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Book Review | Leaving Prostitution: Getting Out and Staying Out of Sex Work

Melisa M. Jaris¹

¹University of Houston

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Sharon S. Oselin. *Leaving Prostitution: Getting Out and Staying Out of Sex Work*. NYU Press, 2014; 206 pp.; ISBN: 9780814770375.

Leaving Prostitution highlights the critical role that prostitute-serving organizations (PSO) can play in prostitutes' efforts to leave the sex industry. PSOs can provide prostitutes subsidized housing, employment opportunities, food, transportation, counseling, education, and mentoring. These fundamental amenities offer prostitutes the life choices and confidence needed to leave the sex industry.

Author Sharon Oselin researched street prostitutes associated with PSOs for ten years. She traveled the nation and immersed herself in four PSOs, where she interacted with and interviewed clients and staff members. The analysis illustrates how society's perceptions about criminal and deviant behavior, personal life experience or crisis, and other factors such as drugs and alcohol often perpetuate and compound the decision to enter into, remain in, or return to prostitution. *Leaving Prostitution* is comprised of six chapters that explain Oselin's research methodology and intent, as well as illustrate some prostitutes' experiences. PSOs are highlighted as the central lifeline for the women's success.

The first chapter discusses street prostitution as a small portion of the sex industry and how it is viewed by society. Prostitutes are often viewed as victims, deviants, or criminals. Oselin intended to research only street prostitutes that had already exited prostitution, to examine the prostitutes' complete cycle. Her research introduced her to PSOs because they offer services and resources to prostitutes who want to leave sex work. These organizations' services range from full-time live-in programs to simple part-time programs and counseling. Oselin interviewed 40 clients and 14 staff members at four PSOs. She worked as a researcher and intern for three months. The testimonies of the staff and clients make it clear that the PSOs offering more in-depth services also provide the greatest opportunity for successful exit from the sex industry.

Chapter 2 challenges popularly held perceptions of sex workers. Exploring factors which contribute to prostitution, *All in a Day's Work: The Good, Bad, and ugly* explores personal accounts of prostitutes' entrance to, life inside of, and exit from street prostitution. These include factors such as a need for fast money, disadvantaged backgrounds (addiction, homelessness, abuse, etc.), and drug and alcohol abuse. The latter was discussed as a contributor to persistence in prostitution. Their testimonies also indicate the toll that long-term prostitution takes, including the fear of violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and multiple arrests. Such perils often contribute to "role exit" or leaving prostitution.

Chapter 3 details why the women left the sex industry and how they ended up in a PSO. Oselin examines two internal and two external factors that expedite the initial exits. The internal factors

include personal reasons and pivotal events that prompt the change. The external factors are their knowledge of PSOs and personal bridges (assistance from trusted people). Although women may leave the trade on their own for these reasons, they are normally coupled with PSO accessibility.

The following chapter, *Getting On: Role Distancing* explains how PSOs encourage women leaving prostitution to adopt mannerisms and speech consistent with their new roles. Because of the stigma attached to prostitution, women are usually eager to distance themselves from the association when given the chance. Oselin takes note of some women who had trouble distancing themselves with this identity, which led to role conflict. This dissonance stalls their exit efforts and can quickly create a path back into prostitution.

Chapter 5 focuses on the women as they embrace their new lifestyles. At this stage, the women exhibit acceptance and understanding of their new social positions. Oselin discusses the importance of organizational roles in this phase, because positive influences and strong guidance can have a significant impact on the women's overall success. Control mechanisms within the PSOs are significant in helping the women to achieve their goals. Coercive control mechanisms compel clients to talk and behave according to their new roles, maintain responsibility for themselves and accountability to others, and follow program rules. Normative control mechanisms include mutual monitoring of clients, helping them to form bonds with other clients, and providing them with role models.

Getting Out: Remaining Out of Sex Work summarizes Oselin's research findings and implications. The women face a great challenge in completely changing their lives and their identities while working with PSOs. The temptations of their old roles will always be there in the form of drugs, alcohol, and former friends or acquaintances. Upon transforming into a new role, the women will be better equipped to set goals and make commitments. These commitments solidify the foundations of their new roles. Oselin's research provides clear indication that solid structure and positive, continued support are paramount for the women who want to make significant lifestyle changes.

Lastly, Oselin offers recommendations for improving the quality of life for street prostitutes through harm-reduction programs, the spread of PSOs nationwide, and additional funding for such organizations. Oselin indicates that legalizing or decriminalizing prostitution could serve to provide a safer working environment for prostitutes as well. As her research indicates, full-time PSO programs have tremendous impact on successfully exiting the sex industry. Oselin recommends further research to provide a larger cross-section of PSOs which may reveal other vital resource options not observed in this research. Perhaps future research or increased awareness of PSOs will help to penetrate the other PSOs that were reluctant to be part of Oselin's research.

Leaving Prostitution provides unique insight into the lives of street prostitutes. Many people may not truly know what it is like to be abused, abandoned, homeless, unemployed, or addicted to drugs.

Oselin sheds light on what some people thought of as glamorous, exciting, empowering or easy money, but turned out to be a disenfranchising mirage. A glimpse of their fears, their struggles, and their achievements provides proof that they do have viable alternatives through some PSOs. Oselin's work is of particular value to sociology or criminology students and professionals, for they may be inclined to address issues of prostitution. The efforts of both fields of study could result in the development of additional PSO services or spur changes in prostitution laws.

Overall, the book is enlightening and informative, but may leave the reader wanting to know more in terms of the women's individual stories. The testimonials add a personal tone that validates the critical role of the PSOs, but the reader mostly gets snippets of the individual stories. Oselin has first-hand knowledge about what transpired for other women in the programs. The reader would benefit from having an appendix of case studies for some of the women (even one from each PSO) that includes a more inclusive look at their journeys. This may further humanize the perceived deviant or criminal, while highlighting the significance of PSOs.