



Drawing on the Perspectives of Street-Based Sex Workers to Inform Prostitution Policy and Program Development

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ELICITING STREET-BASED SEX WORKER PERSPECTIVES TO INFORM PROSTITUTION POLICY DEVELOPMENT

This manuscript reports on a study based on the artwork and narratives of 17 women attending YANA Place, a drop-in center for women currently and formerly engaged in street-based sex work in Baltimore, Maryland. As part of an exploratory study designed to inform the development of an alternative criminal justice response to the illegal exchange of sex for money generally referred to as prostitution, we employed a visual methodology (Prosser, 2011) in which study participants created poster-sized collages to illustrate their hopes and aspirations for the future. The method was chosen specifically for its potential in highlighting the voices of women engaged in prostitution who are often excluded from the development of policy and programs, despite its impact on their lives and opportunities (Capous-Desyllas & Forro, 2014; Cheng, 2011).

Women in our study described a desire to lead an ideal or better life in contrast to their experiences engaging in street-based prostitution. Participants' visions of their ideal lives centered on several themes: achieving good health and beauty, reuniting with family, employment, and stable housing. However, current policies are either punitive or combine punishment with mandated services that are primarily therapeutic and predicated on a victim-claiming model (Corrigan & Shdaimah, 2016; Wiechelt & Shdaimah). Our findings point to the inadequacy of such policies that focus on individual behavior to the exclusion of structural factors (including criminal justice sanctions).

Backdrop

This study was part of exploratory, descriptive research that emerged in response to Baltimore City's efforts to create an alternative criminal justice response to the sale of sex for money, which is a misdemeanor in Maryland punishable by up to a year's incarceration and a

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\$500 fine (Maryland Criminal Law Code §11-306, 2014). These efforts were initiated due to complaints by a number of community groups in high-prostitution neighborhoods (Peirce, 2008; Shdaimah, 2010). Stakeholders did not challenge the legal status of prostitution, but rather sought to create a response that more effectively promoted desistance than incarceration and fines (Abell Foundation, n.d.). However, they knew little about the target population, their motivations for selling sex, or about what services or programs might best facilitate their stated policy goals. The authors, who were asked to join the stakeholder committee that created the diversion program, were troubled by the absence of the program's target population from these conversations. This project was designed to bring these missing voices, albeit mediated through the researchers, into the conversation in order to better inform the resulting policy.

Our selection of methods and focus for the research were grounded in social work ethics (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008; Oleson, 2011; Kapur, 2002), including the value of hearing from those people who are most likely to be affected by a policy out of respect for people's essential dignity and humanity, a belief in self-determination, and a desire to avoid unintended harm. Most of the literature on prostitution and sex work, which focuses on danger or harm, is within a framework of control or rescue (Dalla, 2007; Grant, 2014; Shdaimah & Leon, forthcoming; Wahab & Panichelli, 2013). We join a growing body of literature, including the critics cited here, that seeks to remedy this disparity (Burnes, Long, & Schept, 2012), often by including the voices of sex workers on a variety of topics that they deem important (i.e. Bergquist, 2015; Lutnick & Cohan 2009). To be clear, we do not intend to belittle or negate the host of problems that many of the women in our sample and women in street-based sex work face, including stigmatization and criminalization of their work. However, we seek to

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4 explore women's agency in identifying and addressing the concerns which with they grapple, the
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6 resources and strengths that possess, and their visions and hopes for their lives regardless (or in
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8 light of) the obstacles they face (McMillen, Morris, & Sherraden, 2004).
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11 Arts-based participatory methods are well-suited to explore goals that respondents have
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13 for themselves. Such methods are often used with groups whose voices are absent from policy-
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15 making or who may be hard to reach or engage (Hergenrather, Rhodes, Cowan, Bardhoshi, &
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17 Pula, 2009; Rice, Primak, & Girvin, 2013), including sex workers (Cheng, 2013; Desyllas,
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19 2014). Visual expressions allow respondents to share values, thoughts, and desires that may be
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21 difficult to articulate with words (Plunkett, Leipert, & Ray, 2013; Prosser, 2011). One
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23 photovoice study of 11 Portland Oregon respondents found a wider range of agency and choice
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25 than is generally reported among sex workers, which the author attributed, in part, to her use of
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27 photovoice (Desyllas, 2014, p. 248).
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33 In this study, we asked our respondents to reflect on their reasons for engaging and
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35 exiting prostitution at different points in their life, and what concerns and hopes they had
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37 regarding court-based programming. Additionally, we asked the participants to share their hopes
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39 and dreams through a modified photovoice method which relied on collages instead of
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41 photographs. In this article, we report data from this last question; we have reported other
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43 findings elsewhere (e.g. Wiechelt & Shdaimah, 2011; Shdaimah & Wiechelt, 2012).
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47 Before proceeding to our methods, we wish to clarify our choices of terminology in light
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49 of highly contentious debates. While we have our own opinions on these debates, as qualitative
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51 researchers, we honor our respondents' self-conception and choice of language. Participants in
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53 our study saw sex work as something that they performed as-needed rather than as an identity or
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4 employment. For this reason, when talking specifically about our study we use person-first
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6 language that suggests an activity rather than a role or a profession. We generally use the term
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8 prostitution rather than sex work for several reasons. Sex work is a broader category and
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10 encompasses activities that are legal and illegal in Maryland; in this study we focused on
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12 individuals engaging in types of sex work that are criminalized as this group was the target
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14 population for the contemplated program. We believe that it is important to underscore the
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16 existing legal construction of criminalization so as not to obscure or downplay the punitive and
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18 surveillance aspects that many of our study respondents face and which often negatively impact
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20 their opportunities. When discussing other studies, however, we employ the language used by the
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22 researchers in those studies.
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Methods

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30 Our research was informed by the principles of photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997). Like
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32 other visual methods, photovoice is predicated on the idea that people are the experts in their
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34 own lives and experiences (Novek, Morris-Oswald, & Menec, 2012). Typically photovoice asks
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36 respondents to take photographs around a theme that is either developed with the respondents or
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38 by the researchers (Plunkett, et al., 2013). The photographs are part of data that researchers
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40 analyze, and study respondents' participation in the research process is enhanced by discussion
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42 and interpretation of the photos. Researcher and respondents are "co-learners" in a more
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44 equitable process of analysis and interpretation, although the extent and type of participation
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46 varies widely (Hergenrather, et al., 2009, p. 697). Photovoice is also potentially an action
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48 research method, such that study respondents and researchers can decide how and when to use
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50 the products of their research.
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Prior to initiating our study, we attended a drop-in session at YANA Place and asked all of the women who were present for feedback on our research proposal. All attendees who were present participated in the discussion, vetted our research questions and guided us on how to go about asking them. They also suggested that we not provide them with cameras that they would be responsible for returning to YANA Place, but that we instead conduct an activity that could be completed on site. Together we devised an arts-based alternative of creating collages using art materials and magazines. According to the revised study plan, respondents would discuss the collages in a focus group that took place during and after the creation of the collages, which could be displayed at YANA Place. This is the project that was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of the University of Maryland, Baltimore. The study's strengths-based focus on women's hopes and dreams is notable, because it differs from the risk and harm framework that predominates research with women engaged in prostitution and marginalized groups more generally.

Study Site

YANA, which is an acronym for You Are Never Alone, was a non-profit organization that served cis and transgender women currently and formerly currently engaged in prostitution primarily through its drop-in center "YANA Place," located in a low-income Baltimore neighborhood in proximity to a number of mental health and addiction treatment centers. Between 4-12 women dropped in on any given day in order to eat, use bathroom facilities, and obtain clothing, or for fellowship, case management, counseling, and condoms. Women hear about YANA through word of mouth or via street outreach (Wiechelt & Shdaimah, 2015). The

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population that attends YANA is the same population that the stakeholder group deemed most similar to the target program group, which are women arrested for street-based prostitution.

Research Sample and Procedures

All individuals who dropped in at YANA place on the dates we conducted focus groups were invited to participate in the study and everyone accepted the invitation. This manuscript draws on data collected from the 10 respondents who participated in focus groups, four of whom also participated in an interview. Although we did not gather demographic data from the focus group participants, our interview sample included respondents ranging in age from 22 to 55.¹ Five identified as White or Caucasian and six as African American or Black. They reported between 9-15 years of education; some had some high school education, three had a high school diploma or GED, and three had some college education. The age of initial engagement in prostitution ranged from age 12 to age 36. YANA staff confirmed that these demographics reflected their regular clientele. They are also similar to the demographic makeup of women who are arrested for prostitution in Baltimore (Shdaimah & Bailey-Kloch, 2015).

All focus groups were conducted in a room at YANA Place with no one except the research and study participants present to ensure confidentiality. Participation was anonymous as we did not ask or receive any identifying information about any of the participants. We use pseudonyms that were either provided by the respondents or chosen by us if respondents did not provide one. Although we employed a consent process, we did not document consent so as to prevent participants from being identified through signed consent forms. We recorded all focus groups and interviews using digital audio recorders; these were transcribed verbatim. Participants

¹This information was only collected systematically in the interviews.

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were asked to create an artistic piece that shows dreams or hopes that they have for themselves for the future or a strength that they want to share. No further instruction about the necessary contents of their piece was provided so as not to limit creativity.

We provided art materials such as glue, glitter, pipe cleaners, popsicle sticks, markers, colored pencils, and crayons, and magazines.² Respondents chose their materials and images and were given approximately one half hour to create the collages. Informal conversation took place while the participants were creating them; some continued to work on the collages once we began the focus group discussion. After the pieces were completed, the facilitators asked each respondent to tell the group about her artwork, how it showed what she wishes for herself and a strength that she has. We photographed all of the collages. Some of the respondents asked us to retain the original collages, which we did, and the rest were hung on the walls at YANA Place.

As is typical in visual methodology, data consisted of both the collages and focus group transcripts. In analyzing the data, we draw primarily on our respondents' own descriptions of their work and explicit references embedded in the collages. The authors and a research assistant coded the transcripts independently, and then met to discuss and create a unified coding scheme through dialogue and consensus (Padgett, 2008). In order to ensure inter-rater reliability, the authors reviewed their initial groupings (Maxwell, 2013). The unified coding scheme included the themes reported here: hopefulness, home and hearth (family/safe haven), and normative visions of health, beauty, and success. We specifically refrain from using psychological tools and methods to analyze the collages, which would be counter to the emic perspective at the heart of

² Magazines covered a variety of genres and included Ms., National Geographic, People, Good Housekeeping, and Glamour.

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participatory research and arts-based methodology. We have named the collages using words or phrases from respondents' descriptions of them

Findings

Home and Hearth

We use the expression "home and hearth" to describe a broader theme of security and warmth. Women in our sample depicted a literal and figurative expression of family experiences in a safe place. They were often connected to descriptions of peace or quiet, and a sense of respite. In the following subsections we describe family and peace/quiet as two important aspects of home and hearth discussed by our respondents.

Family. Many of our respondents mentioned family members. While some of the family interactions were difficult and had in fact precipitated women's engagement in prostitution, others mentioned wanting to repair or protect relationships, particularly with their children. Betti, a 34 year-old White woman, was trying to rebuild her relationship with her two teenage daughters who were living with her mother (See figure 1).

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

After a stint in an inpatient drug rehabilitation program, Betti participated in an outpatient clinic and dropped in at YANA Place between groups. "M[y collage] is something that is true to my heart, because I'm trying to build a relationship with my daughters³ and I'm thinking about them." In her interview, Betti described her frustration with her limited financial resources, which hampered her ability to provide her daughters with clothes and material goods that they

³The names on the collage that have been covered for confidentiality are Betti's real name (at the top) and the names of her daughters (one in each heart).

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wanted. She was unsure how else to connect with them, given her absence from their lives while in active addiction or during her rehabilitation.

Darla, a focus group participant who did not provide demographic information, described her collage (see figure 2) as “just a little of everything,” including “a beautiful vacation spot, of course. I love animals. And, I definitely need to improve my health in exercise.” Her collage is displayed below.

[FIGURE 2 HERE]

Nearly all the Darla’s photos were connected to children. One was a picture of a breastfeeding mother and child: “I always admire...what [mothers] do with kids and how they treat them in other countries.” Another picture, which she did not comment on, shows a celebrity couple holding their young children. Of a third picture, she said it “reminds me a lot of my daughters when I look at it...the eyes and the freckles.” She chose the car because her eldest daughter “is getting her license here in a few months,” indicating her connection to her children and what goes on in their lives. When asked about the pregnant cartoon figure, she said “that made me think of health and made me think that maybe I could get pregnant and feel that good about my body.”

Darla thinks not only about her own children, who are teenagers, but also looks to idyllic images of pregnancy, breastfeeding, and caring for young children. She did not reference these as experiences that she had herself when pregnant or raising young children, but rather images that resonated with her or to which she aspired. Women in our sample had clear ideas and hopes for their own families and they were drawn to images that showed happy or peaceful families.

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Safe haven. Deeply connected to discussions of family were respondents' desire for stability and safety. This sometimes came as a description of a house where they could live, as depicted in Elana's drawing below (Figure 3). Elana (a 55 year-old White woman) had just started her collage when we began our group discussion. She explained what her picture represented and what else she planned to put on her collage. The physical house was just part of her vision of home.

[FIGURE 3 HERE]

Elana wanted to be with her children in a beautiful and safe environment. Her sense of home was deeply intertwined with her vision of recovery. She stated "I would put a picture of a good mom on there. And I would also put my kids, my good kids. I would also put a house on here, and we have a house that represents being clean and sober. Next time, I can make something a little more like a collage to show that and that I love them." Elana went on to explain that her vision of home also nurtured her hopes in bad times, and that she wanted her children and others to know that she aspired to a quiet and secure family life:

This has been in my head and whenever things went bad, that's where I went. I'd like everybody to see where it is. When they look at me, they go, "well, where are you?" I'm in a nice place, but a lot of time, they don't think so. It's sunny, there's a mountain and a lake down there where you can go swimming.... In the pond, you could go swimming and fishing. And there's a nice wrap-around porch that's screened with flowers and trees. It was a survival skill; I had to think of this place. I'm still working on the rest of my piece, but this is what I wanted this to represent...that idea.

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Elana's idyllic image of a peaceful home was echoed by many of our respondents in the photovoice and interview components of the study. Often, these descriptions of family, quiet, and security were both what enabled and were a result of recovery from addiction and, sometimes, trauma. Our respondents' images of good health, beauty, and exercise were remarkably similar in that they were mutually reinforcing with recovery and reintegration with idealized images.

Visions of Health, Beauty, and Success

Respondents' collages featured health and beauty. Nancy shared a collage entitled "My Dream." "I want to be beautiful, healthy, and I want to work. That's pretty much it." She chose the pictures for her collage without much need for thought "Because I know what I want, and I want this. It was easy once I saw the pictures." Like Carolyn, these respondents connected health and beauty to other facets of their lives and hopes such as health, motherhood, and work:

I'm only 23 years old, and I want to be a mother. And, [what] a lot of people don't know about me is that I'm really athletic. I'd like to continue playing soccer...I played for 18 years. Then I hurt my knee and it got away from me because I got on drugs and stuff and medication. But, that used to be one of my dreams to be a professional soccer player.

Carolyn's hopes contain an element of getting on track, or getting back on track, to another point in her life where she had aspirations that seemed attainable. While she describes getting derailed from her hopes and dreams by addiction, they remain possible for her future.

Similarly, Debbie saw good nutrition, health, and beauty as "Part of Recovery" (Figure 4) - the title of her collage.

[FIGURE 4 HERE]

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Debbie was one of several respondents for whom drug addiction and prostitution were intertwined as a part of her life that she was trying to move away from. Her collection represented both her vision of, and her path to, recovery.

I put down all the things I like to do and want to get back. I love perfume, makeup, fashion, and to be healthy. These are the problems that can go on with your body: like acne, breast health, skin, better sex enhancements, OB/GYN, cancer, abuses, smarter sweets, colon cancer, fertility, liposuction, sleep, breast cancer, all kinds of things. And, this is representing good health, and this is something that I like to do...I like recipe books.

Debbie noted health problems that many people face. Health problems often came up in interviews and observations. Many of the YANA attendees, including our respondents, suffered from a variety of chronic and acute health problems. These included hepatitis, dental problems, HIV, over/underweight, and mental health concerns. Thus visions of good health in the collages contrasted sharply with the frequent discussions about these health concerns that often centered around advice-seeking and -giving.

Visible but Far Away Visions of the Future

Perhaps unsurprisingly in a study focused on hopes and dreams, our respondents shared visions that were positive and hopeful. Contrary to the majority of literature that depicts those engaged in street-based prostitution as despairing, pain-filled, and targets of disease and violence, we found hopefulness, resilience, and strong survival skills. While women in our sample saw their dreams as attainable, it was not always clear how they would actualize them. They also appeared to be thinking far off in the future, unlikely to materialize their dreams soon.

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4 Kara, a 48 year old White woman, presented her collage (Figure 5) to the focus group:
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6 “This is my pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Here we go everybody, ain’t it beautiful? My
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8 pot of gold is at the end of that rainbow. That rainbow never ends, so I will always get that pot of
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10 gold wherever I go.”
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12 [FIGURE 5 HERE]
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15 At first glance, Kara’s pot of gold looks small and far away. However, she sees it as attainable.
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18 I think that’s what I’m going to get. My life is going to come out good. I’ll be 49 this
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20 May and I still got a lot of hopes for my life. I have been abused a lot in my life,
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22 [inaudible]. Never give up, my dad always told me that.
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25 Kara had been a YANA client off and on for many years, and suffered from a range of health
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27 concerns including Hepatitis C which had harmed her liver. On one of her visits, she had just left
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29 the emergency room after being badly beaten by her boyfriend. However, Kara was considered
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31 one of the older and wiser women attending YANA Place, and was resourceful in getting
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33 services to meet her medical needs. Her general optimism was striking in the face of the many
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35 hardships she had encountered throughout her life, which also provide a window onto the limited
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37 choices she faces for employment and housing given her current state of health, physical
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39 appearance, and criminal record.
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44 Vu, an African American women in her 40’s, asked to be photographed holding her
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46 collage (Figure 6). The collage showed both her past and her future. Vu’s hopes are tied to
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48 housing.
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Like Kara, Vu explicitly said “my hopes and dreams are reachable.” Unlike Kara, Vu’s collage references her difficult past. The writing at the bottom explains what the collage depicts:

The first picture is of a face with red tears, which symbolizes the blood from the abuse that I’ve suffered. And, everything else is black because it was a dark time in my life. And from sadness to happiness, there is where the colors come in, and I’m smiling instead of frowning. Life is just so much better. It’s like a rainbow, that’s how I feel inside now...colorful.

Vu connects her future “happiness” to housing. She sees YANA as a bridge from one to the other and the non-judgmental welcoming space that YANA Place provides is a source of hope. Vu is in a transitional stage and while she believes that her dreams are attainable like the pot of gold at the end of Kara’s rainbow, they still feel far away.

I’m not in a dream home yet, but I’m no longer homeless...here, you see, it’s a bridge, where I’ve slept under bridges with different people. There’s a lot of people that sleep under bridges and [are] on-the-ground homeless. It says, living on the streets, under bridges, and then you see one house and even these houses are abandominiums. That’s why I have them dark, because sometimes you come from the shelter, only to abandominiums, which is an abandoned house, basically. And, it’s...far away and that symbolizes me not having a home and it’s so unreachable...But, now on the other side, you see my house is full of colors and structure, and you have the green grass and the colorful trees. It’s just the way that I want to live my life, colorful and happy.

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Another striking aspect of Vu's collage is that she sees herself as one of many. She connects her individual experience to the plight of others who must seek shelter in "abandominiums" or under bridges. Though her plight is shared, in her dream home she is alone.

Discussion

A combination of systemic violence, poverty, ill health, addiction, and prostitution shaped the lives and circumstances of the women in our sample, all of whom described a longing for basic health, security, belonging, and stability. For example, the creator of the "My Dream" collage had been a college soccer player who suffered an injury. While addiction to drugs that resulted from treatment of her injury put her off of her "expected" path of college graduation, employment, and beauty, she still hoped to achieve these goals. Some of our other respondents had insurmountable obstacles to their future success placed in front of them before they could even begin their journey. The violence and exploitation as well as the social and educational deprivation that Kara experienced rendered her ineligible for any path to traditional social success. However, Kara was very successful in surviving the streets of Baltimore and managing to meet her extensive medical needs, in part through prostitution (Shdaimah & Leon, 2015). She also had a network of social service resources that she successfully navigated. Nevertheless, she longed to be safe, healthy, and secure for, despite her street success, she became sick with HIV, and was currently alcohol and drug dependent, battered, homeless, and with had a precarious social network.

Like any study, our research has limitations. Although typical of arts-based methodology (Hergenrather, et al., 2009), the small sample size limits the generalizability of our findings. It is also likely biased by the fact that we chose to focus on those who attend YANA Place, where

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4 attendees seek assistance and therefore may not otherwise have networks of family, friends and
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6 community. This means that those who drop in at YANA Place may be a particularly
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8 marginalized and under-resourced segment of those who engage in street-based prostitution.
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10 Those who attend YANA Place also engage largely in what is often called “survival” sex work;
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12 their motivation for engaging in prostitution is to meet their basic needs of shelter, clothing, food
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14 and, often, addiction (Wiechelt & Shdaimah, 2015). Their work is therefore likely more
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16 dangerous, less remunerative, and more stigmatized than other forms of sex work (Weitzer,
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18 2009), and so the modesty of women’s hopes and dreams may be informed by relatively greater
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20 needs and difficult life circumstances. This study cannot speak to the hopes and dreams of men
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22 engaged in prostitution, nor those who do not have such difficult backgrounds and limited
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24 opportunities. Since the drop-in center is voluntary, it is also not constrained and informed by
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26 program rules and coercive factors that often come with mandatory court- or probation-affiliated
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28 programs.
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34 Our respondents’ desire for a quiet life of family, health, and security situate them as part
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36 of normative discourse. It is the context of our study respondents’ lives that makes the
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38 juxtaposition of these hopes and dreams with the reality of stigma, marginalization, and violence
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40 so jarring. These are not, and should not be viewed as, mutually exclusive features. However,
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42 portrayals that center on disease, nuisance, and deviance often preclude viewing women engaged
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44 in prostitution and other forms of sex work as beings who have multiple roles (mother, sister,
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46 daughter) and a variety of aspirations (such as family, beauty, career, and health).
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51 Cheng’s (2013) photovoice study of sex workers who were longtime residents and
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53 workers in a red light district in Seoul, Korea that was slated for destruction with changes in city
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planning and new prostitution laws had similar findings. Her photovoice project with the women of her study revealed policymakers' callousness, a combination of economic pressures of gentrification, and failure to recognize sex workers as community members:

Like the women in Cheng's study, our respondents' desires are relatively mundane (pets, jobs, cars, and careers). Many of their goals, such as the desire for beauty, family, marriage, and a home in the suburbs, are related to gendered expectations and norms.

The hopes and dreams of the women in our sample must be viewed within the fuller context of their lives. Many of their goals feel simultaneously possible and remote. This is often because their financial situations, health, or addiction, are significant hurdles, particularly for those who wish to exit prostitution (Jackson, 2014; Manopaiboon, et al., 2003) They are also coveted precisely because other aspects of women's lives are, in other ways, marked by the violence of poverty and hardship. Health features prominently against a backdrop of limited health care and serious health concerns; seeking the respite of a quiet, peaceful, and stable home figures against a backdrop of housing instability and homelessness.

Relationships with family seem to be of central importance to the women in our sample. They highlighted restoration of family connections, in particular their roles as mothers, in their descriptions of their hopes and dreams. This corroborates what other researchers have found in the context of women engaging in prostitution (Dalla, 2006; Shdaimah & Leon, 2016) as well as those seeking to exit prostitution (Cimino, 2012; Mansson, & Heddin, 1999).

Implications

Our findings have implications for prostitution policy and policymaking in general. Current US policies and programs, whether punitive or rehabilitative, focus on changing

ELICITING STREET-BASED SEX WORKER PERSPECTIVES TO INFORM PROSTITUTION POLICY DEVELOPMENT

individual behaviors and attitudes. However the primary reasons that the women in our study engage in prostitution have little to do with attitudes and behaviors but rather structural and personal constraints that hinder their ability to live in secure, healthy lives with their families and community of support. This means that policies that seek to change women's attitude are not only unhelpful, but may further stigmatize them and undermine their ability to achieve goals that they in fact share with policymakers.

Programs and policy responses designed to address prostitution view women who sell sex as flawed, damaged, or wicked. Interventions that are designed to rescue, punish, or convert the women are common and do not recognize their power, needs, aspirations, or choices (Capous-Desyllas, & Forro, 2014). Real pathways for opportunity and choice need to be integrated into programming for women in prostitution. These should include help meeting basic needs such as shelter, safety, and health; fostering networks of support; and realizing aspirations such as stable housing and careers..

Our study points to the importance of removing barriers that further limit women's ability to reach their goals. . This includes the criminalization of prostitution which gives rise to the host of many collateral consequences attendant to criminal conviction (Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2002). Current prostitution policies that result in arrest, conviction, and criminal records make it harder for women to find legal employment, receive medical and mental health treatment, and disrupt family and other social ties. They may also result in loss of housing as well as future opportunities for public housing, welfare, and other public benefits that may otherwise enable them to reunite with their families, further their education, grapple with addiction, and desist from prostitution, should they choose to do so.

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PROSTITUTION POLICY DEVELOPMENT

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4 Research on prostitution should always consider the perspective of those who engage in
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6 it. For those who seek to assist women engaged in prostitution, failure to consult with people
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8 who are impacted by the policies and “interventions” that flow from it might result in harm to the
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10 intended beneficiaries (Showden & Majic, 2014). For those who seek to curb prostitution,
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12 regardless of their moral stance or reasons for doing so, consultation with the target population
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14 may increase the likelihood of creating efficacious interventions. Despite all good intentions, it
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16 may be difficult to involve women engaged in street-based prostitution in policy conversations
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18 due to stigmatization, fear of criminal consequences, and economic marginalization that result in
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20 transience and lack of resources (such as transportation) which may limit their ability to
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22 participate.
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27 Policymakers must think creatively about how to include individuals in policy debates to
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29 the fullest extent possible. Research, especially methods that are participatory and action-
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31 oriented (e.g. Stringer, 2007), are one way to can create fuller pictures of women’s lives, and to
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33 provide a better sense of the interplay of personal and structural factors impacting women’s
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35 decision to engage in and/or desist from prostitution (Cheng, 2013; Oselin, 2014; Shdaimah &
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37 Leon, 2015). However, the mediated nature of research as a means to inform policy is a double-
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39 edged sword. While research can offer a relatively safe means for vulnerable people to influence
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41 the policy process, it is always limited by the fact that such influences are shaped and filtered by
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43 researchers. Policymakers may also consider reaching out to organizations that serve and are run
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45 by individuals impacted by policies, or by providing anonymous or confidential means to weigh
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47 in. These insights apply not only to women engaged in prostitution, but may be more broadly
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49 applicable to any marginalized group.
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ELICITING STREET-BASED SEX WORKER PERSPECTIVES TO INFORM PROSTITUTION POLICY DEVELOPMENT

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4 Most societal responses to women engaged in prostitution seek to punish, save, or
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6 pathologize them. While these approaches are (sometimes) well-intentioned, they obscure
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8 women's voices and experiences, often leading to irrelevant or harmful policies and
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10 interventions. The mismatch between the goals of women engaged in prostitution and the current
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12 policy regime do not bode well for their success either in the eyes of policymakers who seek to
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14 abolish prostitution or for the people who are targeted, who seek financial and familial security.
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16 Such a mismatch can only be corrected by incorporating the voices of women who sell sex in
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18 policymaking and program planning. Our study suggests the need for a more robust picture of
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20 the lives and experiences of women engaged in street-level prostitution that further their self-
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22 identified goals and increase their range of choices in how to best achieve them.
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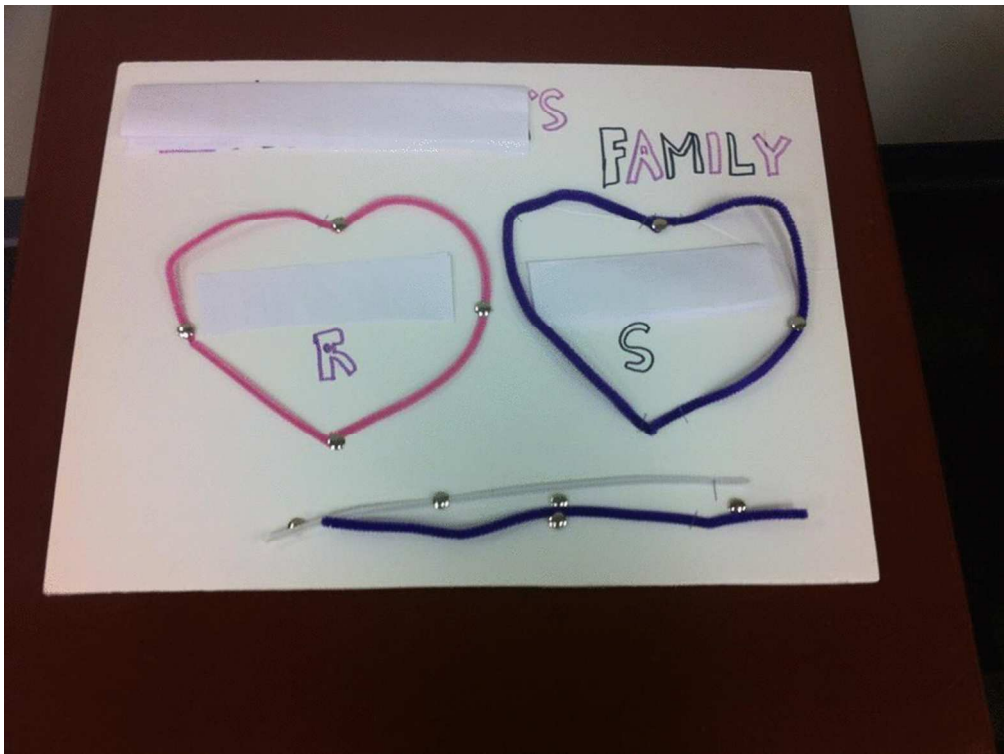


Figure 1: My Family

338x253mm (72 x 72 DPI)

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Figure 2: A Little of Everything

57x42mm (300 x 300 DPI)

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Figure 3: Home

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Figure 4: Part of Recovery

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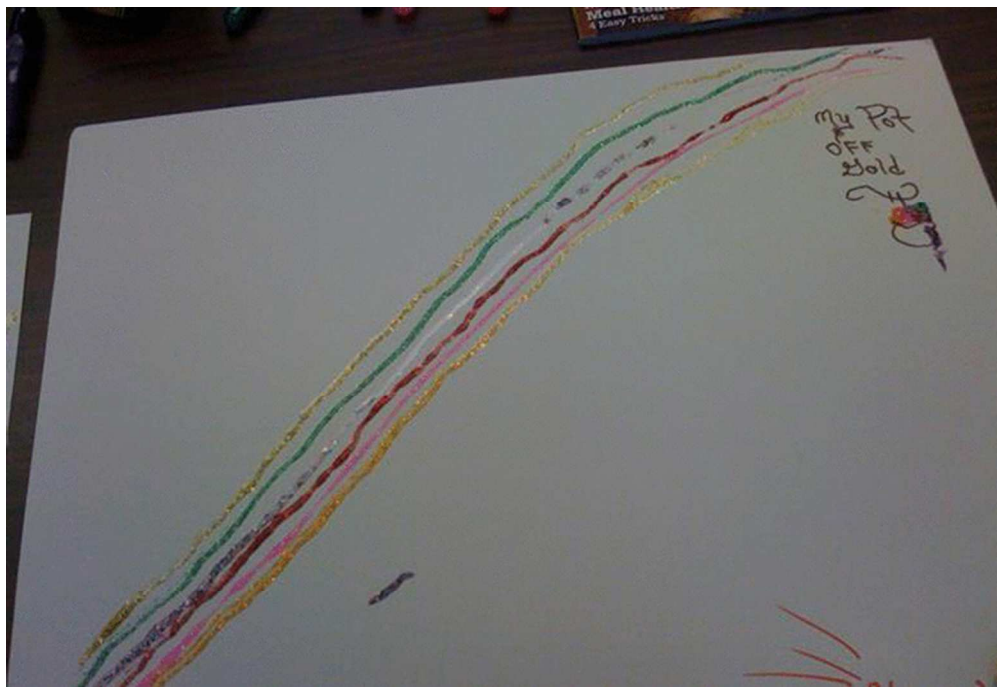


Figure 5: My Pot of Gold

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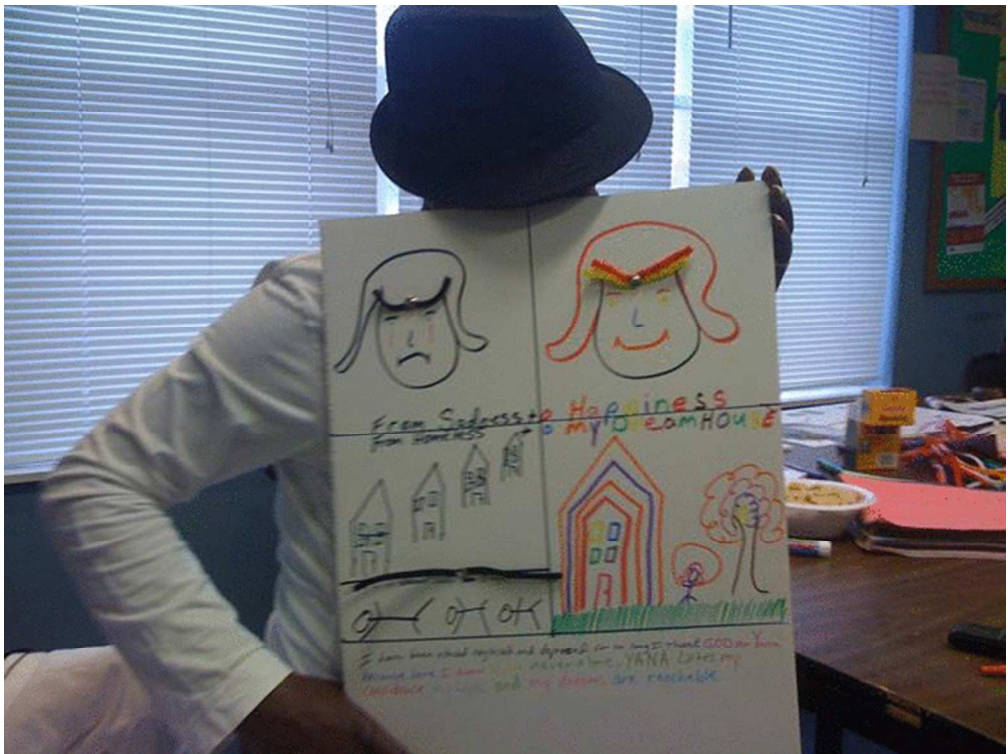


Figure 6: From Sadness to Happiness

237x177mm (72 x 72 DPI)

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