

HIGHLIGHTS

OF THE RESEARCH REPORT:

TRAJECTORIES AND NEEDS OF RACIALIZED WOMEN WITH EXPERIENCE IN THE SEX INDUSTRY: HOUSING ISSUES AND IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

THE FULL REPORT CAN BE CONSULTED ON THE FOLLOWING SITES:

- Service aux collectivités de l'UQAM:
<http://sac.uqam.ca/liste-de-publications.html>
- The website of our partner organization:
<https://www.untoitpourellesquebec.org/>
- The website of the groupe de recherche sur l'inscription sociale et identitaire des jeunes adultes (GRIJA): <https://grija.ca/>



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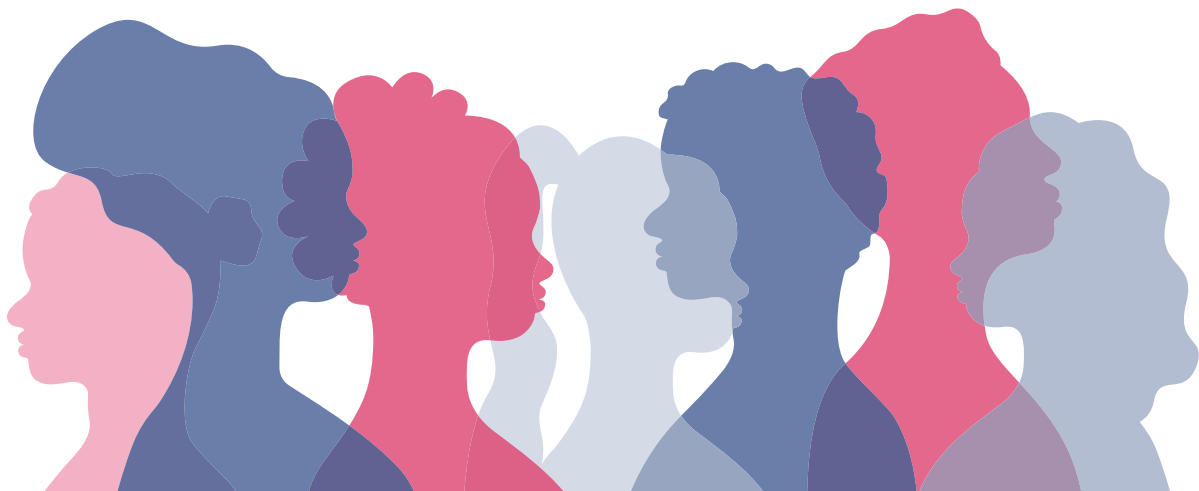
HIGHLIGHTS

PRIMARY OBJECTIVE

To understand the specific needs of racialized women with a history of involvement in the sex industry, particularly in terms of shelter and housing, and in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

METHOD

A qualitative research design (two “life story” interviews conducted with 13 participants) was used to provide an in-depth understanding of the women’s trajectory and its particularities, taking into account the complexity of their situation and the environment in which they evolve. Our aim was not only to identify the women’s needs, but also to understand them within the specificity of their trajectory, which is marked by various sources of oppression. In this way, we were able to contextualize the challenges inherent in their path, the limits of the services offered, and so on.

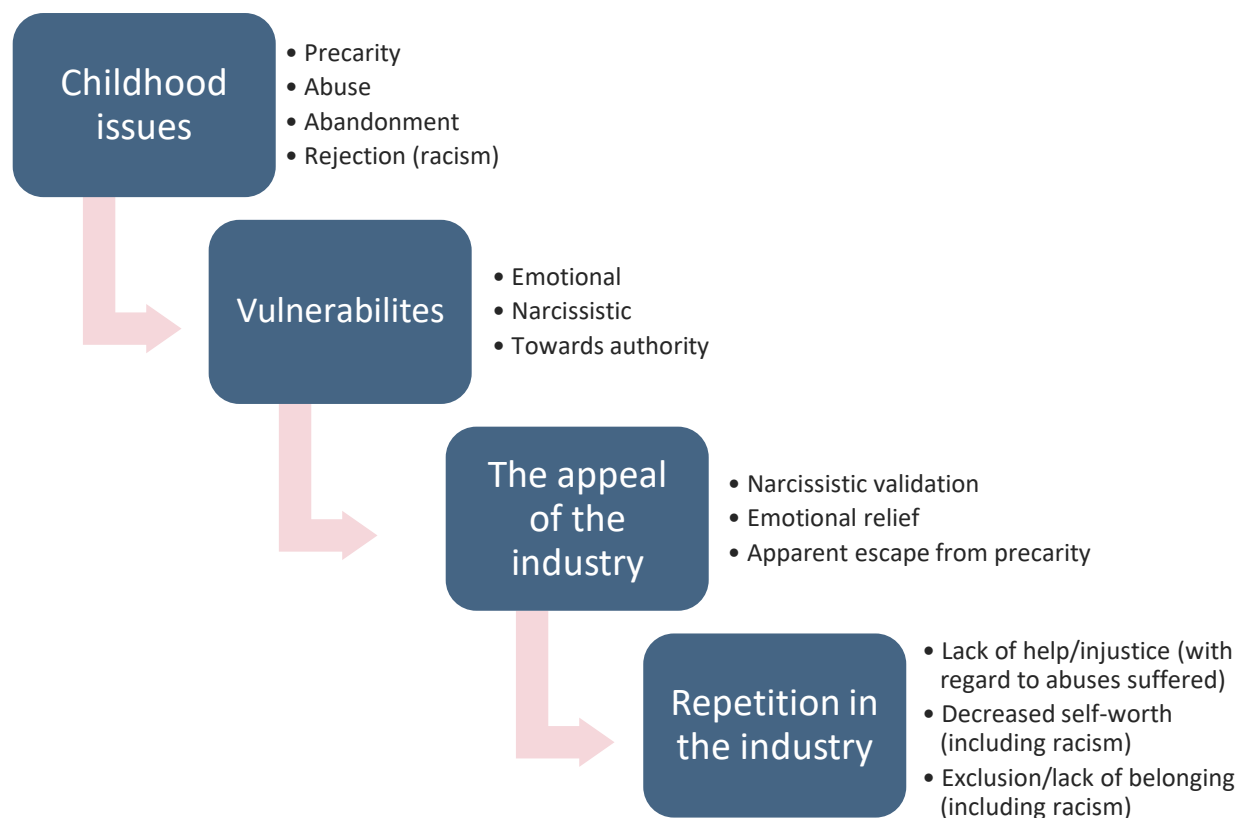


RESULTS

BEYOND RISK FACTORS, A **TRAJECTORY** LEADING TO THE SEX INDUSTRY

Our findings point to **common elements in the women's trajectories** (precarity, abuse, particularly sexual abuse, mistreatment), from childhood and adolescence onwards, that made them vulnerable to the influence of their peers and of predators in the sex industry.

More specifically, the following diagram suggests that vulnerabilities inherited from childhood and adolescence gave rise to different needs in the women, for which the sex industry seemed to offer an attractive solution. However, at the heart of this experience, the women's wounds were exacerbated rather than healed. This is particularly the case for Black women, due to the colourism that prevails in this environment – just as, one might assume, it does in the society in which the industry is embedded. As a result, their initial needs are still very much present when they leave the industry, and await alternative solutions, both from intervention workers and from society.



THE WOMEN'S UNDERLYING NEEDS

As shown in the diagram above, the women's **vulnerabilities**, inherited from their childhood, are broken down into a number of **issues or needs**, which make the industry seem like a potential solution.

- **Escaping precarity** – regaining power

I couldn't find work that was satisfying, or that paid well enough. Then I found a massage place. (MAEVE)

- **Satisfying emotional needs**

[Talking about the industry] It's about feeling like there's someone who's interested in us. You know? Someone who asks us questions, who says, "Are you all right?" Stuff like that. (MAEVE)

- **Satisfying narcissistic needs**

It's like... I kind of found my worth, somewhere. (CLARA)

EFFECT OF RACIAL ISSUES ON THE TRAJECTORY

These issues take different forms, and tend to increase the impact of the abuse, as well as fuelling the women's needs.

- **Racism** experienced by women, particularly in **adolescence**, which has an impact on relationships with peers and potential romantic partners, as well as on self-image.

It was the second time that I realized that guys aren't interested in Black girls. (CLARA)

- **Impact of immigration** on the family unit of origin: family separations, economic insecurity (especially for mothers), parental unavailability (and greater demands on children).

I had no parental control. I was using [...] I was experimenting, you know, with drugs. [...] I was just... it was complete debauchery. There was no... no structure, no discipline. (CLARA)

- **Between two cultures**: parent-child conflicts linked to a clash of values, feelings of confinement and marginalization in relation to peers in the host culture, mistrust of child protective services.

My parents are very traditional, and they're very conservative, too [...] they didn't accept that I was growing up. Like... in their eyes, I was still like a baby. (FAYAH)

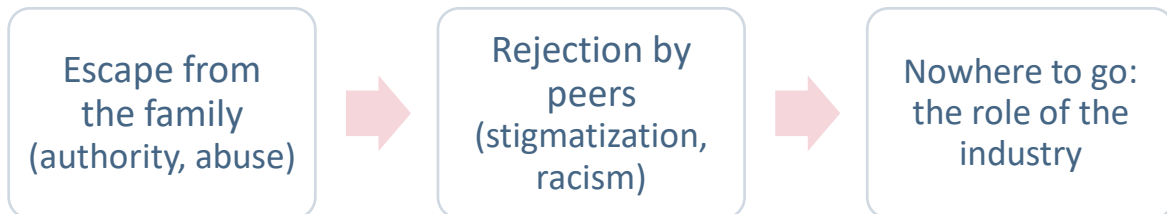
My mentality is Quebecoise. But her mentality is Caribbean. (NATALIA)

These issues related to race and immigration exacerbate the women's fragilities (emotional, narcissistic) and amplify the need to keep a distance from the family of origin in order to emancipate themselves and regain power over their lives.

[...] in a strip club... That's where I saw bodies like mine [Black women], you know? At a time when every day, especially when you are becoming a teenager, well you want to be beautiful, you want to make people happy, you know? (HORTENSE)

THE ILLUSION OF THE INDUSTRY: FROM HOPE TO REPETITION

At first, the industry is seen as a place where one can **regain power**, a place where one can revolt against past experiences of suffering...



... but the industry soon reveals itself as a place where **past** emotional and self-image **wounds are repeated** and amplified, and where precarity is maintained.

You have money, you spend it... you want more money, you spend it... you want more money, you spend it... it's like a vicious circle. (FAYAH)

For Black women in particular, **the racism and colourism inherent in the industry** exacerbate previous narcissistic suffering.

I was worth less than someone else, another person, another woman, because I was darker [...] Plus, in the sex industry, Black women don't make any money. It really hurt me. (CLARA)

OBJECTIFICATION OF RACIALIZED WOMEN

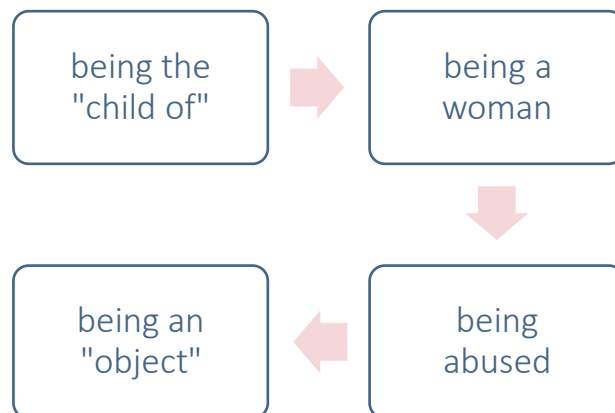
The repetition of the **abuse** amplifies certain aspects of the **cultural view of the child** (contribution to family functioning, respect demanded) and **of women** (subordination to men). It is as though some women gradually come to see their self-worth in terms of satisfying someone else's desires - considering that, through abuse, particularly sexual abuse, children are effectively used to satisfy someone else's desires.

A kid has to look after the kids. You can't have fun like a kid should. Because there's no parent around [...] I was there to welcome my brother to Canada. So that my brother could go to school. (CLARA)

[Talking about her relationship with her father] It was always conversations or situations that were like... I was treated like an object, basically. And that was before I was... [in the industry]. (MAEVE)

Even I can see that if my father had been better, if he had been different, if my father had more respect for women, I would have... learned to make men respect me. (CLARA)

The diagram below summarizes the accumulation of issues relating to the progressive objectification of women.



The industry **adds to this positioning as an “object”** at the service of someone else's desires, accentuating this effect of repetition of wounds, against the original wish of the women – emancipation – in turning to the industry.

LEAVING THE INDUSTRY: ISSUES AT STAKE

Insecurity

The women were already ill-prepared to enter society (e.g., lack of training), and are even more vulnerable when they leave the industry.

I never had a real job. That's the first thing I learned, how to make fast money. [...] When, for example, you have to meet a landlord and everything, they ask a lot of questions. And you don't know what to say. (ANGELA)

Even the money the women earned by working in the industry cannot be used to support life goals that would lead to their autonomy.

But at the same time, it's dirty money. You know, I don't want [my business] because I sold my body. (DAFNÉ)

Social exclusion

Instead of finding a solution for their emotional needs, the women find themselves increasingly alone, isolated in particular from their family environment...

I could disappear for days at a time... because I didn't want my mother to see me like that. [...] in my community, there are so many taboos. (CLARA)

...and more generally, neglected by society, which is not very receptive to them: their previous **stigmatization** is reinforced by the way women with a background in the industry are viewed.

And then when I asked for help, he said, "You're the one who decided to be here. You're the one who decided to be a whore." He said, "I can't help you." Then they left me on the street and went home. (DAFNÉ)

Trauma, shame, and damage to self-image

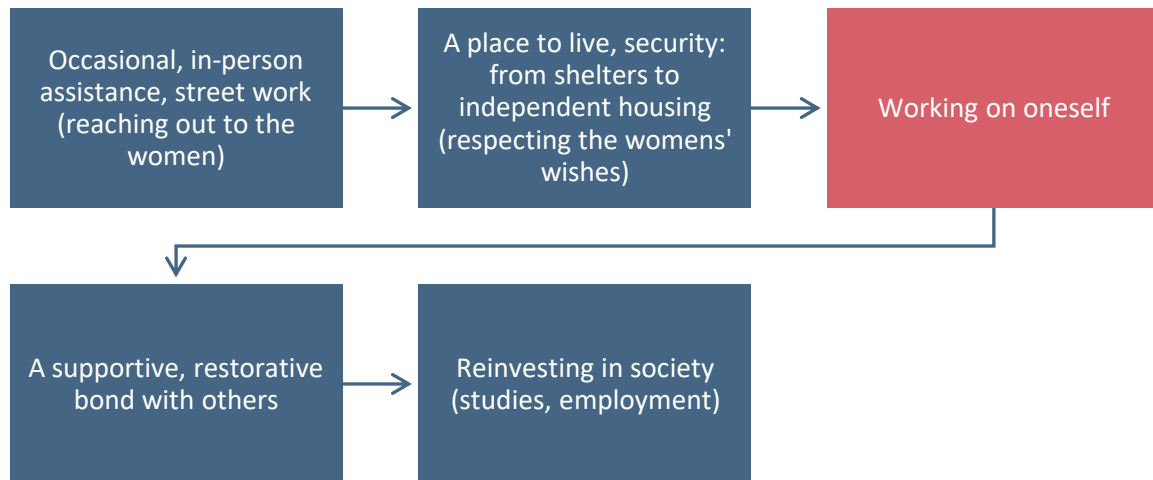
Instead of finding a solution to their narcissistic needs, the women emerge from the industry deeply wounded: flashbacks, difficulty concentrating, increased reactivity, and so on.

And there are the after-effects of the past that keep coming back. Like I'm trying to... because now, I'm going to therapy. And I try to... the after-effects of the past affect me to the point where, mentally, I have mental health problems, umm... depression. (ANGELA)

THE PROCESS OF LEAVING THE INDUSTRY

A diagram of the trajectory out of the industry emerged from the women's stories, highlighting the importance of **working on oneself**, which requires:

- first and foremost, **progressive housing stability**
- **long-term guidance and support**



More specifically, essential needs related to this trajectory emerged from the women's stories:

- Firstly, **sporadic help** (downtime, drop-in/respite or local intervention) and taking the time to earn the trust of women in the industry

At least you know to take a break. But at least you know, if you want to take a break for say, five days, you can go there. Then, after that, you have the tools, and if you want to go back [to the industry] you go back. But personally, I wouldn't have gone back. (DAFNÉ)

- From the moment they leave the industry, **a stable, safe environment**: settling down to begin healing and change

A place to live, it's important, that's where you rebuild yourself, that's where you analyze yourself, that's where you have time for yourself to finally think: here is my world, this is how I want to recreate myself. (BERTHE)

- **Security**, both internal and concrete, is based on:
 - the choice of location: an environment apart from the industry and its “anxiety-provoking,” worrying influence, reminiscent of traumatic experiences;
 - for racialized women (Black women in particular), this choice is complicated by the need for a place where they will not experience racism.
 - the characteristics of the location (for example, a locked front door);
 - in shelters, the respect by fellow users of the proposed framework (house rules and respect for them). For many, it is difficult to confront women who have had the same experience, at least at first.

I don't like spending time with people like that... [...] I'm afraid to run into people I know. (FAYAH)

This is where **racism, particularly against Black women**, proved to be the most prevalent.

**Race and housing:
repetition of the issues
in the industry**

accepting humiliation

obtaining money quickly

standing out based on appearance - the woman as objet

accepting housing that is second-best

I feel like I got ready in the same way I would to get a client [...] there was like a huge correlation between looking for an apartment and being in the sex industry. (CLARA)

More broadly, systemic issues, with racism at the forefront, make it more difficult to fit into a normative trajectory and find one's place in the world.

[...] a place where we feel like ourselves...for women of colour, or other races, or women who wear a hijab, whatever. Like... there's no place for us, you know. There's no place. (ANGELA)

- Group interventions and peer coaching: **building on the skills of the women**, of survivors.

- While spending time with peers can be detrimental for some women (influences, reminders, etc.), the positive influence of women who share the same experience is also valued by others. Moreover, women with a background in the industry could be involved as peer counsellors.

It would be cool if they trained girls who've been there, who've had the same experience. It would be easier that way... getting through to them. Because you know, for example, you, you haven't been through that. But you give advice to a girl. The girl's gonna say, "What the fuck?" Like, "who are you?" [...] There would also be regular intervention workers, you know, who have been trained, but with other girls, who haven't been. (DAFNÉ)

- **Time...** to rebuild themselves as **subjects in their own right** (deconstructing previous objectification) with the help of a new space-time setting: the importance of stable housing and long-term support.

Getting a teenager out of prostitution, that's one thing. But getting a women out... of prostitution, that takes... a whole organization! (BERTHE)

- Despite the importance of the women's search for autonomy, support and guidance are essential.

I had a roof over my head. That's great, but all the rest, you know, the process, I would have liked, you know, to talk to someone. [...] I know, the goal of this is to house women in difficulty, but what else? (ELENA)

- It is also important to avoid ending this support at the slightest improvement in the women's economic situation.

WHICH RAISES THE QUESTION:

Is our society based on money, productivity and immediacy, ready to accept that these women need time? Time to settle down, in complete safety and with their basic needs met, as long as necessary, to heal, and eventually achieve a lasting change in their trajectories?

THE “INTERNAL” TRAJECTORY IN LEAVING THE INDUSTRY: REGAINING CONTROL OF ONE’S LIFE

[...] I had a life. But it’s like I wasn’t really living it. (Berthe)

What does working on oneself involve?

It is an internal transition (albeit supported by caregivers, in particular), akin to the **resumption of the adolescent transition** (passage to adulthood), interrupted by a parenthesis in the industry at the level of identity, and at the level of the acquisition of skills (dropping out of school is very prevalent among the women). The women feel as though they are “starting over from scratch,” or “from minus one thousand”

I feel like... I’ve lost really key years of my life... working in the sex industry. [...] And now I realize, there are a lot of things I need to redo. It’s like I’m living through my teenage years now. (CLARA)

Interestingly, a number of **(Black) women** ended up **revisiting family models** (despite their flaws), especially maternal ones, in their process of re-constructing themselves; this appears to be particularly restorative on an emotional and identity level (an inspiring model despite its fragilities).

[Talking about her mother] Despite her failures, she kept going, she persevered, she got her diploma... She started working. She worked really hard. She saved for years. She bought her house. Despite her financial failures, she never got into prostitution, or anything like that. So for me, she’s a role model. This is a strong woman. (BERTHE)

ANOTHER SOLUTION TO INITIAL NEEDS: A SECOND CHANCE FOR SOCIETY

When women leave the industry, it is as though both intervention workers and society have been given a second chance, considering the initial social responses (particularly from the sex industry) to the women’s needs. In other words, the (re)construction of the self, the new relationship with the self, requires us to take into account the **social and even societal responses** to these inner transitions (needs, issues); these responses are outlined below.

Rebelling against authority

- Repairing childhood traumas, guidance
- Training legal authority figures
- Making recourse available

Escaping precarity

- Financial and logistical support when leaving the industry
- Advocacy and guidance
- In all cases: destigmatization (experience in the industry and race)

Meeting narcissistic needs

- Others reflecting an accurate image of themselves
- Becoming the "subject" of their own story
- General recognition of their trajectory

Meeting emotional needs

- Building a trusting relationship with intervention workers
- Revisiting family ties (and models)

IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

- The majority of the women experienced numerous **negative consequences** of the pandemic:
 - Precarity and vulnerability: in order to obtain sufficient income, responding to requests that they would otherwise have refused, in connection with lowering rates, and also in connection with customers' non-compliance with public health regulations.
 - Increased fragility: difficulty distancing from the industry, exacerbation of substance abuse.
- For some women, however, the confinements were a **forced break**, allowing them to slow the pace of their lives and reinvest in themselves.

You know, I tell myself that if Covid never happened, maybe I would have kept going. But Covid did happen. I thank Covid for that [laughs]. (DAFNE)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Support reinvesting oneself

- support the resumption of the adolescent transition in terms of abilities, identification with relevant models, and needs inherited from childhood
- take into account the time required to do this work, particularly given that the women often have traumatic histories
- take into account the strategies developed by the women, for example, meditation, spirituality, etc.
- consider that the relationship with oneself is inevitably linked with the relationship with others, which act as a mirror of the integrated (or to-be-integrated) self-image

Systemic issues: recognize the reality of the women involved

- consult this report!
- support the training of different social authorities who work with women, based on a better understanding of their individual trajectories
- involve women who have had experience in the industry, including racialized women, as trainers and peer counsellors
- recognize the women's experience in the industry as an integral part of their trajectory - recognize the women's skills and strengths, and ensure a vital minimum to prevent a return to the industry

Towards independent housing

- think of housing in terms of the need for a stable, safe place (apart from the industry's influence) so that other spheres of the women's lives can be transformed
- keep in focus the women's autonomy (an important need rooted in their experience), while envisaging a process that begins with local approaches, emergency intervention, then medium-term accommodation, according to the needs
- offer long-term support to the women (e.g., housing subsidies) according to their needs, despite increases in their stability (e.g., increased income following employment)
- recognize the particular case of mothers and the importance of this status for them, a role to be supported both in adapted shelters and in housing

Specific context of racialized women

- keep in mind the diversity into the experience of racialization: immigration, cultural differences in terms of customs and values, racism experienced, etc.
- recognize the issues connected to racism and colourism in the trajectories of the women as additional factors of oppression experienced by them - when they leave the industry, consider discrimination in terms of housing and employment
- train intervention workers on the specific realities of racialized and immigrant women; integrate more culturally diverse women into support services
- counter stigmatization and two-way biases: from the suspicion of some immigrant parents towards legal authorities (such as child protective services) to the systemic racism that infiltrates intervention work

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING TO DO WHEN YOU LEAVE... I THINK
THAT'S WHAT YOU WANT TO KNOW FROM ME.

IT'S WORKING ON THE SELF-ESTEEM OF THE GIRL WHO'S
RE-ENTERING SOCIETY. THIS IS SO IMPORTANT, BECAUSE FUCK,
SHE DOESN'T HAVE ANY. SHE'S COMPLETELY BEATEN DOWN WHEN
SHE COMES BACK.

AND WORKING ON THE SELF-ESTEEM OF **BLACK WOMEN**... (Karina)



