

Social workers neglect mothering issues with women in prostitution

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When's the last time you heard prostitution and mothering mentioned in the same sentence?

Prof. Einat Peled of Tel Aviv University's Bob Shapell School of Social Work is willing to bet it wasn't recently. In a new study, Peled and her co-researcher Tal Levin-Rotberg, a social worker at the Israel Health Ministry, found that even child-protection officers, who deal with mothers in prostitution as part of their job, are ambivalent and uncomfortable talking about the issue and so may avoid addressing it.

"A very high percentage of CPOs, and social workers in general, meet women in prostitution in their work, but most do little to address child-rearing and other challenges," says Peled. "The situation is riddled with conflict, questions, and [ambiguity](#). Prostitution, particularly in relation to mothering, is an uncomfortable topic, and people don't tend to raise issues that are uncomfortable."

The study, based on in-depth interviews with 13 female CPOs and published in Social Science Review, is part of a groundbreaking research series looking at professional attitudes toward prostitution for the first time.

Hiding in plain sight

The researchers note that the majority of women in prostitution have

children, a fact borne out by a growing body of research. In a sample of 1,963 street prostitutes in New York, 69.4 percent had children, and two studies in the Midwest found that 88 percent and 91 percent of the prostitutes in those studies had children.

The reality of mothers in prostitution is a "public secret," the researchers say. In Israel, that reality is suppressed to maintain a status quo regarding prostitution resting on "masculine ethics," defined by notions of absolute rights and contracts, according to Peled. This cultural approach is reflected in Israeli law, which views prostitution as a legitimate occupation based on a contract between two consenting parties. Women have a legal right to work as prostitutes as long as pimping and soliciting are not involved.

In semi-structured interviews, the researchers found that the CPOs' dominant professional perspective reflected such masculine ethics. The officers, responsible for the welfare of disadvantaged and at-risk minors in Israel's central region, expressed support for the idea that prostitutes can be good mothers, as long as they provide their children with basic developmental needs—food, clothing, school, and supervision—and shield them from the world of prostitution.

But this perspective was complicated for the CPOs by another perspective informed by "feminine ethics," reflecting concern and caring for others, the researchers say. As the interviews progressed and became more relaxed, the CPOs increasingly expressed concerns regarding the harmful impact of prostitution on women and reservations about the raising of children in the shadow of prostitution. This view stressed additional aspects of mothering, such as psychologically supporting and protecting children and being a positive personal influence. The CPOs expressed doubt that women in prostitution could fill these roles, given the traumatic nature of their work.

Keeping mum

The researchers report that the [social workers](#) were hesitant and uncomfortable during the interviews. CPOs hastily transitioned between questions, paused heavily, became embarrassed, digressed from the subject, and used humor to diffuse tension.

Peled speculates that the clash of the two perspectives and officers' difficulty maintaining a coherent perspective is similarly responsible for the lack of professional discourse about mothering in prostitution. An officer's mixed feelings send conflicting signals to the mothers, making open discussion of the reality of raising children while working in prostitution extremely rare.

But the researchers say the interviews seemed to help the officers reconcile their thoughts and perceptions on the issue. Further dialogue within and outside the world of social work could help incorporate feminine ethics into the framework used to handle mothering in prostitution. "I believe these studies are part of what we need to do to improve our social services to women in prostitution," says Peled. She advocates more research on the attitudes of different professional and lay groups—including men—toward [prostitution](#).

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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