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Street Sex Work and Mothering

Parenting is challenging for anyone, but it is particularly so within a stressful context. Stressors known to hinder parenting include substance abuse, poverty, homelessness, poor health, victimization, and inadequate social support (Drake and Pandey, 1996; Milner and Chilamkurti, 1991; Tracy, 1994). A group of women who encounter many of these stressors, are street sex workers, individuals who exchange sex for money or drugs on the street (El-Bassul et al., 1997; Parriot, 1994; Vanwesenbeeck, 1994; Weiner, 1996). They also encounter stress from their involvement in a hazardous and stigmatized occupation (Shedlin and Oliver, 1993). While working, they must contend regularly with unsafe working conditions, victimization, difficult clients, incremental weather, police harassment, and incarcerations (Dalla, 2000; Miller and Schwartz, 1994; Sloss, 2002; Valera, Sawyer, and Schiraldi, 2001).

Within this stressful context, many women who work the street bear and raise children. Rochelle Dalla (2000) reported that of 43 current and former street sex workers in a Midwestern U.S. city, 88 percent had children, averaging 2.4 children each, and 51 percent had been pregnant while working the street. Among 91 women currently involved in sex trading at the street level in Chicago, 91 percent had children, averaging 3.4 children each, and 74 percent had experienced pregnancy following their initiation to sex trading (Sloss, 2002). Finally, in a sample of 1,963 street sex traders in New York, 69 percent had children, averaging 2.25 children each (Weiner, 1996).

The sparse research that has been conducted on mothers involved in sex trading has suggested that they encounter parenting difficulties. Although many street sex workers in the U.S. have children, very few have primary responsibility of their children (Shedlin and Oliver, 1993). In the New York study, only one fifth of the children lived with their mothers (Weiner, 1996).

In Dalla's (2000) study, only 5 of 38 street sex workers lived with their children. Those who maintain custody of their children also may have problems. Researchers found that female sex workers in Mexico City experienced shame in being mothers who engaged in sex work, often hid their work, and reported difficulties in managing their "double-lives" (Castañeda, Ortiz, Allen, García, and Hernández-Avila, 1996). Nevertheless, many reported that they engaged in sex work to provide for their children and offer them a better life.

Despite the paucity of research on women involved in both parenting and sex trading, investigators have examined how women in other professions experience and cope with dual roles (Barnett and Marshall, 1992; Hemmelgarn and Laing, 1991). While the degree to which women experience role strain varies, researchers acknowledge that balancing parenting and working is often stressful (Lepore and Evans, 1996). Managing the dual roles of parenting and street sex work may be even more stressful and problematic given the many stressors associated with this occupation. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative research was to explore female street sex workers' parenting stress and perceptions regarding the interaction of their parenting and work. Although this relationship is two-way, this article will focus primarily on how these women perceive that their street sex work affects their parenting.

Method

Participants

Participants recruited for this study were adult women who had traded sex for money on the street at least once in the previous two months, and who were mothers who had at least monthly contact with at least one biological child. They were recruited from an agency providing services to female sex workers in a large Midwestern city of the United States. They were invited to participate if they met eligibility criteria, as determined by a screening measure (questions on street sex work, parenting history, and contact with children). Of 20 women asked, none declined participation, although three failed to show for their appointments. One participant was dropped from analysis because she had engaged primarily in escort services.

The final sample consisted of 14 African-Americans, one Latina, and one Caucasian woman. Their ages ranged from 20 to 46 years with a mean age of 32. Most had experienced unstable housing in the past year, with a median of 4.5 different types of residences. All but three of the women reported being in a relationship. Participants differed in their educational attainment from having completed only elementary school to having attended college. They reported first working the street as adolescents or young adults, and had worked from seven months to 25 years. Most now worked the street independently 12 months a year, relying solely on sex work for their income. Although only one reportedly worked for a "pimp," seven said that they were currently supporting a man, and a few noted being pressured by boyfriends to trade sex.

Informants experienced an average of four pregnancies, with three women pregnant at the time of the interviews. They had given birth to between one and seven children, with an average of three. Almost half ($n = 7$) had suffered a miscarriage or stillbirth, and three had had an abortion. As a group, they had a total of 47 children. Although most informants ($n = 14$) had given up or lost custody of a child, a quarter had not been involved with child welfare and almost half ($n = 7$) had retained custody of at least one child. Only three mothers currently lived with at least one of their children. Two thirds of the children lived with relatives. Some women no longer saw at least one of their children ($n = 4$) primarily due to non-relative adoptions or caregivers living far away.

All but two mothers knew the identity of all of their children's fathers, which, in a few cases, were customers. About half of the children ($n = 24$) had fathers who had been in some way involved in their lives, from infrequent letter writing to primary parenting. Several fathers had not been available to their children due to choice, whereas others were unable to have contact with their children because of incarcerations ($n = 7$), violence ($n = 5$), or death ($n = 3$).

Procedure

Interviews were conducted at a drop-in center, and lasted between two to three hours. During each interview, the interviewer asked questions about participants' parenting and sex work, orally administered the Parenting Stress Index-Short Form (Abidin, 1990), and conducted an audiotaped semi-structured interview about participants' experiences as mothers and street sex workers. Upon completion of the interview, participants were debriefed and paid \$50.

To prepare for analysis, the interviews were transcribed, edited, and entered into QSR Nudist Software (1997). A coding system was developed inductively as outlined by Patton (1990), first through coding of the hard copies of the transcripts, and then by entering these into QSR Nudist Software to allow for further coding and for conducting cross-case and comparative analyses. To assess the reliability of the coding system and of the coders, a check-coding procedure as described by M. B. Miles and A. M. Huberman (1994) was implemented. In this procedure, two coders each independently coded 20 percent of the total number of participant responses using broad coding categories. The reliability percentage was then calculated by dividing the number of coding agreements by the total number of agreements and disagreements, and then multiplying by 100. Reliability percentages of the interviews ranged from 80 percent to 92 percent and averaged 86 percent.

Measure

The Parenting Stress Index-Short Form (PSI-SF) (Abidin, 1990) is a derivative of the Parenting Stress Index (PSI) (Abidin, 1995) and measures stress resulting from parent-child interactions. It consists of 36 statements to

which participants indicate their degree of agreement on a five-point scale. In addition to a total stress score, the PSI-SF yields four subscales: Parental Distress, Parent-Child Dysfunctional Interaction, Difficult Child, and a Defensive Responding Score. The PSI-SF has demonstrated excellent reliability and correlates highly with the PSI, which has been used extensively in research and has been found to have good validity (Abidin, 1995; Hutcheson and Black, 1996).

Results

Parenting Stress

Results from the PSI-SF revealed that informants experienced high levels of parenting stress. They obtained a mean Total Stress Score of 93.6 (SD=9.9), a score above the clinical cut-off of 90 (See Table 1). Although the mean of each domain scale was high, only the Parental Distress (PD) Scale had a mean score above the clinical cut-off. Items that received the highest scores related to personal and relational difficulties. Scores on the Parent-Child Dysfunctional Interaction (P-CDI) and Difficult Child (DC) Subscales were somewhat lower perhaps because most mothers did not have daily contact with their children.

Table 1
Results of the Parenting Stress Index - Short Form

N = 16	M	SD	No. of cases above the clinical cut-off
Parental Distress	36.5	6.6	9
Parent-Child Dysfunctional Interaction	25.8	6.1	6
Difficult Child	31.3	3.4	3
Total Stress Score	93.6	9.9	11

Perceived Impact of Street Sex Work on Parenting

When asked about the effects of their street sex work on their parenting, a few informants noted positive effects, such as being able to give their children more time and money due to their work's flexibility and financial remuneration. One woman stated that because of her experiences working the street, she was not naive about problems her children might encounter with regard to sex, drugs, and gangs, and was more prepared to handle them should they arise.

Apart from these few positive examples, the women generally believed that their street sex work was not helpful to, and even incompatible with, their parenting.

You can't do both at the same time. There's no such thing. There's no such thing as being a mother and a prostitute at the same time. I mean you can do it, but in some kind of way, it's gonna affect the kids.

Because of this perception, women tried to hide their sex work involvement from their children, to separate themselves emotionally from their work when at home, and/or to compensate by spending more time with their children or giving them gifts.

I tried to tell him, "Babe, you can't go with me cause mommy's gonna do something you can't see. I'll be back in an hour or two, and when I came back I'll give you pizza or I'll bring you some toy." And I used to do it.

Despite these efforts, informants acknowledged that their street sex work had impaired their parenting. They asserted that they had inadequate resources for their children, such as safe housing, because of their inconsistent and inadequate income. Over two-thirds indicated feeling stressed because of being unable to buy things that they or their children needed. Additionally, almost a third of the women believed that their work forced them to expect too much from their children; they often relied on their children to care for their younger siblings or themselves.

Oh, if I had a stressful day at work, when I would come in, he would always say, "Mommy, what you doin' workin'?" I would just start telling him about maybe an associate or something that got on my nerves or something, and he would say, "Oh, that's a mean lady," or something like that. And then we would just be talking and then I would say, "Oh, I'm stressed out today. Mommy doesn't feel well." And he was just affectionate. He used to always, "Oh mommy, it's gonna be better."

Informants also shared that they were unreliable and unavailable to their children due to spending time on the streets or in jail, or losing custody of their children.

It [street sex work] makes it [parenting] harder. 'Cause how can I be on the street twelve hours a day and still be a mom? That's impossible.... How you gonna raise your family and you never home.

If I wasn't on the street, you know, I'd probably have a job and have a place and he'd [son] be with me.

As already mentioned, fourteen of the informants had lost their children. Circumstances mitigating these separations included drug use, neglect, fear of neglect/abuse, homelessness, exposure to violence, and incarcerations.

Other women observed that their work had resulted in them being dishonest with their children. When possible, many women chose not to discuss their sex work involvement because of feeling ashamed, believing that their children were too young, or fearing the consequences.

No, I always avoid the subject ... I don't know, I just don't feel comfortable with talking to him about it ... I'm ashamed I guess.

She doesn't really know but when she finds out ... she'll probably hate me ... 'cause she'll feel that her mother is no good, has a pimp ... She'll feel that I wasn't mother enough to go out and get a job and take care of her the right way.

Other mothers disclosed trying to cover up or lie about their involvement in “prostitution.”

I don't tell her about my work on the streets ... 'cause one time she asked me why did I wear tight clothes? And I told her, “Because I liked to wear tight clothes.” And she said, “Those men be looking at you all strange.” And uh, so I just told her, I say well, “Sometimes I dress like this to get attention from guys so that they'll buy me what I want.” I didn't tell her, ya know just straight out tell her. And then I, I told her that uh, I use drugs and that I was sick and that if I'm dressed like that, the guys will buy it. So that's all I tell her.

Finally, informants disclosed that their involvement in street sex work had resulted in their children being exposed to negative influences, such as the sex trade, drugs, and violence. Despite their desire to shelter their children, women sometimes felt compelled to disclose their sex work and drug use because their children had heard people gossiping about them, had been asking pertinent questions, had observed their mother on the streets, and/or “deserved to know.”

He knows that I'm workin' the streets. He knows 'cause my mother told him all of that. He knows. One night he asked me and I told him the truth ... I couldn't lie to him. “Yeah, mommy works the streets. Mommy gets money for drugs.”

He knows that I'm a prostitute. He knows I use drugs. I'm his Mama and I would always tell him things 'cause I didn't want other little kids to say, “Oh, you mama's a hoe.” He'd just be devastated. You know, they'd have something back to say... I guess I always gave him a defense. I didn't want

them to be timid. I didn't want them to be mad, but I didn't want them to be weak and timid.

Mothers differed in how much they hid their sex work activities. Some children reportedly watched their mothers preparing for work, strolling, interacting with clients, and/or taking money from men. Given this exposure, many mothers believed that they set a poor example.

Well, you know, when you a parent, when your children see you do something positive, they feel it's all right. But when they see you do something negative, they also think it's all right because you're doin' it. You know what I mean? How can I, you know, how can I stand and protect you [my child] turnin' a date when I do? You see what I'm sayin'? 'It's hard to get you to understand that this is a bad thing. Just because I'm doin' it don't make it right.' But it's hard to get that point across 'cause this [me working the street] is what they're seein'.

Mothers perceived that because of their street sex work, their children had experienced anxiety (for their mother's safety), sadness and anger.

[My work on the street] makes them sad.], especially cause he's at the age that he knows. It gets him mad and sad, but he tries to deal with it.

He says, "Momma, people get to talkin' about you [mothers' involvement in street sex work], you know, that really hurts me, you know."

Although some mothers believed that their children accepted their work, others shared that they disagreed with their sex work involvement, and some that they would refuse to talk about it.

When I try to talk to her about it, she clams up on me and she'll go, "I just thought we'd talk later on it," and I'll say, "You don't wanna talk about it?" And she'll say, "Not right now." But everytime, it's not right now.

Informants also shared ways in which their unborn children had been affected. Three mothers disclosed that their infants had died because of being assaulted while working the streets.

[Because I was raped] He would have had brain damage and wouldn't have been able to walk or move his arms. I was raped and beat with a two by four metal pipe.... It was April 3rd. I was two days late [past the due date]... if I hadn't been working the streets that morning, he [the perpetrator] wouldn't have been able to come up behind me and put me to sleep [knock me unconscious].

Many women also admitted that they had exposed their unborn infants to harm because of inadequate prenatal care, insufficient rest, and/or exposure to violence and disease.

Oh, I was real bad because um, sometimes I would um, have sex without condoms, and sometimes I would have sex rough, and I would be bleeding, and I was six months pregnant. It's all types of things. I wouldn't go to the doctor. I didn't have no prenatal care at all.

During the interview, informants were not specifically asked about the impact of their drug use on parenting. Nevertheless, they frequently spoke about their drug use and it became apparent that their drug use and street sex work were interrelated. For example, many participants worked the street partially to fund their drug use, and used drugs as a way to tolerate and cope with their sex trading. Given this association, it was difficult to untangle the effects of the sex work from the effects of their drug use. However, two women indicated that they believed it was their drug use, more than their street sex work that had impaired their parenting.

I don't really put it [parenting difficulties] on the street [sex work]. The street just get me what I want to get – the drug. I really put it on the drug.

Similarly, when asked at another point in the interview about their parenting regrets, more informants indicated remorse about having used drugs while pregnant and parenting than having engaged in street sex work. They said that they felt guilty, ashamed, and regretful of their drug use because of its effects on their parenting, including being neglectful, impatient, and unavailable. They recognized the incompatibility of drugs and parenting.

You can't have a successful life [including parenting] and do drugs too. It's not gonna work. The two just don't coincide. That's like, you know, sending heaven and hell together.

One woman stated her belief that it was her drug use that had resulted in her losing her children.

Drugs is what made me end up losing my kids, so it affected my ability to be a mom drastically and not be a mom.

Perceived Impact of Dual Roles on Mothers

Throughout the interviews, mothers expressed shame, guilt, and sadness because of how they believed that they and their work may have harmed their children. They also expressed anxiety and fear that their children might be hurt while they were working (due to inadequate child care) or that they might be

hurt themselves, and thus unable to care for their children.

But I thought at the point where he [customer] was strangling me, all I could think about was seeing 'em. I'd never see my kids no more. And I hadn't thought about my kids. I hadn't seen my kids in a month. Outside getting high and all that stuff. And all I was thinkin' about, I'd never get that last chance to see my babies no more. I thought about how they feel not having a mamma. My kids growing up, you know, "My mamma dead." You know, "My mamma dead."

Informants who had lost their children shared feeling regret and grief because of this separation. They disclosed that following the loss of children, they felt depressed, suicidal, angry, and anxious, and they experienced the loss of their identity and responsibility as mothers. These reactions appeared to play a role in increasing their drug use and time working the street.

Well it hurt a lot... And once they took her away it's like it just messed with my head ... it made it worser, because she wasn't there. Again I started getting high. It's like just the fact that they, you know somebody came and took a child away from me... So I just stay high all the time, for a long time, just constantly stay high just to hide the thought that she wasn't there. Then I stop hanging in the house, there wasn't no reason to be there ... she wasn't there ... I'm getting high ... so I just go working [the street].

I had all that free time. You know I didn't have no responsibilities. And then like I say, I didn't know no one in the projects, so I had to learn to, you know, I had to accept that apartment, and I wasn't ready for that. So I got high to stay out ... So then I would basically sleep once a week and up the rest of the time getting high and working the streets. Now then I worked all the time.

Given that a few informants perceived street sex work and parenting to be incompatible, and most believed street sex work to have primarily negative effects on their parenting, it follows that they might not want to continue managing both roles. In fact, when asked about future goals, half of the mothers explicitly expressed wanting to discontinue street sex work, whereas almost half (n = 7) indirectly implied this intention by stating their goal to become clean from drugs and obtain an alternative job. No women expressed the desire to stop parenting; rather twelve women explicitly spoke about their desire to become better mothers and more involved in parenting.

*Well, I would like to have a job [legal job] and not be working the streets.
I'd be off drugs and be raising my children.
Yeah. I would like to get all my kids back together you know, take care of*

them. But I have to get myself cleaned up first before I do that. I would get myself a job [legal job]. Show 'em that I'm doing myself, you know, getting myself up too.

Discussion

Prior research has documented high rates of pregnancy and parenting among women involved in street sex work. Not unlike other working women, these mothers must simultaneously manage their occupational and parenting responsibilities. It is clear from this study that informants experienced difficulties in parenting while involved in street sex work.

Informants revealed clinical levels of parenting stress that were higher than other groups of at-risk mothers, such as adolescents, teen wards of the state, and low-income African American single mothers (Budd, 1996; Hutcheson and Black, 1996; Nitz, Ketterlinus, and Brandt, 1995). However, their level of stress was comparable to other samples of drug using or recovering mothers (Harmer, Sanderson and Mertin, 1999; Kelley, 1998), and to another sample of sex workers (Sloss, 2002). Unfortunately, high levels of parenting stress are associated with parenting difficulties (Burrell, Thompson and Sexton, 1994; Crnic and Acevado, 1995).

One source of parenting difficulties for informants in this study was the negative impact of their street sex work on their parenting. They claimed that their work resulted in them being unavailable to their children, being unable to provide adequately, expecting too much, being dishonest or secretive, setting a poor example, and causing emotional and physical harm. Because of these effects, a few women commented on the incompatibility of street sex work and parenting, and almost all indicated their desire to discontinue working the street.

These parenting problems did not seem to originate from a lack of concern for their children. Rather, informants revealed that they cared for their children and valued their parenting role, a finding consistent with research in other western countries (Castañeda et al., 1996; Dalla, 2001; Hardman, 1997; Perkins and Bennett, 1985). Because of their desire to be good mothers, these women shared feeling inadequate, guilty, and ashamed of their parenting.

There are several reasons why street sex work may negatively affect parenting. First, it is a means of making money that is often inconsistent, unpredictable, and time-consuming. Second, street sex work is dangerous and involves the threat of victimization (Miller & Schwartz, 1995). Third, street sex work is illegal in many countries and can lead to arrests and incarcerations (Sloss, 2002). Fourth, street sex work is a stigmatized profession, thus decreasing the likelihood that sex traders will be open about their work and receive adequate services and support (Shedlin & Oliver, 1993). Finally, street sex work is related to other parenting risk factors, such as the use of drugs, which seems to provide motivation for, and a means of coping with, sex work

(Graham and Wish, 1994; Potterat, Rothenberg, Muth, Darrow and Phillips-Plummer, 1998).

These negative working conditions do seem to make parenting difficult and perhaps incompatible with street sex work. But is this incompatibility inevitable? The parenting problems noted by informants in this study might be reduced if mothers involved in street sex work were able to learn to manage their dual roles more effectively and/or if their working conditions were improved.

The first approach to dealing with this apparent incompatibility focuses on helping mothers reduce dual-role stress. One of the reasons these mothers may not manage their dual roles well is that they are exposed to so many stressors while having limited resources. Karen Hardman (1997) found that a group of mothers who were sex workers in England felt helpless to improve their parenting until they received practical help, such as welfare, parent training, health care, housing, therapy, education, and childcare. Mothers who are street sex workers may need extensive services, such as case management to improve their financial and living situations. Given this sample's desire to stop using drugs, it is clear that they also need effective drug treatment. One informant advised to other mothers, "There's nothing more important than raising those babies.... Doesn't matter what your obsession or compulsion [including drug addiction] is. Just seek help to overcome it."

Female street sex workers who are mothers may need various parenting services, including prenatal and postnatal care, parent training, family therapy, parent support, and/or parent mentoring (Sloss, 2002). These women may benefit from improved social support and the opportunity to "get together as mothers, as single mothers taking care of their kids." These mothers also might experience less dual-role strain if they acquired good, affordable, and accommodating childcare (Sloss and Harper, 2004).

To enable mothers who are street sex worker to use services, it is essential that they be relevant, accessible, non-threatening, and non-punitive. Women who live with children must not fear that their children will be removed from them should they access services. If they do lose their children, mothers should receive compassion and support in coping with this loss constructively, instead of by increasing their drug use and street sex work. Informants in this sample also gave specific advice to child welfare workers, including that they be more responsive, communicative, collaborative, and helpful to mothers.

The second approach to dealing with the parenting and street sex work incompatibility involves improving working conditions. Female sex workers in this and other studies indicated their tendency to lie about and hide their work from their families (Castañeda et al., 1996; Hardman, 1997), and not access needed services due to stigmatization (Sloss, 2002; Weiner, 1996). If sex work was less stigmatized, these mothers might experience less role strain, receive more social support, increase their service use, work more safely, and be less likely to lose their children. Their risks might also be reduced if prostitution was

decriminalized and greater measures were taken to prevent their exposure to victimization.

Alternatively, the apparent parenting and street sex work incompatibility could be addressed by enabling mothers to exercise choice about their sex work involvement. Almost all of the mothers in this sample wanted to stop working the street, a result also found in other studies (Dalla, 2000; Sloss, 2002). When asked what they would advise other women in similar situations, several informants suggested that women who do not yet have children not get pregnant until they are no longer using drugs and working the street, and that mothers working the street abandon this profession.

Don't not have a dream just because you're doing this [sex work]. You still have the right to have a dream, to want something better. You are not doomed to this [sex work] if you don't wanna be.

Most informants insisted that sex work and drug use were not worth their risk and costs, particularly to children. They advised mothers to place their children first in their lives.

Get your life together [get off drugs and away from the streets] and be a mother to your kids because 'fore you know it, they be grown and it be too late.... Get your shit together 'fore it's too late.

You can't have a successful life [including parenting] and do drugs too ... You eventually have to make a choice. I would just say make a choice, make sure that your choice be you and your kids whatever you choose to do.

Transitioning out of street sex work would require multiple and coordinated services (Dalla, 2000; Farley and Barkan, 1998; Sloss, 2002). Women in this sample emphasized their need for drug treatment, education, housing, and employment.

To summarize, women who work the street are not sex workers alone, but hold multiple roles, one of which is that of being mothers. Because of their involvement in street sex work, these mothers risk difficulties with, and the loss of, this role. Effort should be made either to increase the compatibility of street sex work and parenting, or to enable these mothers to access alternative employment. Society must recognize the importance of their parenting role to themselves and their families, and empower them to retain or regain this role and achieve their parenting goals.

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