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### Violence Against Women in Street Level Prostitution: Women Centered Community Responses

*Celia Williamson*  
*University of Toledo*

#### My Emerging Consciousness

Becoming a community advocate fighting violence against women in street level prostitution has been a ten-year experience for me. It has been both fulfilling and stigmatizing. Mobilizing and organizing a community to seek out solutions to the problem of prostitution and the associated violence became the impetus which propelled me to become a community leader. My work enabled me to successfully influence both the criminal justice and social service systems, along with local government, to create a program to help women victimized by prostitution. Fighting off feelings of perpetual passiveness and socialized silence, I found my voice. It was a voice that gained momentum over time, a voice that didn't ask for permission or beg for forgiveness. An unlikely advocate, I established meaningful connections with oppressed women. From these connections a coalition of individuals emerged that stimulated community level social change.

The negative outcomes of women in prostitution was never so profoundly felt as when my childhood friend was found murdered in Toledo, the victim of a serial rapist. Over the years as we aged and grew apart, I focused on college. Through a series of unfortunate circumstances, my friend stayed behind and succumbed to the street life. Addicted to drugs, she was forced to finance her habit by selling her body on the streets. Her life ended when she was brutally stabbed in an abandoned parking lot and died a few hours later in a hospital five blocks from our childhood homes.

I was a social worker at the time, committed to the ideals of the profession and devoted to a code of ethics that outlined a social worker's primary mission to work with the poor, vulnerable, and oppressed. I memorized this section of the code because it gave me focus, meaning and purpose.

I had driven past women in prostitution many times on my way to assist children and families living in the area. I had little knowledge of these women's experiences and even less empathy for them. I hadn't realized that my ignorance and unwillingness to engage them prohibited me from fully realizing the meaning of the creed I had so strongly claimed as my own. Instead of working with the poor, vulnerable, and oppressed, in whatever experiences led them to their current set of circumstances, I was only willing to work with the needy, the deserving, and the worthy. I was willing to meet that person at the place in life that made me feel most comfortable. In a self serving and non-altruistic way, I wanted to help people as long as I maintained a reasonable balance between what I thought was a deserving population and feeling good about the work I did.

After a bit of reflection and soul searching, I began conducting research to identify the problems associated with this population. I built a relationship with an informant who took me out on the streets where I spent six months, three times a week to learn the language and culture of street level prostitution. Two days per week I spent in the library reading and learning.

I met a woman who would be eventually become my informant the day she came into our neighborhood community center for services. She needed food. It was her son's fourth birthday and she hadn't made any money on the streets. For his birthday, her son wanted a blue cake. After finding some cake mix, frosting, and food coloring to add to the standard

bag of food items, we parted. Weeks went by and I began to smile and wave when she returned to the center. She would occasionally stop and talk. On one of those occasions, I worked up enough courage to ask her to take me out on the streets and teach me about prostitution.

My days on the streets were spent learning about the people, the language, the culture, the key players, the location of drug houses, and the houses used specifically for prostitution. I learned who local pimps and drug dealers were and how to avoid contact with law enforcement.

Months after immersing myself into this culture in order to learn how help, I found it almost impossible to confront the truth and conceptualize the brutal lives women lived while involved in street level prostitution. I created false rationalizations about why women were sold their bodies, and why I would never be out there. I had to strip away the explanations I conjured up. Once I did this, I was left with the profound realization that this was a social justice cause for women whose lives were a daily nightmare and whose very existence could be snuffed out in a moment's notice with little community concern. This profound revelation moved me. Indeed, it would move even the meekest from silence and fear to voice and power. Helping these women find a voice was a kind of selfishness that allowed me to harness our collective power and not seek consent or authorization for doing so. It is what propelled me to conduct research, mobilize a community, and respond to a pressing need.

### Social Justice Action

I began by developing documents that outlined the issues of violence perpetrated against women in prostitution. For example, I found that the mortality rate for women in prostitution is 40 times the national average (U.S. Department of Justice, 1995) and that it is unlikely that any occupation or lifestyle exposes women to violence as constantly as prostitution (Fairstein, 1993). This is supported by extensive research on the prevalence of violence in this population (Baldwin, 1993; Barnard, 1993; Farely, Baral, Kiremire, & Sezgin, 1998; Hunter, 1994; Jeffries, 1997; McKeganey & Barnard, 1996; Miller, 1995; Silbert & Pines, 1982; and Weisberg, 1985).

Next I appealed to various systems including the health care system, criminal justice system, community development corporations, neighborhood groups, child protective services, alcohol and drug programs, and the mental health board. I disseminated information and provided educational seminars that spoke to both the effects and prevalence of prostitution among their clientele. I told them about the barriers prostitution presented to the fulfillment of their own institutional goals. For example, women involved in street level prostitution were least likely to receive annual check-ups and to have medical insurance. They were least likely to follow up on existing medical conditions and were more likely to use expensive emergency room services over doctor visits for both illness and injury. Many children of women in street level prostitution were high-risk babies with a disproportionate number of them experiencing medical problems as they aged (Williamson, Cluse-Tolar, & Beech, 2003).

The criminal justice system was interested to know that it costs our community approximately \$2,000 per arrest in manpower, resources, and facility use (Williamson, 1993). In addition, women in our county are arrested an average of 27 times throughout their involvement in prostitution. With over 650 arrests per year, our community is spending a considerable amount of money on an ineffective arrest and release program (Williamson, et al., 2003). The long-term effects of prostitution were even worse. One in three women serving long term prison sentences in this country were first arrested for prostitution and prostitution-related offenses (Flowers, 1998). By focusing on early intervention. That is, getting women out of street level prostitution before they committed more serious crimes, we could save lives, save families, and save money.

Community Development Corporations were interested to know that nearly 100% of women involved in street level prostitution in Toledo smoked crack cocaine and that they helped to sustain a thriving drug industry in our low-income urban neighborhoods (Williamson, et al., 2003). Why was this information appealing to them? Community Development Corporations are non-profit entities that move into low-income residential areas to rehabilitate housing and revitalize neighborhoods. They re-sell these newly rejuvenated houses to low-income residents at a lower interest rate. The purpose is to increase home ownership, which in turn reduces crime in these neighborhoods. It's difficult to meet the goals of the CDCs - increase home ownership, reduce crime, and revitalize a neighborhood - when prostitution is a constant, highly visible presence.

A report to our county Child Protective Agency that outlined the risks of prostitution to children and their families prompted the agency to conduct a one-day informal survey. It found that 33 families on their caseloads were negatively impacted by a family member's prostitution. A more telling figure can be found in our 2003 quantitative study in Toledo in which 85 percent of prostitutes interviewed had children, but only 79.5 percent currently lived with them (Williamson, et al., 2003).

Managers of transitional housings for women receiving alcohol and/or drug treatment reported that 75 percent of these

clients had been involved in prostitution. The mental health board learned that 52 percent of women involved in street level prostitution had been diagnosed with a mental illness. The most common types of illness were posttraumatic stress disorder and bi-polar disorder.

Over the next four years I continued to conduct both qualitative and quantitative research, contacting over 114 women involved in street level prostitution in our community. Overall, findings support the notion of increased victimization of this population. Eighty-five percent were involved in intimate partner violence and 72 percent experienced customer-related violence on more than one occasion. This included rape, beatings, torture, brandings, and stabbings.

Armed with this information, I sought out and received media attention, which enabled me to identify influential people with expertise or a stake in the issue to help advance the cause. Together we initiated a citywide prostitution advisory board that developed a strategic plan. We began lobbying local leaders. We worked to neutralize opposition and criticisms of the plan by talking to social service agencies and criminal justice departments and addressing their concerns. We earned the support of several neighborhood groups and gained access to key community social service agencies which gave us a seat at the collaborative table. We became a unique and necessary social service component.

We received permission from high profile social service players to coordinate their existing systems in order to better serve women in prostitution who were among their current clientele. We received seed monies from the county to use as leverage to capture more funding from the city to operate a program to reduce prostitution and violence in our community. Community Development Corporations, locally invested in neighborhoods where prostitution is most visible, are currently working to incorporate prostitution-specific interventions into their federally funded crime prevention grants. The countywide child protection agency contracted with us to work with families who have children and/or parents involved in prostitution. We were given access to in-patient drug and alcohol treatment programs, transitional houses, jails, and criminal justice treatment centers to order to respond to women involved in prostitution with specific services. These efforts took a total of ten years. The project began because of an idea, the commitment to tell the truth and the willpower to see it through. Indeed, leadership requires truth in purpose and willpower in character.

The newly formed Prostitution Advisory Board is currently a year old and has adopted a four-point plan for helping women. We are entering the second year with a focus on evaluating progress, making appropriate changes to better engage the community, and increasing program visibility. Our program relies on the kindness of larger agencies for space and, as a result, has been housed at three different sites over the years. We have yet to establish enough services to meet the need. Continuing to face critics, funding issues, and program instability, we struggle to keep our local political connections and to keep the issue in front of the public eye.

Despite shortcomings, we celebrate our successes. These successes did not come easily. I am reminded that as a university professor and community advocate for this population, it can often be stigmatizing to the helper as well as those receiving help. More than once, my commitment to the cause was tested. There were times I was pressured by powerful people outside of the university to end my research. Other times the Dean of our college and the University President were called to stop a story that was to be printed in the local newspaper regarding prostitution and involvement of respected members of the community. Other powers within the university, in their uneasiness, required that I be watched by university personnel to ensure an interview with the media "went well". On more than one occasion, I was questioned about my integrity as a researcher and my purpose for wanting to help these particular women. As a condition of using a room, I was censored by the library and not allowed to use the word *prostitution* in the title of one of my presentations. Most often, however, I have been questioned about why I would choose to spend what could be a successful career, working at an urban university, talking and writing about street women.

Despite my struggle and the struggles of my fellow advocates, we have endured and achieved, surviving the years involved in helping women in prostitution. We have received some funding to survive yet another year.

In order for women in local communities to be most effective at helping other women, we need the support of women and men at the state and national levels. This article serves as yet another platform to further our efforts to reduce violence against women. It is a plea for national support and connectedness, to link with us as we fight the good fight in our local communities. We need to know that some enlightened someone is watching, helping, lending aid, speaking for us, and supporting our efforts. This is a call to mobilize women in leadership to aid in the struggle to reduce violence in street level prostitution. Violence can be significantly impacted by a nation's response that includes national recognition that violence against women in prostitution is a hate crime, the designation of federal funds to reduce violence against women in prostitution, and the development of an annual conference devoted to issues related to prostitution.

### Violence Against Women in Prostitution as a Hate Crime

Hate crimes are crimes motivated by hostility toward the victim as a member of a group based on color, creed, gender, or sexual orientation. Hate crime laws exist because traditional law was failing to take seriously the violent victimization

against those on society's fringe. These crimes were minimized throughout the various levels of the criminal justice system from the officer who first encountered the case, to the prosecutor's decision to prosecute the case, and the judge and jury's decision to apply the law fairly. Hate crime laws are an attempt to ensure that the perpetrator is prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

Women involved in street level prostitution suffer rape, assault, torture, and murder at the hands of predators who often seek out these women for the purposes of carrying out such brutal acts. Similar to other federally identified populations, women in prostitution are targeted precisely because of the perpetrator's disdain for women and because of the victim's status in society. These perpetrators release their hatred on a portion of female society that is vulnerable and less protected by the criminal justice system. It is commonly held that police officers have a considerable amount of discretion in crimes of vice and may not choose to pursue the arrest when the victim is a prostitute. Prosecutors may not seek to try a case where the defendant is a prostitute, and the court system is often unwilling to invoke the maximum penalties allowable if the victim has been involved in prostitution.

Those who are the perpetrators of such horrific and violent crimes against women in prostitution are more often viewed as customers. These are not agreed upon assaults, but like many other hate crime assaults, the victim is led into a situation set up by the perpetrators. At the point when the victim is in a vulnerable position, the perpetrator unleashes his hatred. In the case of women involved in street level prostitution, the specific way in which the perpetrator carries out his crime is both intimate and perverse, and often particularly sexually heinous.

This is a call to adopt a unified understanding that women in prostitution who are victims of customer-related violence are victims of hate crimes. By giving it a name, we bring it into the light and can respond to the needs of women in a manner that is legitimized by society and inherently respectful to women.

#### Funding for Violence Against Women Involved in Prostitution

Hate Crime Law does not provide language that includes women who are victims of violence while in a relationship. As a result, the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) was passed by Congress. VAWA supports programs across the country that addresses the needs of women who are victims of violence. To ensure that support reached those populations of women who may be overlooked or disproportionately affected, VAWA designated specific funds to women with disabilities, women on campuses, rural women, Indian women, and older women with disabilities to ensure that they too receive a portion of much needed funding to help rebuild their lives and move forward.

Although it should be understood that violence against women is violence, no matter what the woman's lifestyle, this is often overlooked where women in prostitution are concerned. In fact, nationally we found minimal funding in the U.S. earmarked for women in prostitution and no priorities given through VAWA for women in prostitution. This is despite the growing evidence that women involved in street level prostitution suffer the most pervasive and heinous types of violence among women in society. In addition, there is growing support to suggest that women in street level prostitution are least likely to not only report violence to authorities, but are least likely to have their claims taken seriously by the criminal justice system. VAWA funds remain largely out of reach to women involved in street level prostitution. They continue to be the invisible victims of the streets to both funding bodies and policy makers.

Instead, programs interested in helping women in prostitution are left to compete for funding from VAWA's "women in general" category. When compared, women in domestic violent situations who are attempting to love their mates and care for their children, and who save their lives by seeking help to escape a violent relationship, are viewed as survivors whose intentions were merely to realize the American dream of living in a love filled relationship. It is difficult to compare this to a woman who is beaten by a customer in an attempt to sell sex, perhaps to buy drugs, or who is beaten by her pimp and needs help to escape the violence and control of which she has been held psychologically captive. Federal funds from VAWA should be specifically earmarked to help women in prostitution.

#### National Annual Conference on Prostitution

In order to expand the knowledge base, it is necessary to come together on an annual basis in a non-exclusionary manner to share knowledge, develop position papers, create policy statements, cross fertilize research efforts, and gain power to challenge injustice. Much work needs to be done and can only be done effectively in concert with other devoted researchers, practitioners, and policy makers. Our Prostitution Advisory Board will hold its first National Prostitution Conference this year.

#### Conclusion: Advocating Women in Leadership

What can one person do to make a difference? All she can and more. I know I will never again be able to build a wall of ignorance and indifference. I have learned that the sum total of my experiences out on the streets, along with the inner

transformation and perception about women in prostitution, are less important than what I decided to do with my newly found education. As Huxley cautioned, "experience is not what happens to a person, it's what the person does with the experience they had". Working on behalf of these women and the injustice they face continues to convince me that I can be a force for change and that I can contribute positive energy to the world that promotes humanity, empathy, love, and respect of all women.

Our road has been a long and arduous one, and we continue to struggle. Some voices believe that women should not place themselves in harm's way, the mentality being you get what you deserve. However, society has surpassed this line of thinking in many areas where women are concerned. We now make a formidable attempt not to blame the victim of a rape by developing the rape shield law and minimizing the cross examination in our minds related to her manner of dress and why she was even out that late or in that place at that time. Several states have instituted hate crime laws with respect to one's sexual orientation, understanding that no blame should be attributed to the victim of a violent assault simply because of their sexual orientation. It's time for women on the streets who are victims of horrendous male initiated violence to be given the same type of consideration.

The federal government should prioritize this issue. Mandatory dollars spent in the area of violence against women in prostitution would prompt agencies competing for dollars to learn about prostitution in order to win funding. As a result, women would receive the help they need in communities across the U.S. to reduce the violence in their lives.

There is power in numbers. When we as women come to accept that the oppression of women in street level prostitution is also our oppression, and that we are intimately linked to each other in a way that denies our freedom so long as their freedom is withheld, progress can be made. The level of social justice afforded even the most oppressed of human beings is a measure of our freedom. By responding with local and national initiatives, we will reduce the risks women face in prostitution and establish a new order that is inherently more respectful of all women.

In order for either our disdain or indifference to women in these situations to continue, it is necessary for us to hang on to the myth that portrays these women in the media and in our social institutions as something different, something "other" than the rest of us. In order to perpetuate the oppression of women on the streets, sources of power must be used to continue to separate us from each other. When we think about women in street prostitution, let us pretend that these women smile and cry like we do, have bad days like we do, feel like we feel, and dream like we dream.

My students often ask how I have the courage to go out on the streets and connect with women and to motivate powers that be to want to create change. I tell my up and coming social work students what Dr. Martin King told the masses; "There are not great men, but only great challenges that ordinary men take on". I would like to amend his quote to include women.

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