



# The impact of a prostitute mother on the child life circumstances <sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The prostitution practice often leads to pregnancy and giving birth to a baby, but there are few studies that have taken into account the maternity variable related to this practice. This study aims to identify and describe the life circumstances of children having prostitute mothers. This research has been conducted for Iași and Bacău, two counties of Romania. This study shows the preliminary results of a qualitative, comparative research, based on thorough interviews. The instrument used was the semi-directive interview guide. The participants to the research were five women, all mothers, and had practiced street prostitution for some time, as well as six experts in various fields of activity (policemen, psychologists, social workers) who had contact with women involved in this activity during their professional activity. The results obtained point out the negative effects of prostitution on carrying out the parenting responsibilities, such as: the long absence of mothers, the risk of separating children from the family as a consequence of their mothers being imprisoned, the children being put into child care institutions and hence the attention for their educational needs is reduced. The results obtained so far bring into focus the complexity of this issue, urging new directions for research on the evolution of children who are born and raised in a family where the mother practices street prostitution.

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## 1. Introduction

The term of prostitution is defined as providing sexual services in exchange for money or other material goods. This activity can take multiple forms, but in this paper we focused our attention on street prostitution, namely represents the most degrading form, where the person practicing it is exposed to multiple forms of abuse and stigmatization by society. Even if prostitution, by its nature, is an activity that makes women vulnerable to pregnancy and maternity, the interest of researchers in the mother-child relation within this context is relatively recent and the studies in this field are quite reduced as number. This can be due to the fact that the lives of women who practice prostitution were often defined by their work, which makes it difficult to portray them in other roles (Sleightholme and Sinha, 1997, as cited in Kelbisow, 2009: 10). In this respect, Dalla (2001:1066) asserts that women practicing street prostitution are rarely recognised as individuals with a life story, with parents and sisters, husbands, partners or

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children. Hence, researchers were determined to mainly focus on other challenges these women face: sexual transmitted diseases, stigmatization, violence, alcohol and drug addiction.

The idea that the majority of women who practise prostitution go through the motherhood experience is demonstrated by the majority of the papers published in this field, as applicable for the different number of pregnancies, births and variety of means to assume motherhood. Although they did not carry out a research in this matter, Sloss and Harper (2004:330) launched the hypothesis stating that women practicing street prostitution are more prone to having babies than women who practice other forms of prostitution and this is due to the variations in their economic situation, access to services, victimisation or substance abuse.

A study conducted by Jeal and Salisbury (2004) established that about 65% of the research sample recipients had children and only 21% of those having children aged up to 16 years were living with one or more of them. Weiner (1996, as cited in Sloss and Harper, 2004) found that from a sample of 1,963 sexual workers within New York's street environment, 69.4% had children, with an average of 2.25 children per individual.

A study performed by Chudakov et al. (2002:307) on the mental health and motivation of women practicing prostitution established that out of 55 research participants, 34% had at least one child and 7% had two or more children. Similarly, Young, Boyd and Hubbell's study (2000) on drug consumption among women practicing prostitution found that, out of 203 participants, 92% had children.

For a better understanding of the empirical pattern of children whose mothers practice street prostitution, we approached the issue from a double perspective: that of mothers involved in this type of activity, as well as that of professionals dealing with such cases.

Upon commencing this study, our domestic legislation on prostitution was undergoing change, starting from the prosecution and punishment for prostitution with imprisonment up to its decriminalisation in the New Criminal Code, entering into force on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014. The study herein set off from the hypothesis that, as any other occupational activity, prostitution leaves its mark on the experience of motherhood. More exactly we are interested in the way women practicing prostitution are involved in fulfilling their parenting responsibilities, and the simultaneous undertaking of such responsibilities determine challenges in terms of the arrangements and decisions that a mother must take concerning the education and care of her child.

According to specialized literature, childcare quality is influenced, among other factors, by maternal availability, and the mother's health status and education level, the existence of resources, the support of the family and society and the environment where the child is educated and cared for. When any of these factors are missing, the child is exposed to conditions affecting his quality of life (Cheghe et al., 2002:383). This could be the case for children who are raised and educated by mothers who practice street prostitution, as studies in this field associate this with low incomes, violence, stigmatization and other stressful factors experienced by the prostitute (Barnard, 1993; Sloss, Harper, 2004; Sallman, 2010).

## 2. Methodology

This paper comprises a comparative qualitative study aiming to explore and analyse the life circumstances of children whose mothers practice street prostitution from the perspective of mothers and from that of the experts dealing with such cases. Among the research questions guiding our approach, we hereby mention: How does prostitution influence parental competence? How does the mother's activity – *prostitution* – influence the living conditions and development of the child under her care? Which are the factors associated with prostitution that may influence the development of the child found under the care of a prostitute mother?

### 2.1. Participants

The research that we initiated is carried out at the level of two Romanian counties, namely, Iași and Bacău. Even if, initially, the study was supposed to take place only in Iasi, the intention to also approach the experience of motherhood in the context of deprivation of liberty for committing the crime of prostitution implied extending the research

activities to include the area of Bacău. This county was selected because of the existence of a women section in the Penitentiary.

Hence, the participants to the initiated study are six experts working with street prostitutes or their children, as well as five women involved in street prostitution. By now, the research has included two psychologists, two social workers and two police officers, and they were selected from the County Police Inspectorate, the Penitentiary and non-governmental organisations which provide services to this category of persons.

The selection criteria for women who practice prostitution have been: age, namely, at least 18 years old, the maternal status - having at least one child, having practiced prostitution for at least one year, during which they should have had at least one child under their care. Three of the participants were identified on the street where they practiced prostitution and two in prison, where they were executing custodial sentences for the crime of prostitution and pimping, respectively. In this latter case, there was also a statement of prostitution practice. The duration of prostitution varied between 1 and 18 years. The number of children varied between one and three, reaching a total of 12 children. During the time of the study, six of the children were separated from their mother either by the imposing special protection measures, or by being under the care of the extended family without legal grounds for these arrangements.

## *2.2. Research instruments*

As mentioned before, this research is qualitative by nature and the method used for collecting data is the *interview*. For both groups of participants we developed a semi-structured individual interview. The instrument used is the *thematic interview guide* which we adapted accordingly to each category of respondents. At the beginning of the interview carried out with both categories of respondents, the interviewer asked structured questions. The experts were asked for information on training and professional experience, and mothers were asked for information on their background, current situation, parental status and involvement in prostitution. Afterwards, the questions addressed were adapted for the two categories of respondents and they referred to manner in which prostitution influences maternal experience and how the development of children could be affected by the mother's activity (e.g. What do you think about the compatibility between the role of the mother and the one of the female prostitute? To what extent do you think that this activity affects parental competence? To what extent do you think that the child's evolution is influenced by the fact that the mother practices street prostitution? What long term effects could the mother's occupation have on the child's development?). For mothers who were imprisoned, these issues were addressed also related to the prison sentence experience.

## *2.3. Collection of data*

The interviews having the results what we illustrate hereby were carried out during April and September 2013. The interviews were conducted with experts, at their workplace, after having obtained the institution management consent, or in a public place outside the working environment – a coffee shop-. The interviews with mothers who were executing the custodial sentence were held in prison, and the other three on the street, in a vehicle that was made available by the researcher. All the participants were informed about the purpose and objectives of the research, granting their consent to take part of it.

Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 60 minutes. The interviews with four of the experts were recorded with their consent, and for one case, the respondent preferred data collection by taking notes. In case of the mothers, the interviews conducted on the street were recorded after having obtained the consent of the participants, and those in prison were gathered via pen and paper technique, according to the regulations of the institution.

## *2.4. Data analysis*

The information obtained with the recorder was transcribed for analysis. The entire material obtained was interpreted using the thematic content analysis. Our interview followed three main themes: the compatibility of roles, the living

conditions of the child and the influence of the mother's occupation on the child's development. The following subcategories of these issues have been proposed for analysis: housing conditions, family environment, maternal responsibilities, child education, child socialization process, child supervision and the perspective on the future.

### 3. Findings

The findings presented herein are preliminary since the research performed as part of the PhD. thesis is still ongoing. The findings illustrate data regarding the effects of prostitution on the parenting role and on the specificity of children development when they are under the care of a prostitute mother.

Four of the experts concluded that the compatibility between the maternal role and the role of a woman practicing prostitution is conditioned by the mother's abilities of setting clear boundaries between prostitution and what it entails and the child's living environment, preventing the child to enter into contact with the specifics of such activity. *'Even though the mother goes to work at night and the child knows this, we cannot say that the child suffers. Probably, it is important for that child not to be exposed to what his/her mother does and if this is possible then, yes, they are compatible.'* Since prostitution practice is not incompatible with assuming parenting responsibilities, experts emphasize the significance of the family and maternal model which the female prostitute had during her childhood. In this respect, respondents consider that undertaking parenting responsibilities are more likely influenced by the parenting model which the female prostitute had and less by the prostitution practice itself: *'If she grew up in a family and she knows how a child should be raised, then she has a parenting model that is somewhat alright and she applies the same rule with her child. If she has a history, for instance, let's say she stayed in a placement centre or she ran away from home when she was very young, she will definitely have no clue on how to practically care for a child and what needs does the child have, in order to satisfy them.'* The respondents add that the absence of an adequate parenting model in the history of many women practicing prostitution determines their incapacity of showing affection towards their own children: *'...When you speak to them about the child, they get emotional, or when they see the child, they do not know how to react, because nobody taught them how to caress a child, how to kiss a child or how to hug a child. They do not know how to laugh together with their children.'* Furthermore, other factors specific to the lifestyle of a female prostitute are stipulated as potentially causing an incompatibility with the maternal role: alcohol consumption, drugs, violence, disorganised families, etc. With regards to the services addressed to this type of mothers, experts highlight the current deficit, but also the lack of counselling services for mothers in order to acknowledge the losses involved by prostitution, as well as for identifying some alternatives to this lifestyle. Respondents consider that by supporting and empowering mothers, you can improve the life quality of their children. Experts working with imprisoned women consider that the detention experience generally contributes to resuming or strengthening the mother-child relation: *'In detention, the connection is closer to children, but I have also noticed that after getting out they do not get into contact with their children. This is probably due to the fact that in detention they spent most of the time alone, and without having something to do, they start analyzing themselves. It is also possible that they get certain benefits. For instance, if you behave, you see your children, you pretend to be better, and you automatically earn days, you get extra visits and other additional benefits.'*

During the interviews with the mothers, three of them perceived as incompatible the roles of mother and woman practicing prostitution, which negatively affected self-esteem, generating shame and a desire to stop this practice: *'When I gave birth, obviously, I did not want to keep practicing... At home, I used methylated spirit . I felt repugnance and I was asking myself: ~ how can I put my hands on the baby now? It was hard to be both a mother and a prostitute. I felt filthy. I used to tell myself: I shouldn't have become the mother of a child'.* When mothers perceive these two roles as incompatible, we observe efforts to establish boundaries between what prostitution means and the environment in which the child lives. In this respect, one can mention strategies for the child's protection like not having sexual contact with clients at their home, as well as providing only 'normal' sexual services.

From the perspective of two of the mothers, parenting responsibilities rather overlap the basic material needs of children, resulting in the perception of increased compatibility between the roles of mother and prostitute. For these women, using the income earned from prostitution especially for satisfying the children's material needs makes the two roles be perceived as compatible. *"Right now, I do not think that one is related to the other. This is how I can*

*prove my love to them and do my duty. I can only prove it to them.;* *'I buy anything for them, especially for the older one. I buy her fashionable shoes. She is crazy for fashion.'* Practicing prostitution in order to fulfil the children's material needs shows understanding and the mother describes this occupation as evidence of strong maternal feelings.

The question of what could be improved in involvement for raising children emphasizes, for four of the cases, the desire of mothers to continue to provide the financial resources for necessary children. Nonetheless, on a long-term, they intend to stop practicing prostitution, without naming a clear deadline, and only conditioning it to making several revenues. In one of the cases we find the expressed desire to emigrate in order to perform activities, other than prostitution. *'I would like to go out and work. Not prostitution, but something else. I would also want to buy an old house, to leave something for my children.'* For imprisoned women, the answers to this question reveal their concerns for the recovery of children who are currently under the care of other people. *'I don't know. Maybe, if I had a place of my own. if they can't stay with me, at least they could visit. My mother won't give me the older one for sure and neither will my mother-in-law give me the younger one.'*

The interview with experts bring to the attention a living environment characterised by poor conditions, inadequate for child development. The reports show that this is due to reduced earnings obtained by practicing street prostitution, but also to the directing incomes to cover adult vices: cigarettes, alcohol, drugs. Furthermore, housing instability is also mentioned as a harmful factor for child development. *'The girls from the street change places very often because most of the time they live in rented places, since they are no longer in contact with their families... Moving a young child from one place to the other... And moving a child every three-four years from on environment to another, taking the child out of a group to which he/she got used to can cause high non-integration problems.'*

In terms of mothers, as well, experts bring to attention the arrangements which mother make for entrusting the child when they are on the street. From this perspective, more often such arrangement are perceived as being unsafe for children and causing various risks to the child safety. *'Now, from my point of view, when she performs commercial sex, the child is mostly unsupervised than under the care of somebody who would indeed take good care. She says that she left him/her with ....usually these are social networks that cannot be trusted, which do not grant much attention to the child.'* Prostitution is considered by experts as having the potential to lead to the separation of children from their families by the mother's imprisonment, abandonment of children, for long periods, under the care of the extended family or by mother's death in contexts related to prostitution. Also, experts believe prostitution entails the risk of unrecognized paternity of the child born in such a context. According to experts, the mother practicing prostitution has no direct influence on the educational process of the child, but rather the educational level of the mother can influence the education that the child receives. Socialization of children with prostitute mothers is seen as a negative factor in the development of child's personality: *'She satisfies the primary needs of the child. The child does not socialize anywhere, not even the mall, for instance. He/she socializes with other prostitute's children. This is their environment'*. Experts identify the risk of discrimination and marginalization of children by society due to the expansion of the stigma to the child, applied by society to the prostitute mother. On a long term, experts predict that girls will become prostitutes and boys will become abusers, rapists, pimps, felons, due to the model that the mother provides and the normalization of this occupation by the people from the social environment of the child.

The child's living conditions were investigated in order to identify the characteristics of physical environments where they grow and develop. Thus, the most frequent situation is where families live in rented houses, as well as the repeated transfer from one house to another. The five mothers respondents expressed their satisfaction regarding the characteristics of the environment in which the children were raised, considering that they had all the conditions required for harmonious development. This state of gratitude was expressed even when the rooms were perceived as overcrowded, when the area was described as insufficient or lacking intimacy: *'... It's only a room, but we can handle that. We have a big bed and my mother-in-law sleeps on an armchair. [...] It's a double bed that's fitting. There is still enough room.'*

Our interview explored the care and supervision arrangements for children that mothers are forced to make in order to be able to practice street prostitution. The most frequent was the situation in which the child was left in the care of a relative or of a person who was paid for their services. In four of the cases, mothers expressed their confidence in these arrangements, perceiving them to be safe for their children. For the women who were in a stable relationship,

the partner, who was also the declared father of the child, namely the person taking over the care of the child when they were out on the street. This arrangement highlighted cases of child abuse: *'I was mostly out. I used to leave them only with him. This happened because he began to behave violently and I was looking for ways of not to....when he got angry because of me, he took it out on the children. He hit them...'* However, the partner is not always portrayed as a violent person, but was also described as being caring and as being able to properly substitute the mother during her entire absence: *'He does everything that I do. He caresses them, he washes them, he puts them to sleep and he prepares the food for them. He does what I do.'*

From the interviews with the mothers' group, one may find that the attention given to the *educational needs* of children is low. Thus the children of three of the mothers were not attending kindergarten, even if they were at the age appropriate for preschool education, and this was due to lack of documents required for registration or the mother neglecting this aspect. Moreover, the interview also brings into focus inadequate educational influences for the child's development: *'She does not go to kindergarten because she has a bad attitude. She swears. She was abroad at the in-laws and she learned there, they taught her what they wanted [...] This fall I'll get her registered. Maybe she will stop swearing by then. But not here, I will register her in Botoşani. What can I do? I don't beat her. I hope she will stop using bad words.'*

One of the features of children raised by a prostitute mother is the *socialisation* of children in peer groups, where parents are not informed regarding the mother's occupation. This choice is made by the mother in order to prevent marginalization to which children may be exposed. For two of the respondents we encounter repeated changes of residence in order to prevent stigmatization, marginalization of the family and to prevent suffering to which children are exposed if they would be informed in their social environment of their mother's job: *'They would probably be affected, but there is no possibility for them to find out, because I change my residence. I already have plans for us to go somewhere else... They would not feel good (if they were to find out)'*

The interviews with mothers highlight the interruption or failure to initiate the relationship between the child and the extended family members as a result of the deterioration of the relationship between the mother and her family of origin. It also highlights the risk of interrupting the connection between the child and the mother as a result of the mother executing a custodial sentence. The child can also be separated from his family due to the request of instituting a special protection measure for children, and these requests were made in one of the cases by the mother and in the other by the partner. In one of these cases, the child's foster care was followed by separations between brothers. For two women who were in detention, even if both of them expressed the desire to receive visits from their children, only one of the mothers maintained telephone contact with one of her children.

When asked about the long term effects that practicing prostitution had on their children, three of the mothers mentioned that in the future their children may feel embarrassed around other people and angry directed towards them. No influences were mentioned within the context of strengthening their personality.

#### 4. Discussions

The purpose of this research consists in identifying the life circumstances of children whose mothers are street prostitutes. The results presented in this paper are partial, the research being ongoing upon writing the paper and this determines considering them valid only for the group of respondents taking part in the research. Nonetheless, it is obvious from the results obtained that practicing prostitution leaves a decisive mark on the perception of motherhood by the female prostitute. Thus, simultaneously assuming these two roles may become a true challenge which she must face and the way she manages the occupational responsibilities could influence the well-being of her child.

Some of the mothers that we interviewed perceived as incompatible the maternal role and the one of prostitute, these women feeling embarrassed by their simultaneous position in these two roles. These findings are convergent with the results obtained by Sloss and Harper (2004), who established that women practicing prostitution used to feel ashamed and guilty for continuing the activity during pregnancy and, subsequently, during the motherhood period. In the interviews conducted with the mothers where that the role of a female prostitute was perceived as compatible with the maternal role, the arguments were based on the satisfaction felt from succeeding in meeting the material needs of children. From the perspective of experts, the compatibility between the maternal role and that of the street sex-worker

depends on the mother's capacity to separate the two levels of her life: the prostitution environment and the environment where she educates her children. In addition, according to experts, prostitution itself does not affect the maternal competence of a woman. Moreover, the maternal model she received during childhood is rather decisive, a model that she would be inclined to replicate in her parental experience. Nonetheless, alcohol and drugs abuse, the violence-based family environment, as factors associated to prostitution may negatively influence the way in which a woman practicing prostitution undertakes her parenting responsibilities. Relating to these aspects, McClelland and Newell (2008) established as different degrees of neglect, harassment, subsequent cares and the contact with the clients are aspects specific to the living circumstances of children whose mothers used to practice street prostitution and which also were drug users. Sloss and Harper (2004) have agreed that prostitute mothers acknowledged the risks to which they exposed their children, while being under their care, and they felt grateful when the children were taken out of the family, considering to have spared them of abuse or neglect.

We noted a similarity among the answers of the two categories of respondents relating to the impact that carrying out the imprisonment penalty has on the relationship between mothers and their children, namely that the detention creates the context where mothers tend to focus more on themselves, defending or enforcing their desire to recover their children from the authorities or the extended family care and to resume the relationship with them. These results agree with the study of Ferraro and Moe (2010: 34) on the experience of incarceration that mothers go through, determining that even if mothers were revoked their parenting rights and they were forbidden to keep in touch with their children, they kept hoping that one day they will rejoin them. Of course, the motherhood experience within the context of deprivation of liberty could make the subject matter of a distinct research, which may deeply explore the influence of deprivation of liberty on the mother-child relationship.

The answers from these two categories of respondents relating to what should be changed or improved in the way these mothers are fulfilling their parental responsibilities have significantly been differentiated. Thus, if mothers consider that continuing to provide financial and material resources to the children ensure the adequate performance of parental responsibilities, the experts identified the need for them to be supported in order to get out of prostitution and to be able to support their children. The answers of mothers can be due to their perception relating to the needs of a child, to the standards they have concerning the education of children, but they can also be facade answers; admitting the fact that major changes are required in terms of what they offer to their children, assuming that they do not adequately comply with the obligations they have towards them.

The interviews with the two groups of respondents bring attention to the housing conditions which are inadequate for the real needs of a child, as well as a certain housing instability. If mothers frequently resort to changing the house due to economic instability and to prevent stigmatization, frequent housing changes are brought to attention by experts as disrupting the child's psychological balance and its possibilities for social integration. The arrangements made by mothers relating to the custody of children when they are on the street, are considered by experts to be rather unsafe for children, while mothers have rather considered adequate the child care received during such a period.

The interview with mothers disclosed that in general the educational process of children is a rather neglected aspect, but according to experts, it is not the prostitution practice itself which is crucial regarding the mother's interest for the child's education, but her personal characteristics and, in particular, her educational level. In this regard, a high level of school education is considered to be a factor that could help mothers understand the usefulness of the educational process and support their children in this area of development. The fact that the education of children is affected in a context where the mother practices prostitution is also revealed by the research conducted by Cheghe et al., (2002) stipulating that although all women with children of school age had made, at a certain point, efforts for registering them at an educational institution, their efforts to keep them in school have been undermined either by poverty or absenteeism. It was also determined that a very small proportion of mothers with preschool and school age children made time during the day to discuss and advise their children. According to these authors, drug consumption has caused many mothers abandon their responsibilities of guiding their children.

The separation of the child from his mother and family is one of the factors that this study identifies as characteristic to children born and growing up in a family where the mother is a prostitute. Experts note that such situations arise due to the deprivation of liberty of the mother, to instituting special protection measures for children or by leaving children for a long time under the care of a close friend. Among the mothers that we interviewed, we confirmed that

in some cases the separation of children was a result of these factors. Separating children from their families and raising them under other forms of protection than maternal care are issues reported by many of the studies in the field of prostitution (Dalla, 2006; Dalla, Xia, Kennedy, 2003; Oselin, 2010).

On a long term, both professionals and mothers anticipate the risk of marginalization of their children as future adults if others would be informed of the mother's occupation. In addition, experts identify the risk of developing deviant behaviours in the sphere of their sexual life, as future adults. They mention the risk of girls becoming prostitutes in their turn and boys becoming bullies, pimps and felons. The risk for this category of children to develop deviations in the sphere of sexual behaviour has been identified by other authors as well (Ling, 2001; Brown, 2005 as cited in Beard et al., 2010: 4) according to whom prostitution is often transmitted from parent to child in some cases as a family tradition or because of real or perceived lack of options. To confirm or deny such risks, it would be interesting to conduct longitudinal studies that allow tracking this category of children throughout their existence, in order to determine precisely how their route was influenced by the mother's practice of prostitution.

## 5. Conclusion

Although these results are partial, we can say that they converge to some extent with previous researches in the field which explored the experience of motherhood in women who practice prostitution. Although this paper presents the results obtained after interviewing a small number of participants, we can assert that street prostitution creates a particular context of educating and taking care of children by women who practice this activity. Thus, carrying out the parental responsibilities is constantly threatened by the risks these women are exposed to. In this context the life circumstances of a child whose mother practices prostitution are influenced both directly through possible contact of the child with everything that means the prostitution environment, and indirectly through the consequences of these practices on his mother. The results obtained so far bring into focus the complexity of this issue, urging new research routes on the evolution of children born and raised in a family where the mother practices street prostitution and implicitly, on the women involved in these practices. What is more, these findings also highlight the need to support these mothers, to empower them so that they can provide a secure family environment for their children in order to decrease exposure to different risks.

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*The impact of a prostitute mother on the child life circumstances*

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