

Episode 92 - Dr. Shelly Wiechelt and Dr. Corey Shdaimah: Women's Experiences in Street-Level Prostitution: Implications for Court-Based and Social Service Programs (part 1 of 2)

[00:00:08] Welcome to living proof a podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. I'm your host Adjoa Robinson and I'd like to take a moment to address you our regular listeners. We know you have enjoyed our pod cast as evidenced by the more than 200000 downloads to date thanks to you all. We'd like to know what value you may have found in the podcast. We'd like to hear from all of you practitioners researchers students but especially our listeners who are social work educators. How are you using the podcast in your classrooms. Just go to our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu forward slash podcast and click on the contact us tab. Again thanks for listening. And we look forward to hearing from you. Did you know that Niagara Falls is less than 30 minutes away from downtown Buffalo high from the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. I'm Peter Sobota in this first of a two part podcast. Dr. Shelly Wiechelt Dr. Corey Shdaimah bring together their areas of expertise to discuss their research into prostitution in the lives of women including the role of trauma substance abuse and current policy related to this population. Doctors Wiechelt and Shdaimah discuss how their work began attempting to make a specialized prostitution diversion program in Baltimore County Maryland. More beneficial to the women who are actually using the program.

[00:02:05] They begin by defining prostitution in the context of their work and contrasting it with terms such as sex work that are commonly used to describe this activity. Doctors Wiechelt and Shdaimah describe what initially drew them to this work and how their desire to bring about the participant women's voices into the conversation about this diversion program inspired their work together. In this first part of their podcast our guests describe how important it was for them to debunk popular myths surrounding prostitution and promote women's understanding about how trauma and substance abuse relate to prostitution activity. UB welcomes back our friend Dr. Shelly Wiechelt she is assistant professor at the University of Maryland Baltimore County School of Social Work. Her research interests include the interplay of shame trauma and substance abuse among women and Native Americans. And She's especially interested in developing collaboration between researchers and practitioners. Dr Wiechelt has extensive clinical experience. Dr. Corey Shdaimah is assistant professor and academic coordinator for the MSW J.D. dual degree program at University of Maryland School of Social Work. Her research interests include professional roles in social justice the effects of policy on low income individuals and communities and theory and practice models. Dr. Margaret Coombes is regional office project associate at the Office of Child and Family Services in Rochester New York. Dr. Coombes interviewed doctors Wiechelt and Shdaimah by telephone I'm Margaret Coombes at the University of Buffalo the School of Social Work Here to talk to me today about prostitution is Dr. Shelley Wiechelt Dr. Corey Shdaimah. Thank you for joining me.

[00:03:56] This is a very exciting topic and I know you've done extensive amount of research and I'm very impressed with both your background and how you've chosen to do this study together. It seems that your fabulous team with your experiences. Would you mind taking a moment to choose to help. My name's Shelly Wiechelt I'm on the faculty of the University of Maryland Baltimore County and have done research regarding substance abuse and trauma in a variety of populations and this current study is focused on prostitution and I'm Corey Shdaimah I am on faculty at the University of Maryland School Social Work in Baltimore. My background is in law and social work

and I'm interested in how people work around laws or policies that aren't working for them. So right now I'm looking into a Shali of prostitution policy that seems to give rise to a number of concerns both on the part of the people who are time and it and the targets of enforcement. So that legal expertise combined with general welfare policies the Substance Abuse Research is great for this town. They think great in terms of the research expanding on it and how that said the Department of Social Services and how policies are written in the future hopefully. Can you give us a definition for the audience about prostitution. Sure. Prostitution is essentially exchanging sexual acts or sexual services for some kind of compensation. Most typically money. But it can include drugs or other kinds of compensation such as food or housing and prostitution can include women street prostitution which is often what people think about that can also include males. It can include transgendered people it can include children.

[00:05:53] It can be indoor prostitution which would keep people engaged in bordello or massage parlor type prostitution or the outdoor type which is street prostitution. And certainly there's a high end type of prostitution that we often think of more as a call girl or escort services. We use the term prostitution read in describing the activity as sex work. Well there are subtle reasons for that the term sex work actually has to compile a suit. One is that it tends to encompass a broad range of activities that might not be considered prostitution or at least not the legal definition of prostitution. So sex work could include pole dancing or sex or things like that. And that would be common sense that her foot would not be relevant to the population or the policies that we're looking at currently. So that broader term really doesn't work. The other thing is that we're also implies level of some of the feminist discourse around sex work in particular implies that an empowerment framework that Shelly and I certainly don't deny that there could theoretically be instances where particularly women or anyone engaged in prostitution could be doing so out of their own volitional choice of how they want to use their bodies. However that has not been the case for the population that we study the habit that we study really self identify as people who are engaging in prostitution due to their lack of perceived choices. And so the feminist model of sex work really doesn't speak to the experiences of the people in our study. And lastly the people in our study do not use the term sex worker at all. We also I would no doubt use the term prostitute because they also don't identify as prostitutes.

[00:07:41] There are people who do prostitution sometimes when necessary. Right. But they don't identify that as an identity. So we use the somewhat cumbersome term people engage in prostitution where women engage in prostitution. What we're referring specifically to women in terms of it's not considered for them a job a career. It was just the lack choices. Yes. And you think they don't identify with that empowerment and they also don't think it's not essential of who they are but they also wouldn't use the term prostitute which things like prostitution is something they do it's not that they are not who they are. And I think you get into great detail about the poverty and trauma. So in some of the reasons that led them to make that decision. But then how can you discuss the scope of the prostitution effects on the individuals that the women that you talked with and how it's also impacted the community. Marilyn in terms of why this research came about. This research came about largely due to a community task force that was focused on addressing prostitution in Baltimore City. The women in Baltimore City were engaged in prostitution are often in the streets and in the neighborhoods and their involvement of prostitution brings an element into the community that neighborhood folks have some concerns about. And it also results in crack vials and needles and use condoms floating in the streets and the community members were really kind of upset about that. And so they were voicing their concerns to community leaders.

[00:09:23] But they were recognizing that the women they were seeing that were going to engage in prostitution were not really criminals in their minds it needs to be prosecuted and thrown in jail but rather people who needed some kind of help and support in order to find a way of living that didn't involve street prostitution. So there was a coalition between these community members and a

number of community leaders including the School of Social Work here and the law school and other kinds of academics and researchers trying to come together and find ways to address this issue in Baltimore City. And our research came about because we wanted to be sure that the women's voices were heard in a discussion on what kind of support they needed what kinds of programs they needed and what they thought that Cortney to do to help them and support them if they thought that the court should at all. So we really wanted to bring the women's voices into the discussion which is where our particular research project emerged from. So the community coalitions the community has for understood that although the prostitution in the neighborhoods was causing some risks and safety issues that they realized the punishment treating these women like criminals was not going to work. So it wanted to address. Yes and that's what you were talking about the specialized diversion program here. Yes. So the futility again punishment is not a deterrent in that it's a vicious cycle. So what is the current legal response.

[00:11:01] Well the current legal response to prostitution in the United States is largely criminalization so prostitution is illegal in all of the states except for Nevada and Florida allows counties to decide how it's going to treat prostitution rather telling me there's only one county in Nevada where prostitution is not illegal and that is Los Angeles and it's regulated there. And so to a large extent people the task force were not necessarily looking to change the law either because they didn't think it was feasible. And I have to say I'm doing another related research project right now where we had looked at we did surveys in the neighborhood. There were three neighborhoods that actually had come to complain about prostitution that initiated this stakeholder group. And so in the surveys that we did in these neighborhoods it was definitely clear that there was a significant proportion of folks who felt that people engage in prostitution really needed help. It didn't necessarily mean that all of them thought that it shouldn't be criminalized. So some people thought to decriminalize and agree with that. Some people thought people just needed help and then some people saw combination and they didn't want it there. They wanted to express societal approbation for prostitution but they wanted to include an element of assistance here. And so you have to look at the specialized prostitution diversion program as an attempt not to change the existing criminal justice response to prostitution in the sense of legalizing it. And I think that there were several reasons. And you had a wide stakeholder groups of some people probably didn't want to. Some people thought yes it would be better if prostitution was either decriminalized or made legal but that is not feasible in the current political climate in the U.S..

[00:12:45] So there are a variety of opinions and what we actually see is there are a number of prostitution diversion programs across the country a very small number and they are often related to problem solving court model which means that people are within nested within the criminal justice system but we provide a rehabilitative response so we don't get rid of the criminal justice aspect. To some extent that's the threat of coercion the threat of punishment might drive people into treatment. Of course there is great debate about the value of these kind of therapeutic criminal justice combinations. I myself have looked at them and have my own critiques of them. But this is the kind of thing that ended up being developed in Baltimore City. And like Shelley said This research grew out of our own desire and that in creating this new alternative response within the criminal justice system we wanted to know what did the women who were likely to be participants in this program what were they worried. Were they concerned about this being of course based rehabilitative process. What did they hope to find from this. What kind of services would they want to really just get their sense of what were their hopes or fears or concerns regarding this. Turkey is again the stakeholders in Baltimore in their understanding of what they saw the issue is in what they were hoping to accomplish. Can you tell me a little about the research with these women engaged in prostitution how keen about him. Explain a little more how you got involved with the actual women. Yeah I'm a stakeholder committee actually at various times. There were a representative of groups that work with women engage in prostitution. And there were other attacks. One of the meetings we did actually have a woman who herself engaged in prostitution come and address the

stakeholder committee.

[00:14:35] But there were not voices of the actual people engaged in prostitution on a regular basis. And so it was our decision to actually in order to get those voices we would actually have to go out into the community. And that's one of the things that as a researcher you can do when you know how to do Shelly and I reached out to one of the groups that had attended the stakeout committee of a group called jaana. You are never alone. And they provide drop in. This is for a great name. You got it. Yes. And they at that time I think I've changed since I've been at the time they had a place called Jaana place. And women could come and see on a place on a drop in basis either to TA or to clean themselves or to have some food or if they wanted some kind of services to get some help. There was also a nurse who was there once a week. And so we reached out to the executive director who is on the stakeholder committee and asked her if we could conduct research on a place with women engaged in prostitution. So that's actually how we have access to the women in our study. That was excellent that you were able to engage them and you were able to get into a place that they're willingly coming to raise this involuntary. you're never alone. It's by choice that they go there. So they weren't being coerced into going into that center play. You could be more easily engaged. Yes exactly and so it also wouldn't be. Yes exactly. So there momentarily.

[00:16:03] And it's also a space where they feel safe and comfortable in working with this population. We were very concerned. We didn't want to be traumatize anybody we didn't want to. So we knew that the space was also a safe space for the women who were there and the people who ran the staff the volunteer staff also provide services and support and having them present and having knowing that the women had access to them. Should our research they are questioning raised any concerns for them was another positive aspect of that particular research site. GREENE So it sounds like it was a safe place for them to to but also somehow you establish some trust with the executive director and the women coming to the center. Yes we spent some time with the executive director as well as with the other staff so that they could get to know us and we could have an understanding of what they would like for us to do in the agency and what they thought the issues or concerns were and what was the best way to approach the women. And we also met with the women in advance of our study to let them know who we were and have their input on how they felt about us being there and how they felt we should approach the other women. So we really had a lot of input from the community members themselves people who both worked at and use the agency in order to best fit in there.

[00:17:20] And then we went to the agency regularly every week and we just hung out and did pitched in and did things in the agency we have people pick clothes and made carving in a suit together and brought in donuts and really got the women to have an opportunity to get a sense of who we were. And oftentimes the women would just approach us and say I'd like to do your interview. Now after they got to know us awhile. So it was really important for them to see that we were there in a way that was not exploitive of them or not going to be harmful for them and that we cared about who they were and what their experience was. And we really wanted to tell their story and by establishing that trust and being present in the agency in order to do it I really facilitated our ability to hear their stories which was really our main goal was to know their views and their perspectives about what they thought they needed and who they were and what their experiences were just add something. When we were in that telling when we were going to them initially to vet our method. So like Shelley said before we even started the research we sat with a group of women who were at the agency wanted to drop it and we said and we asked questions What should we do now. Before we even submitted to the Arby crookery wanted their input on the design. So one of the questions asked is it okay to ask about this. And they basically said yes you can ask us anything he wants as long as you were genuine and we will know it.

[00:18:49] We can reach you and we now if you are approaching us with an open heart and open

mind and if you do then we'll talk to you and it's okay. Anything to that was very telling. Then we took that to heart quite a bit and also how to speak the agency wasn't just instrumental okay people can get to know us so they'll talk to us. You also help us and our interpretation of the findings. So if you spend a lot of time in a setting you learn a lot more that might not come across in interviews that face to face. Taken out of the environment a little bit so it was very helpful on that as well and I think the fact that you went through weekly and you did demonstrate that you cared about and you wanted to hear their stories and like you said it knew how to interpret the data it may help to understand what they're saying and to a degree that you can give that information back to the stakeholders in terms of what these women are experiencing. The first has about what they would like. He told me what were the goals of the research and the rationale for each. Well like I said it was really to inform the stakeholder committee at the time when Shelly and I started our research. That's right prostitution diversion program had not yet started. The stakeholders to me have been meeting for almost two years at that point but they haven't actually started. And now they actually are hope to give input to the committee about the kinds of services people would want where their needs and interests. We didn't even nonstick out of committee. Who was it that was on the prosecution's docket who were going to be the people participating in the program.

[00:20:27] There wasn't that much known about them as well to understand what were the experiences of the people who would be likely offered this diversion program ahead of time so that we could have a better understanding of who would be in the program. What would their needs be and what concerns might they have about the provision of these court services. And then to take that information back to the stakeholder committee and also hopefully to be part of the larger dialogue of these kind of problem solving programs in the criminal justice system that were being designed for people against prostitution. And we also want to understand the women's experience of trauma and substance abuse because we thought that that was important to inform how to approach an intervention should occur. There's a great deal in the research literature about substance abuse and women and prostitution and certainly anecdotally people often speak about women engage in prostitution because they're on drugs and I need to get that money to support their drug habit and that's sort of the mythology that we talk about in terms of women in prostitution as being sort of low fall and women who are drug addicts or alcoholics and if we just fix their addiction problem then they won't need to engage in prostitution and people sort of have that notion about prostitution. Have we looked into the literature and try to understand what the actual research says about substance abuse and women in prostitution. And certainly the research literature does support that there's a strong association between substance abuse and prostitution. However it's not clear exactly when the substance abuse begins to occur.

[00:22:10] Is it that women begin to use substances develop an addiction and engage in prostitution. Or is it that the vagaries of prostitution pushed them into using substances as a means to numb and cope and manage their environment prostitution. And some researchers have even found that engagement prostitution and substance abuse occur simultaneously. So it's so strongly associated it's an unsettled issue as to exactly how it's associated with women in prostitution. So we wanted to have an understanding of our women's experience of substance abuse. And the other thing that people often speak about is childhood sexual abuse as being a precursor to prostitution. And we wanted to understand was child sex abuse a part of our women's experience. But even beyond that we weren't understand how was trauma traumatic experiences across the lifespan experienced by women in our sample because we know that trauma and substance use in general research shows that there's a strong association between trauma and substance abuse and we were thinking that there is a kind of complex relationship between prostitution trauma and substance abuse. And so we want to begin to understand that in our population and certainly the research literature that exists supports that women of prostitution have high levels of trauma. But the notion that child sexual abuse leads to prostitution. Some research supports that. Some research doesn't. Some research says that there are mediating or moderating variables such as women experience childhood sexual abuse

ran away as a teenager and engaged in prostitution.

[00:23:52] So the mediator there is the runaway behavior so it's much more complicated than simply saying Women of prostitution use a lot of drugs and have child sexual abuse so we wanted to understand how that operated with women in our community and what we need to consider in terms of trauma substance abuse and the development of any programming or court based program on their behalf. It's so complex and I think it's some of those myths that are out there also that yes most women go into prostitution to keep their substance abuse Hadayet or to maintain their substance abuse. But there's also been glamorizing prostitution like Pretty Woman are things that are in the media but it's some complaint in terms of whether or not these women have been traumatized or most have had trauma or whether it's related to any sexual abuse in the past. But it sounds like you were very willing to take your gloves on and get into that with each of them to hear each of their stories about the trauma substance which came first in terms of substance abuse or prostitution and you were really willing to hear each of their stories. How complex it can be for each woman and whether or not it is a choice or survival. Absolutely. We were very interested in hearing each of their stories and understanding what brought them into prostitution and what maintained them in prostitution. And certainly we were respectful of their choice as to whether they wanted to continue to engage in prostitution or not. But we really learned from our women that many of them experienced their involvement with prostitution as a mechanism of survival as a way of getting housing and getting food and maintaining themselves in the community. Can you talk about your Sambo. Because some of them talked about entering prostitution at ages 13 older 36 years old. Most of the women you interviewed were between 22 and 55.

[00:25:53] Can you talk a little more about how many are the women that you mess. We have 17 women in our sample. And yes they did ranged in age from 22 to 55. We weren't able to get demographics on all of them those that are participating in our focus groups. Certainly we weren't able to get demographics on but for those 11 that we had long detailed interviews with five who were Caucasian and six were African-American. And they did their education range from nine to 15 years. Five had some high school three had a GED and three had some college and their first engagement in prostitution ranged from age 13 to 36. So I mean it's hard to believe some would have to make that decision. Thirty six said that's how you can make your money for how you would survive. Yeah I would say we are probably very surprised at the age range. Also at the upper age range there are still people in their 50s who were engaging in prostitution especially with all of the survival concerns. How difficult is the dangers and the risks that are involved with all of the concerns that they were still surviving and how they're doing this. And I have also looked at doing another project looking at who's coming into the specialized prostitution diversion program. Now I'm looking at another program and another Northeastern study that they don't want to be identified. And I would say that the age range and the racial breakdown and that years of education I'm finding in my other sample as well The sample includes a total of another 25 women.

[00:27:31] And so it's not just our sample that it does seem to be what we're finding at least. Again this is street level prostitution with it seems to be fairly representative of the women who are on the docket. So those are the people who are arrested for prostitution. So it was similar in the sense that these women are Valy ages of all ages and that there is a range of educational backgrounds and the racial breakdown seems to be fairly even in Baltimore and in the other city which has similar racial demographics that are the same as well. You've been listening to Dr. Shelly Wiechelt and Dr. Corey Shdaimah discuss substance abuse and trauma in the lives of women in prostitution and living proof. Be sure to watch for part two of their podcast coming soon. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. For more information about who we are our history our programs and what we do we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. At UB we are living proof that social work makes a difference in people's lives.

