

Childhood victimization and prostitution. A developmental victimology perspective

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The relationship between childhood victimization and subsequent entry into the sex industry is one of the most controversial topics in the field of victimology. Views on this issue tend to explain prostitution either as a free choice that has been made after weighing up the potential financial rewards compared with those of other employment options or, alternatively, as the result of structural forces of male dominance. However, the decision-making capacity of the individual who enters into sex work can be classified along a continuum ranging from prostitution as a choice to prostitution as the result of coercion. Decisions made in this so-called 'grey area' are strongly influenced by childhood victimization. The aim of the present study is to conduct a critical review of the empirical research on the relationship between childhood victimization and

prostitution. Based on the studies reviewed it can be concluded that childhood violence is a key variable to take into account when attempting to understand a person's decision to enter the world of prostitution and sexual commerce. This review shows that – despite the notable rates of victimization that are consistently reported and which need to be acknowledged once and for all – the issue of childhood victimization in prostitutes remains one of the most controversial topics within the discipline.

Keywords: children; prostitution; sex work; victimology; development

Given the many forms of violence they experience during their lives, women who are engaged in prostitution are worthy of being studied from the perspective of developmental victimology. The relationship between childhood victimization and subsequent entry into the sex industry is, however, one of the most controversial topics in the field of victimology, despite the various publications that support such a link (Pheterson, 1990). One of the problems is that most of the research in this area adopts a prior ideological stance, either the abolitionist or the regulationist, and this makes it very difficult to find studies that can be relied on as being objective, whose approach and interpretation of results are more than a mere reflection of their premises. As Weitzer notes, 'In no area of the social sciences has ideology contaminated knowledge more pervasively than in writings on the sex industry' (2005a, p. 934).

Sensationalism is commonplace within abolitionist writings, where one finds expressions such as ‘sexual slavery’, ‘torture’, ‘domination’ or ‘domestic violence’, among others (see the review by Weitzer, 2010, on what he refers to as the *oppression paradigm*). Conversely, the defence of prostitution by means of expressions such as ‘sexual freedom’, ‘modernity’ and ‘women’s control over men’, as well as a radical denial of the link between sexual commerce and difficulties, psychological problems or victimization, is characteristic of the regulationist perspective, one that is associated with activists in the sex industry and where one of the arguments alludes to a kind of moral crusade against prostitution (see, e.g., Weitzer, 2006). Authors such as Pheterson (1990) highlight this polarity and note how both extremes make it impossible to capture what the practice of prostitution actually implies. Similarly, Shah (2004) points out that most texts on prostitution seek to distinguish between women who engage voluntarily in it and those who are forced to do so, as if all the problems associated with the area of sexual commerce might dissipate once women had been classified into one group or the other. All this makes it very difficult to draw robust conclusions about the relationship between childhood victimization and prostitution, and hinders the development not only of objective knowledge regarding the risk to such victims, but also of prevention strategies or institutional interventions based on empirical evidence.

In light of these limitations the aim of the present study is to conduct a critical review of the empirical research on the relationship between childhood victimization and prostitution. Although several studies have been published on this question, there is as yet no review that would enable general conclusions to be drawn from this body of work (Matthews, 2015). The present review does not include articles that deal with trafficking or forced prostitution, as this is an area with distinct characteristics that does not reflect the broader reality of a much more complex phenomenon (see the critique by Weitzer, 2005b on the indistinct use of the two concepts). In addition, the studies included in this review focus only on female sex workers, due to the scarcity of research on male sex workers. Authors like Logan (2010) have emphasized the need to analyse the special characteristics of male prostitution. There is also a need for studies including indoor prostitutes, male and transgendered sex workers, and clients and managers (Weitzer, 2005c).

In sum, the goal of this paper is to present a critical summary of the main findings reported in those publications that have addressed an area of enormous social and professional relevance, but which has by and large been neglected within the field of victimology.

Childhood victimization and decisionmaking

It is important to stress that there are different kinds of prostitution and that the women who engage in it have a variety of experiences that cannot

be reduced to a single category. The thorough-going study by Harcourt and Donovan (2005) describes a range of sexual services in which the primary purpose of the interaction is to exchange sex for a fee. Among them, street or other public place sex work is probably the most dangerous and socially undesirable. Indoor sex work includes brothel prostitution, often licensed by authorities; escort prostitution, in which sex workers are contacted by phone and travel to the clients' premises; private prostitution, in which clients contact the sex worker by phone and services are provided in the sex worker's premises; and also clubs, pubs, bars, karaoke bars, dance halls, or other all-male venues such as barbershops, bathhouses, saunas, where services are provided on site, or elsewhere. Therefore, the decision-making capacity of the individual who enters sex work can be classified along a continuum ranging from voluntary to forced prostitution, from prostitution as a choice to prostitution as the result of coercion. Figure 1 illustrates this continuum. Therefore, the decision-making capacity of the individual who enters into sex work can be classified along a continuum ranging from voluntary to forced prostitution, from prostitution as a choice to prostitution as the result of coercion. Figure 1 illustrates this continuum.

Leaving aside the two extremes of this continuum, which affect a relatively small percentage of women, the large majority of prostitutes have chosen to enter into sex work after considering their limited options, a situation that is

the result of a series of variables and which is greatly influenced by experiences of victimization during childhood and adolescence. Indeed, despite being a subject of controversy about which there is little consensus among groups and associations of sex workers (in fact, there are opposing views on the matter), the scientific studies conducted to date indicate that although interpersonal victimization, whether in childhood or adulthood, is an under-recognized factor within the so-called 'grey area' (see Figure 1), it may nonetheless influence the decision to enter into sex work. However, while the abolitionist perspective considers everybody who engages in prostitution to be a victim, the regulationist stance does not consider victimization to be a relevant variable, neither when it comes to decision making nor in the everyday lives of these women. It should be noted that neither of these viewpoints is complete nor offers a comprehensive account of prostitution, a point that has been made by key feminist authors who argue for a more integrative perspective that includes all the possible reasons why an individual may end up engaging in sexual commerce (Bernstein, 1999). continuum ranging from voluntary to forced prostitution, from prostitution as a choice to prostitution as the result of coercion. Figure 1 illustrates this continuum.

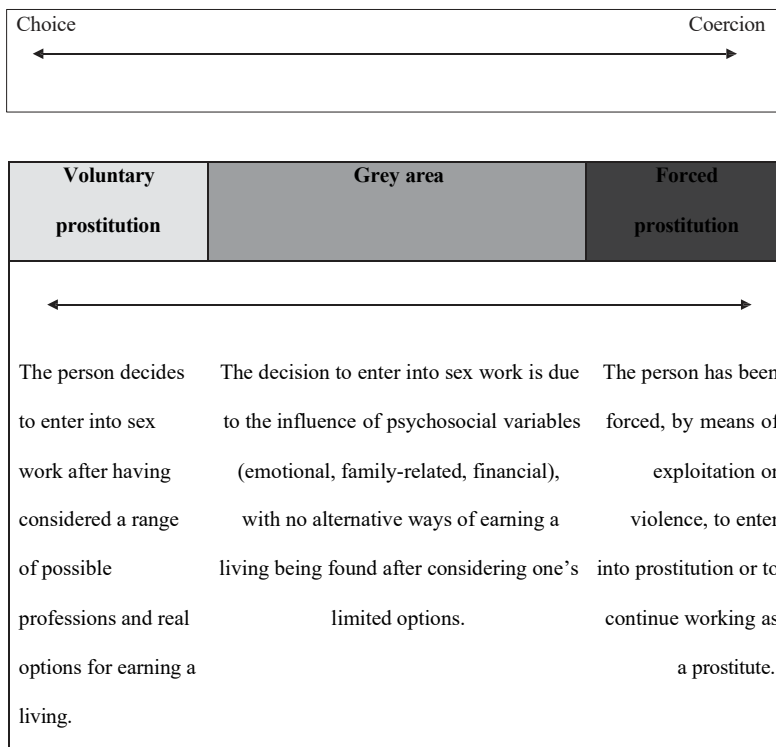


Figure 1. Decision-making capacity regarding entering into sex work (adapted from Kaveman, 2007).

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In this context, the paper by Phoenix (2000) is one of the few criminological studies to have considered how a woman may become involved with and continue to work in the sex industry. This author criticizes the polarized views on this issue, which tend to explain prostitution either as a free choice that has been made after weighing up the potential financial rewards compared with those of other employment options or, alternatively, as the result of structural forces of male dominance, whether through the use of violence or due to the economic imbalance between men and women. Based on her analysis of interviews with 21 sex workers, Phoenix argues that prostitution is maintained through the construction of a 'prostitute identity', one which the

individual develops in order to accommodate the contradictions and paradoxes that are inherent in the activity. Engaging in prostitution takes on meaning for the prostitute as a result of the rational analysis she makes – in light of her experiences over time – of her personal condition, of her concept of men, of violence and of money.

Dalla (2002) similarly finds that the *prostitute identity* becomes psychologically reinforced the longer the woman remains involved in prostitution, thereby making it difficult for her to leave this domain; in many cases this places her at greater risk, since she may lose some of her fear and adopt behaviours or enter into situations that would previously have been regarded as unacceptable. In the words of Weiner (1996, p. 100) this identity or *prostitute label* becomes applicable when ‘they [prostitutes] have lost so much that they have nothing left to lose’.

Empirical research on this issue has confirmed that victimization, principally that occurring during childhood, significantly increases the likelihood that a woman may enter the world of sex work, and it also contributes from an early age to the construction of a *prostitute identity* (Phoenix, 2000). The influence of victimization on an individual’s ability to make free choices is, however, highly complex and, rather than being under-standable in terms of a single cause, is likely to require an explanation based on multi- factorial models that take into account a range of individual and contextual variables. Indeed, behind the stereotypical

view of the prostitute there clearly lies a plurality of individual stories and circumstances that cannot be explained in simplistic terms.

Studies on the experience of childhood victimization and prostitution

Victimization during childhood is the form of this experience that has been most often related to the decision to engage in prostitution.

Moreover, the type of prostitution most studied has been street sex work, although street sex workers are not the largest population

(Vanwesenbeeck, 2001). It should be noted that a proportion of sex workers enter the world of prostitution before reaching adulthood, suggesting that they were already in a highly vulnerable situation as children. Authors such as Brannigan and Gibbs Van Brunschot (1997) and Gibbs Van Brunschot and Brannigan (2002) argue that it is not victimization in itself but, rather, the impoverished relationship with caregivers, the lack of support and control and the absence of a secure attachment (i.e. a negative family environment) that seems to increase the likelihood that maltreated children will turn to prostitution. Similarly, Potter, Martin, and Romans (1999) compared the life experiences of a sample of sex workers with those of a matched control group and found that the former were characterized by greater family breakdown, a lack of positive attachments and violence. In the study of British sex workers by Benson and Matthews (1995), 75% had entered prostitution before the age

of 18 and 40% had done so before reaching 16. Similarly, Silbert and Pines (1981) reported that 78% of the North American sex workers they interviewed had started to sell sex prior to the age of 18, while 62% had done so before the age of 16. A study of 47 Canadian sex workers by Nixon, Tutty, Downe, Gorkoff, and Ursel (2002) found that two-thirds of them had become involved in prostitution prior to their sixteenth birthday. Other studies, such as that of Schissel and Fedec (1999), describe the reality of juvenile prostitution in Canada and its relationship with experiences of family violence, it being demonstrated that physical abuse, neglect and sexual abuse significantly increase the possibility of a young woman becoming involved in prostitution. These experiences appear to lead to risky behaviours, low self-esteem and a vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. For a review of the need to treat prostituted minors as victims rather than as criminals, see the paper by Mitchell, Finkelhor, and Wolak (2010).

Although the majority of victimized minors do not become involved in prostitution, many adult sex workers do have a history of incest, maltreatment within the family or other forms of sexual abuse and assault. Among the most widely cited studies in this regard are two papers by Silbert and Pines (1981, 1982). These authors interviewed 200 women who worked or had worked as prostitutes on the streets of San Francisco and found that 60% of them had been the victim of sexual abuse prior to

the age of 16, and that on average there had been two perpetrators of this abuse, most commonly the father (67%). Ninety per cent of victims lost their virginity during the abuse, and many of them (47%) were seriously injured as a result. Some of the statements made by the sex workers when invited to give open-ended responses to the questionnaire showed that they associated what they felt after the abuse with their subsequent involvement in prostitution: 'My brother could do it; why not everybody else?', 'Might as well make them pay for it' or 'My father bought me, so who cares who else does?' (p. 410).

In a study conducted in Miami, Surratt, Inciardi, Kurtz, and Kiley (2004) interviewed 325 sex workers who were also drug users and found that 44.9% of them had been the victim of childhood physical abuse, 50.5% had experienced sexual abuse and 61.8% had been emotionally abused. Neglect was also a common feature of these women's childhoods, with emotional and physical neglect being reported, respectively, by 58.5% and 45.2%. Most of the women in the study indicated that prostitution was not a chosen career but a means of survival, the result of a drug habit combined with a lack of other skills or resources. However, the relationship between prostitution and drug dependence is not as clear as it seems. For example, the study by Morris et al. (2013) shows that among female sex workers who currently inject drugs in two Mexican-US border cities, nearly half appear to initiate sex work prior to beginning to inject,

nearly one-third initiate injection drug use before beginning sex work and one-quarter initiate both behaviours concurrently. Similarly, the study by Young, Boyd, and Hubbel (2000) showed that even though some women may enter prostitution in order to fund their drug use, they were more likely to use drugs as a means for coping with various intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences commonly associated with prostitution. In addition, research exploring problematic alcohol use among female sex workers in the UK found that alcohol use, before entry into sex work, was used as a coping mechanism to deal with experiences of loneliness and victimization during childhood and/or adolescence (Brown, 2013).

The study by Surratt et al. (2004) also showed that among these women the experience of childhood violence, especially sexual abuse, significantly increased the likelihood of their being the victims of violence during their adult life, this being consistent with the findings of studies carried out with samples of victims not involved in prostitution (see the reviews by Breitenbecher, 2001; Messman-Moore & Long, 2003; Roodman & Clum, 2001).

The study by Villano et al. (2004), conducted in the US, was the first to use a standardized instrument, namely the *Childhood Trauma Questionnaire* (CTQ; Bernstein & Fink, 1998), with a sizeable sample of sex workers in order to gather information about their experiences of childhood victimization. Of the 171 street-based sex workers who took

part in this study, 42% minimized their experiences of childhood maltreatment. Mean scores on the Sexual Abuse subscale were in the moderate-to-severe range ($M = 9.33$; $SD = 6.17$), while those on the subscales of Physical Abuse ($M = 9.26$; $SD = 5.45$), Emotional Abuse ($M = 10.35$; $SD = 5.33$) and Emotional Neglect ($M = 11.40$; $SD = 5.37$) were in the low-to-moderate range.

A greater probability of having been the victim of violence during childhood was also reported in the study by Gibbs Van Brunschot and Brannigan (2002). These authors compared 42 street-based sex workers with a control group of 57 students and found that the former were 3.6 times more likely to have been physically maltreated and 2.3 times more likely to have been the victim of childhood sexual abuse. It should be noted that the most significant predictor of involvement in prostitution in this sample was early sexual relations (specifically, prior to age 13) rather than the experience of sexual abuse itself; the likelihood of such involvement was 4.4-fold higher among those who had had early sexual relations. However, one needs to take into account that in the majority of Western countries, having sexual relations with a minor below the age of 13 is still regarded as sexual abuse even in the absence of violence or intimidation, since the law regards the victim as unable to give consent. Consequently, the results of the study by Gibbs Van Brunschot and Brannigan (2002) give rise to confusion since the differences between the

variable referring to early sexual relations and that concerning sexual abuse are based on the presumed consent of the victim, when in fact both are measuring experiences of abuse; it is simply that in one case the victim reports having consented and in the other no.

Of all the possible forms of victimization, it is sexual victimization that has been the most widely studied in relation to the decision to become involved in sex work. Research on the effects of childhood sexual abuse has shown that victims are significantly more likely to engage in promiscuity and risky sexual behaviour (Lalor & McElvaney, 2010; Paolucci, Genuis, & Violato, 2001) and they also tend to have their first sexual relations at an earlier age (Dunlap, Golub, & Johnson, 2003), both of which have been shown by rigorous empirical studies (e.g. Wilson & Widom, 2010) to be predictor variables for involvement in the world of prostitution.

Based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative data gathered in the US, Dalla (2000) and Dalla, Xia, and Kennedy (2003) observed that a high percentage of the 43 sex workers they studied had suffered various forms of violence during childhood. Specifically, 74% had been sexually abused, mainly by a relative, 13.9% had been physically maltreated by their caregivers and 20.9% had been exposed to family violence. In line with this, the study of 294 North American sex workers by Kurtz, Surratt, Inciardi, and Kiley (2004) found that 85.7%

and 70.4% had suffered childhood physical and sexual abuse, respectively. Similar results have been obtained in Canada, where 90% of the 33 sex workers who reported on this issue said they had been victims of sexual abuse (80.3%), physical maltreatment (6.1%) or neglect (3%) during childhood and/or adolescence. In addition, 48.5% of these women stated that they had been the victim of different perpetrators (Nixon et al., 2002).

When considering the above findings it is worth noting that reviews such as that by Vanwesenbeeck (2001) point out that childhood victimization has often been linked to a specific subgroup of prostitutes, mainly those who work the streets, and these childhood experiences cannot be generalized to all sex workers. An important study in this regard is that conducted by Vanwesenbeeck, De Graaf, Van Zessen, Straver, and Visser (1995) in The Netherlands, where prostitution is legal within regulated premises. Based on interviews with 127 prostitutes these authors reported that 15.2% had been sexually abused by a relative and 8.8% by someone outside the family before the age of 16. Lower rates of childhood abuse among off-street prostitutes were also observed in the study by Sanders (2004), where 27.3% of a sample of 55 British prostitutes (16 with experience of the street) reported having suffered childhood sexual abuse.

The study by Farley and Barkan (1998) of 130 prostitutes who worked

the streets of San Francisco found that 57% had been the victim of childhood sexual abuse, with a mean of three different perpetrators. In addition, 49% said they had been physically assaulted by a caregiver. In a parallel study involving 475 prostitutes across five different countries (South Africa, Thailand, Turkey, Zambia and the US), 58% reported sexual victimization during childhood (see Farley, Baral, Kiremire, & Sezgin, 1998). More recently, Farley et al. (2004) interviewed 854 prostitutes (working on and off the street) from nine different countries (Canada, Colombia, Germany, Mexico, the US, Thailand, Zambia, Turkey and South Africa) and found that 59% reported being physically assaulted by a caregiver during childhood, while 63% said they had been the victim of childhood sexual abuse, with an average of four different perpetrators.

Despite these findings, the relationship between such experiences and subsequent involvement in prostitution remains open to debate. Two models have generally been proposed in this regard. The first considers that sexual abuse is mediated by psychological and emotional mechanisms. In their seminal study, James and Meyerding (1977) argue that the experience of sexual abuse leads the victim to detach herself from sexual activity and sexuality, as well as from the emotions associated with them, and that this facilitates her subsequent entry into the world of sexual commerce. In this context, Roth and Lebowitz (1988) have described how sexual victimization affects the core identity of victims, transforming

many areas of their lives, especially how they perceive their body, or how the body is used when relating to others. Sexual victimization during childhood and adolescence also places the victim at high risk of revictimization at a later stage, and it increases the likelihood of their becoming involved in prostitution.

In contrast to the above, some authors argue that the relationship between childhood sexual victimization and the decision to enter into sex work is mediated by psychosocial variables, such as having run away from home or the absence of family support (Nadon, Koverola, & Schludermann, 1998). The studies by Seng (1989) and Simons and Whitbeck (1991), among others, support this viewpoint. Other studies that have linked childhood victimization to subsequent prostitution acknowledge that the relationship is a complex one that is influenced by a range of variables that heighten such a risk. These variables include low educational level, substance-abuse problems in the family of origin and running away from home. At all events, it is argued that entry into sex work is better explained by models based on multiple and concurrent causality, rather than by individual variables (Kramer & Berg, 2003). In this regard, the study by McClanahan, McClelland, Abram, and Teplin (1999), involving 1142 female jail detainees, identified different pathways into prostitution, with the most significant in statistical terms being running away from home when still a minor and, especially, the

experience of childhood sexual abuse.

Yet perhaps the most convincing results regarding the relationship between victimization and prostitution, regardless of the ideological or theoretical approach, come from the small number of longitudinal studies that have been carried out (see Cunningham, Stiffman, Doré, & Earls, 1994, or the follow-up study covering more than 30 years by Wilson & Widom, 2008) and which confirm that childhood victims of maltreatment and sexual abuse are between 1.5 and 2.5 times more likely to become involved in prostitution during adulthood than are non-victims. The study by Cunningham et al. (1994) showed that polyvictimization (i.e. the experience of more than one form of maltreatment during childhood, and especially when this includes sexual abuse) is associated with an increased likelihood of risk behaviours during adolescence, among which is possible entry into prostitution. After controlling for variables such as gender and ethnicity, the probability of becoming involved in prostitution during adolescence was 1.3 times higher for those who had previously been physically assaulted, although this relationship was not maintained into adulthood. For victims of childhood rape the probability of subsequent entry into prostitution during adolescence and adulthood was, respectively, 1.5 and 1.7 times higher. The study by Wilson and Widom (2008) considered victims of maltreatment, abuse and neglect, as well as a matched control group, and it is one of the most exhaustive studies

on the effects of childhood violence. By means of path analysis (a form of structural equation modelling) the authors showed that childhood victimization led to early sexual contact, which in turn led to involvement in prostitution. Thus, early sexual experience is a mediator variable between childhood victimization and prostitution. A further finding was that among the different forms of victimization, childhood sexual abuse showed the strongest association with subsequent prostitution. Previous studies by the same group reported similar results (e.g. Widom & Kuhns, 1996).

The prospective study by West, Williams, and Siegel (2000), involving 113 women with a documented history of childhood sexual abuse, found that this experience was associated with a high risk of revictimization. Furthermore, revictimized women were three times more likely to become involved in prostitution than were their non-revictimized counterparts. Other studies using the same methodology, such as that by Siegel and Williams (2003), have indicated that the higher risk found among victims of childhood sexual abuse does not relate solely to entry into prostitution but also to many other criminal behaviours, mainly those of a violent nature, and that this is the case during both adolescence and the adult life of these victims. An earlier study by Widom and Ames (1994) reported similar results, it being found that victims of childhood physical assault and sexual abuse were significantly more likely to be arrested for

numerous crimes, notably those of a violent or sexual nature, including prostitution.

Table 1 provides an overview of the studies reviewed above in relation to the experience of childhood victimization among sex workers.

Victimization, prostitution and psychological distress

Few studies have analysed the emotional stress that involvement in sexual commerce implies for the individual concerned, and the implications this may have for her health, although it is well established that this is the most common risk, and the one which the person is least able to cope with.

Indeed, prostitution has been considered a high-risk activity from a psychological point of view, although it is difficult to determine the extent to which this risk is the result of prostitution itself or a consequence of previous victimization experiences or the stigma and negative connotations attached to the activity and those engaged in it.

Dissociation appears to be common among sex workers, just as it is among victims of childhood violence. Dissociative disorders are conditions that involve a disturbance of normal integrated consciousness, memory, identity, emotion, perception, body schema, motor control and behaviour (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). One view of dissociation is that it is a coping mechanism that enables individuals to forget or detach themselves from those experiences that are too painful to

be dealt with at present (see Spiegel et al., 2011). Dissociation allows the person to isolate the traumatic experience and, as a result, to function adequately in other areas of life. The goal here would be to give the person time to gain the strength needed to face the traumatic event, although the risk is that he or she fails to reconnect his or her emotions with the experience, such that what develops is a series of chronic problems (recurrent dreams, flashbacks, difficulty with decision making, substance abuse, etc.) (Herman, 1992).

Many prostitutes dissociate the more negative aspects of their work from other areas of their life, and as such they detach themselves from the psychological pain they would feel were they to be aware of the experiences they have to deal with, although this also puts them at high risk of revictimization (Sandberg, Lynn, & Green, 1994). This mechanism of dissociation, whereby a woman's private life is separated from her work as a prostitute, has been documented in numerous studies and it offers a way of having another life that is detached from the experiences of sexual commerce (Phoenix, 2000; Warr & Pyett, 1999).

Table 1. Studies on the experience of childhood victimization among prostitutes.

Study	Country	Type of prostitution	<i>n</i>	Childhood victimization*				Exposure to violence
				Sexual	Physical	Emotional	Neglect	
Dalla (2000) and Dalla et al. (2003)	US	Street	43	74%	13.9%	—	—	20.9%
Farley and Barkan (1998)	US	Street	130	57%	49%	—	—	—
Farley et al. (1998)	US, South Africa, Thailand, Turkey, Zambia	Street and off-street premises	475	58%	—	—	—	—
Farley et al. (2004)	US, Canada, Colombia, Germany, Mexico, Thailand, Zambia, Turkey, South Africa	Street and off-street premises	854	63%	59%	—	—	—
Kurtz et al. (2004)	US	Street	294	70.4%	85.7%	—	—	—
Silbert and Pines (1981, 1982)	US	Street	200	60%	—	—	—	—
Surratt et al. (2004)	US	Street	325	50.5%	44.9%	61.8%	Phys.: 45.2% Emot.: 58.5%	—
Nixon et al. (2002)	Canada	n.s.	33	80.3%	6.1%	—	3%	—
Sanders (2004)	UK	Street and off-street premises	55	27.3%	—	—	—	—
Vanwesenbeeck et al. (1995)	The Netherlands	Off-street premises	127	15.2% within family; 8.8% unknown	—	—	—	—

Notes: *This column includes the results of those studies that report percentage data for the different kinds of violence experienced by respondents prior to the age of majority. The cut-off point for determining this age differs between studies (i.e. it is taken as 16, 17 and 18).

n.s.: not specified.

In relation to the above, it should be noted that various studies with samples from different backgrounds have reported a high rate of dissociative disorders among victims of childhood sexual abuse (e.g. Egeland & Susman-Stillman, 1996; Hetzel & McCanne, 2005; Rodriguez-Srednicki, 2002). These victims dissociate their sexuality from their affective and emotional lives, and this can increase the likelihood of their becoming involved in sexual commerce. When one considers that many of these victims end up running away from home, and that they lack a secure and protective family environment, it is perhaps unsurprising that, within the so-called 'grey area' (see Figure 1), they might see entry into prostitution as one of their few limited options.

In this context, it is also important to note that the experience of violence has been consistently associated with the development of various psychological disturbances (see, e.g., the review by Macmillan, 2001), and as such the high prevalence of psychological problems among sex workers may be explained more by their high rate of victimization experiences rather than by the act of prostitution itself. Other authors suggest that the psychological distress associated with prostitution is more the result of social rejection and the negative connotations ascribed to such work and those who engage in it (Romans, Potter, Martin, & Herbison, 2001). However, the poor methodological control that characterizes most of the studies published to date prevents any reliable conclusions from being

drawn on this issue.

With respect to the presence of externalizing symptoms, the relationship between experiences of victimization and violent behaviour has been reported among victims, who may end up becoming perpetrators themselves (Arnold, Stewart, & McNeece, 2001). The study by Napoli, Gerdes and DeSouza-Rowland (2001, p. 75) similarly found that prostitutes may decide to adopt the role of perpetrator with their clients when they feel that it is the only way to avoid being revictimized themselves ('As long as I was perpetrating against someone else it meant they weren't perpetrating against me – or so I believed').

A strong association between sex work, victimization and drug or alcohol problems has also been documented (Baker, Case, & Policicchio, 2003; Dalla, 2002; Kurtz et al., 2004). The study by Medrano, Hatch, Zule, and Desmond (2003) found that childhood victimization increases the risk both of substance abuse and of entry into prostitution, with the three variables interacting in a complex way that is not captured by a simple linear relationship. Similarly, the path analysis conducted by Vaddiparti et al. (2006) showed that the strongest predictor of drug dependence and adult sex trading was having been the victim of physical or sexual violence during childhood. Once again, the relationship

between these two variables is complex and requires further attention on the part of academic researchers.

Social and professional implications

It is difficult to draw conclusions regarding an issue that has remained the subject of debate for so many years, especially since much of the research is tainted with ideological perspectives that go beyond strictly scientific objectives, thereby hampering an objective interpretation of results, which should not merely serve to support the researcher's existing viewpoint.

Neither is it easy to establish what the world of prostitution actually involves, since the term is used to refer to people with very different backgrounds, characteristics, motivations and experiences. While acknowledging these limitations, the knowledge that can be synthesized from the studies reviewed above does enable a number of conclusions to be drawn and recommendations to be made with respect to the field of victimology.

First, the decision to engage in sex work or prostitution is mediated by a number of variables and seems, in many cases, to result from a process of individual reflection and an analysis of risks and potential benefits. We should not forget that some sex workers decide to go into prostitution voluntarily and see it as an accepted work option; some studies even reflect positive aspects of sexual commerce as reported

by the prostitutes themselves (see, e.g., Lucas, 2005). However, in light of the published literature it should not be assumed that this is the process that has been followed by the majority – or even a sizeable proportion – of sex workers. Leaving aside those situations involving sex trafficking, which do not represent the experience of most sex workers, decisions made in the so-called ‘grey area’ (see Figure 1) are strongly influenced by childhood victimization. Although victims of maltreatment and, especially, childhood sexual abuse should not be regarded as incapable of rational decision making (based on an analysis of risks and benefits), it does need to be acknowledged that the experience of violence and an adverse family environment during childhood – coupled with the psychological distress, including the possibility of dissociative symptoms, that such situations produce – make it more likely that such victims may turn to prostitution. The present review suggests that many of these victims will not reach a decision based on their real options, but rather one that is coloured by their traumatic experience and the psychological disturbance associated with it. More than being just one of several options, prostitution therefore becomes the option that appears to offer the best chances of survival given the personal characteristics that have resulted from the experience of victimization. It can be concluded, therefore, that childhood violence is a key variable to take into account when attempting to

understand a person's decision to enter the world of prostitution and sexual commerce. As such, there is a need not only to promote more effective strategies for detecting childhood sexual abuse and maltreatment, but also to develop early intervention programmes that would enable these children to make genuine choices based on all possible options, rather than decisions that result from the distorted view they have of themselves, of others and of their future.

The fact that most studies focus on female street sex workers makes it difficult to know and assess the decision-making process in other types of prostitutes, such as males or transgendered people. In this latter group, a recent review by Nadal, Davidoff, and Fujii-Doe (2014) shows that the levels of discrimination suffered by transgender women mean that many view the sex work industry as their only viable career option. The authors describe interpersonal discrimination experiences that can be considered victimization, such as emotional abuse or physical and sexual aggression. The high levels of victimization and discrimination experienced by transgender persons and its relationship with the decision to enter prostitution have also been found in non-Western societies (see, e.g., the studies by Abdullah et al., 2012 in Pakistan, and by Khan et al., 2009 in Bangladesh).

Mention also needs to be made of research suggesting that prostitutes as a collective do not generally feel well represented by the

studies that have been carried out in this area, it being felt that their experience is often misinterpreted so as to lend support to one ideological perspective or another (Chancer, 1993). A similar point has been made by Wahab (2003, p. 626), who states that ‘the rifts between sex workers and both feminist and academic communities remain vast’. Aside from the ideological question, academic studies in this field also suffer from serious methodological weaknesses, such as a lack of control groups, the application of non-standardized instruments or the use of non-representative samples. In light of such weaknesses, and given the conclusions that can be drawn from the present review, the time has surely come for victimology as a science to take a more serious look at one of the most highly victimized groups in society, and to demand that researchers in the field achieve the same empirical standards that are expected in other areas. In practice, this would mean (1) that objectivity, validity and representativeness would be a prerequisite to the awarding of funding; (2) that institutional support would be withdrawn from any study that, without any empirical foundation, openly adopted a particular position and whose purpose was merely to support the activist aims of a particular group or ideology; and (3) that research would be conducted independently, not only of power structures but also of lobbyists and interest groups. Only thus will victimology be able to provide scientific knowledge on an issue that – despite the notable

rates of victimization that are consistently reported and which need to be acknowledged once and for all – remains one of the most controversial topics within the discipline.

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