the

sex work sector was clearly evident among many participants in both studies. Sex workers who discussed exit programming questioned if exit programmes could provide value beyond sex workers' own expertise. Kristen, who had left the industry seven years previously and now works in support and advocacy, observed that many workers approach their time in the industry in a goal-oriented way: 'Well we don't need an 'exit strategy'. Because we all have one.' As Kristen's comment highlights, exit programming that aims to 'teach' workers how to leave the sex industry may be of limited utility to workers who have already formulated plans or strategies for employment outside of the sex industry.

Among those who supported exit programmes, it was of key importance that these be evidence-based, peer run and not coercive. For example, Leonie argued that there was potential to positively support women who wanted to explore options beyond the sex industry, but that exit programming needed to acknowledge the temporariness of sex work for many workers:

> I would like to think that people who want to leave the sex work industry would be given support to do so. … It's all about meeting people where they're at. I don't think anyone who is in the sex industry and who wants to be there should be forced to leave … If they want to stay in the sex industry, they should be supported to stay there. And if they want to leave, then they should be supported in that. Because, I mean, some people are in the sex industry for a short period of time and that's all they want. They want to put together a certain amount of money. Or they want to get through school. Or they want to do whatever they want to do. And then they want to move on.

> (Leonie, Australian-born citizen, Melbourne, independent worker, had been working in the industry for 18 years at time of interview)

The question for those developing exiting programming is thus to reconcile the mobility that characterizes sex work and the diversity of sex workers' motivations with a dominant exiting narrative in which an encompassing industry ensnares vulnerable women who require assistance in order to escape. Furthermore, the temporariness of the work for many people, alongside the considerable planning evident among many participants in both studies and their legitimate concerns around de-skilling, all need to be considered in any exit programming.

Concluding thoughts

Our analysis reveals the myriad ways in which sex workers' evaluation of and strategies for exiting challenge dominant anti-prostitution approaches, by demonstrating a strategic orientation to decisions about exiting. An analysis of the anti-prostitution values and assumptions that underpin exiting interventions has been explored in greater detail elsewhere (Wahab and Panichelli, 2013) but our modest objective here was to introduce diverse conceptualizations of exiting among workers who have spent considerable time reflecting and assessing exit strategies, and critically measuring the value of exiting the sex work sector. Our research findings thus also challenge the current political acceptance of exiting as a point of compromise between highly polarized anti-prostitution and sex workers' rights frameworks. We argue that current exiting programming may not reflect how sex workers may understand and envision exiting and, therefore, is likely to be of limited utility.

Therefore, we propose a different lens through which to understand exiting the sex work sector, an approach that may assist in the development of exiting models that reflect sex workers' priorities. We propose that exiting approaches be grounded in an understanding of *mobility* in sex work, rather than assumed trauma. Research indicates high levels of mobility into and out of the sex industry (e.g. Maher et al., 2013), indicating a more complex interpretation is necessary than that of the exploited woman in need of rescue. For the workers in our studies, exiting is much more often connected to mobility rather than trauma or exploitation. An exiting approach that is grounded in an understanding of the importance of mobility *in* sex work (e.g. travelling to different locales, use of mobile identities) and the significance of sex work *for* a range of mobilities (e.g. social, economic) may better reflect workers' lived realities.

For this reason, sex work was understood to be relatively temporary for numerous participants – thus encouraging planning for later careers. Sex workers' intention to leave the industry ought not always be conceptualized as evidence of the negatives of sex work, and transitioning need not be understood as a positive shift from a deviant to a socially acceptable identity. Rather, we acknowledge that some sex workers may intend to transition out of the sex industry at some point, no matter how positive their experience of the industry may be. Georgiana, who criticized the idea of rescuing women from the industry, also recognized that sex work may be a relatively temporary career option for many workers:

> Because sex work's sort of regarded as something that people want to get out of. Or it's a limited thing while you're a student. But I think there's a career in it. I don't think it's a good idea that that would be your only career. But in this day and age, people have multiple careers.
>
> (Georgiana, Australian-born citizen, white, Sydney, brothel worker, had been working in the industry for 25 years at time of interview)

For the women in our respective studies, exiting did not stand in opposition to sex work. Rather, exiting and sex work were symbiotic, with exit plans shaping a strategic and focused approach to sex work, and sex work enabling transitions into other areas of work or study. As our research found, exit plans aided women's mobility and success both in and out of the sex industry. Perhaps exiting models that incorporate this recognition from the start may be more likely to avoid entrenching discriminatory attitudes towards sex work and unsubstantiated assumptions of victimization or exploitation.

Dominant approaches to exiting are a relatively recent subject for critique (exceptions include Bowen, 2013; Law, 2011, 2013; Sanders, 2007; Wahab and Panichelli, 2013) and the perspectives and analyses of sex workers have much to offer to the development of respectful and effective exiting models. Participants were largely critical of exiting programming, but such programmes did result in unexpected valuable outcomes for some. One unexpected outcome was the role exiting programming played in (inadvertently) fostering sex workers' critical analysis of exiting and the sex work sector. Exiting programming not only entails transitioning out of a sex worker identity but it also involves fashioning a new worker identity that is considered more appropriate for the 'square' labour market. While sex work was a strategy for some women to professionalize themselves

beyond the industry (e.g. through tertiary study), women criticized the valorization of downward mobility that they detected in exit programmes. Workers who wanted to explore options outside the sex industry still strongly challenged the new worker identity they were encouraged to cultivate for the 'square' labour market. For stakeholders involved in implementing exiting interventions, this suggests that it is key to analyse the new worker identities that gendered workers are encouraged to take on outside the sex industry.

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Notes

1. Interviewee responses are presented differently throughout the article. In Vancouver (where sex work is criminalized), more respondents requested that the interviewer take notes rather than recording their voices. Respondents in Melbourne (where sex work is legalized) tended to be more comfortable with having their interviews audio-recorded, which permits the greater inclusion of detailed, verifiable quotes.
2. This participant is of Indigenous background but presents herself as Southeast Asian to clients.
3. Pseudonyms are used for all research participants.
4. Although definitions may vary, Girlfriend Experience (GFE) typically involves providing more emotionally intimate services or a greater emphasis on emotional interaction between workers and clients.
5. No workers asked for assistance in leaving sex work in interviews.

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Julie Ham is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Hong Kong. Her current research interests include sex work; gender and migration; community-based research; and the criminology of mobility.

Fairleigh Gilmour is a Lecturer in Criminology and Gender Studies at the University of Otago. Her key research interests are the regulation of sex work; race, gender and class in media representations of crime; mental illness and social control; and the impacts of new and social media on crime and security.