



# ENCOMPASS FOCUS ON HOUSING AND COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION (CSE)

Over a week in November 2021 the 7 organisations that make up the Encompass Network supported 150 women who had been involved in selling or exchanging sex or images.

The Encompass organisations are Another Way (Edinburgh), Routes Out (Glasgow), Vice Versa (Dundee), Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre (Perth & Kinross), Aberdeen Cyrenians, Alcohol & Drug Action Aberdeen, TARA.

Of the 150 women 79 women needed support in relation to housing and 33 in relation to homelessness.

Women who sell or exchange sex or images are not a homogenous group. One woman may be involved in exchanging sex for a place to stay, whilst another woman may be struggling to pay her mortgage and as a result starts escorting, others may have had multiple experiences of homelessness due to mental health or addiction issues.

As a result, no two women involved in selling or exchanging sex will have the same housing needs, but for many women housing and housing instability can be a driver into selling or exchanging sex.

As such housing and homelessness services have a key role in supporting women involved in selling or exchanging sex or images. This briefing will set out some of the key research in this area and highlight some practice points that will support you in your work with women who may have been involved in selling or exchanging sex or images.

## ALMOST 5 IN 10 WOMEN SUPPORTED BY SPECIALIST CSE SERVICES NEEDED SUPPORT WITH HOUSING ISSUES



## WHAT DOES RESEARCH TELL US ABOUT THE LINKS BETWEEN CSE, HOUSING & HOMELESSNESS

Housing and homelessness are often a pathway into selling or exchanging sex for women. Gender inequality means that women's housing options are impacted by the disadvantages in the labour market such as part time or precarious and/or low-paid employment or are more reliant on benefits due to caring responsibilities. According to Engender women often pay a higher proportion of their income on housing, and so they are

- less able to access adequate standards of housing,
- more likely to live in overcrowded housing or poor conditions,
- more vulnerable to housing insecurity.

For women involved in selling sex research carried out in Stoke on Trent suggests that street sex workers are a 'hidden homeless' population. The majority of those surveyed had stayed in squats (59 per cent) and most had relied heavily on friends and family for a roof over their head. Some used clients as a means of obtaining a night's shelter as well as other homeless people's temporary accommodation (for example a friend's hostel room).

This research also found that repeat homelessness was very common, with 85 per cent of participants reporting that this was not their first episode of homelessness. More than half had been homeless five times or more and 30 per cent reported having experienced ten or more episodes of homelessness.

The experiences of the women in this study suggest that once they became homeless it proved very difficult for them to resolve housing problems and permanently escape homelessness. Specialist agencies working with women involved in selling or exchanging sex across Scotland work with women who find difficulties in sustaining tenancies, usually as a result of addiction and poverty issues.

This research showed that the triggers for homelessness in this group included:

- an unplanned move from the parental home following problems or conflict
- domestic abuse from a partner
- an unplanned exit from local authority care where meaningful contact with Social Services ceases
- a traumatic experience, the personal impact of which eventually results in homelessness.

The Scottish Drug Forum found that women became involved in transactional sex 'as a result of grooming while others found themselves involved from a place of vulnerability which included desperation for money, not wanting to be caught shoplifting or selling drugs as they might end up in prison and they rationalized that selling sex was preferable. Other vulnerabilities came from being made homeless or having benefits stopped.'

A Shelter and ComRes survey published in Jan 2021 found that as many as 30,000 women were propositioned with 'sex for rent' offers across the UK between March 2020 and December 2020. These adverts appeared on sites such as Craigslist, Gumtree and Vivastreet and were particularly prevalent in high rent areas such as Edinburgh and Aberdeen. While it is illegal for a property owner to demand sexual favours in return for rent or accommodation, only 1 man had been arrested or convicted for it in the UK by March 2022.

*When he left, there was times I didn't think I would make it. I had the kids so I had to, I had to keep going because I was all they really had then. I couldn't go running away. I didn't have that choice. The kids, see they never knew what I did, all those times they stayed with their gran or away at my sisters. I fitted my work round the kids the best I could, we were able to keep the house, that was really important to me. They still don't know. I mean, how could I tell my kids? How could I? I would never want either of them in that life. Never. No way.*

Kandi, Outside

Research from Wales with 40 women found:

- Approximately half of the respondents did not have secure accommodation with five being homeless at the time of interview
- Fifteen of those who had secure housing were in rent arrears
- Fifteen respondents reported having had to leave a property due to rent arrears (eight due to domestic abuse and six due to drug use)
- The majority of respondents (n = 28) indicated that they had experienced multiple periods of homelessness

Research carried out for Eaves found that, housing can act as a reason for entry into prostitution as well as a barrier to exiting. Lack of access to affordable and safe housing was the second most prevalent barrier faced by the women in the sample. Eighty-seven (77%) women experienced housing problems and homelessness during their involvement in prostitution. Problems with accommodation and housing acted as a barrier for women in this study in several ways, for example being compelled to seek accommodation with pimps or abusive partners in order to prevent homelessness, involvement in prostitution in order to pay the rent or mortgage, losing accommodation due to imprisonment, and problems with location resulting in feeling isolated and living away from support networks.



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## PRACTICE POINTS FOR HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS PROFESSIONALS

### BE AWARE THAT THE EXCHANGE MAY NOT BE FOR MONEY BUT FOR 'SURVIVAL' REASONS

Women involved in selling or exchanging sex are a diverse group, with such diversity, you should be aware that you may be working with individuals who are or have been involved in selling or exchanging sex. Remember that the exchange of sex does not need to be for money it can be an exchange for:

- Drugs / alcohol
- food
- shelter
- protection

Women can also be involved as a result of being pressurised into exchanging sex by 'partners' in order to cover debts, buy drugs etc.

### INDIVIDUALS MAY HIDE THEIR INVOLVEMENT DUE TO FEAR OF STIGMA OR DISCRIMINATION

Those involved in selling or exchanging sex may hide their involvement, out of concern about the response they may get (fear of being judged or being reported to the police or social services can be a barrier to disclosure), or because they do not see the exchange of sex for drugs or shelter etc as a formal exchange but as something they do for survival or to meet these needs.

Be clear about women's rights to confidentiality just because someone is involved in selling or exchanging sex or images, this on its own is unlikely to meet the threshold for breaching confidentiality, but be clear that where there is felt to be significant risks to her or to others that you have a duty to share information.

For women trying to access housing their involvement can make it difficult for them to provide proof of income which impacts on their ability to take on leases and they can also find that their involvement can lead to threats of eviction and issues with neighbours. Selling sex is not illegal in Scotland and should not be used as a reason for evicting someone in its own right.

### ASK THE QUESTION

If you think someone may be involved in selling or exchanging sex, you should ask them about this, as it's easier to tell when you have been asked as it shows the person asking has an awareness of the issue and is open to listening. Ensure you reaffirm their right to confidentiality and let them know you are asking so you know how to help them. If they say no, emphasise again about confidentiality and let them know they can come back to you at any time if they need help.

Some individuals who sell or exchange sex will not frame their experience as prostitution, sexual exploitation or sex work, so try to give examples when you ask.

This could include asking:

*Has anyone offered you money or goods such as drugs / alcohol in return for sex?*

*Has anyone offered you a place to stay in exchange for any kind of sex?*

*Has a partner or someone else you know ever put you under pressure to have sex with someone else?*

## SEX FOR RENT

Sofa surfing is a one of the reasons that women's homelessness can be hidden from agencies, it is also something which makes women vulnerable to being coerced into exchanging sex for a roof for the night, be aware of this and recognise the links between sofa surfing and sex for rent.

Research has shown that landlords will take advantage of women's weaker economic situation, if there is any evidence that a private landlord is offering to rent properties for sexual activity then it should be taken into account in determining whether a landlord is a fit and proper person under the law relating to landlord registration and licensing of Houses of Multiple Occupation.

## RECOGNISE LINKS WITH OTHER FORMS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Be aware that there are links between involvement in selling or exchanging sex and other forms of violence against women and girls. The Encompass Snapshot showed that:

- 35 (23.5%) of women disclosed experiences of Childhood Sexual Abuse (this increases to 36% if we remove women who have been trafficked for sexual exploitation)
- 81 (54%) of women disclosed experiences of domestic abuse (this increases to 83% if we remove the women who have been trafficked for sexual exploitation)

Where appropriate let the individual know about support services available for these issues.

## CONSIDER THE APPROPRIATENESS OF ACCOMMODATION

Too often temporary accommodation can exacerbate women's vulnerabilities and lead to further exploitation. Women who have been placed in mixed sex temporary accommodation report being further exploited by individuals in this accommodation.

Women who are trying to address addiction issues find difficulties with the ongoing contact they have to have with other tenants / residents who are continuing to use substances. This is more difficult if other women have to also continue selling sex.

Sometimes an allocation of temporary accommodation can cause more difficulties for women and so, it's essential that accommodation feels safe and supportive if it is to meet women's needs.

Reviews of homelessness services show how an emphasis on behaviour change alone may, in some cases, result in people disengaging with services and remaining in cycles of homelessness.<sup>8</sup>

Taking a Housing First approach with women who have complex needs and are involved in selling or exchanging sex has been shown to work. Housing First may be operating in your area and so the framework is there to consider the specific needs of women selling sex.

***Life, it's not easy, it's not fantastic but it's livable and it's at times enjoyable. We're in our own house, the first house I've ever felt safe. This house has to be pure and clean. Somewhere Jackson, my wee dog and I want to be.***

*(Wendy Inside Outside)*



# ENCOMPASS FOCUS ON ADDICTIONS AND COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION (CSE)

## LONG TERM IMPACT

Be aware that involvement in exchanging or selling sex can have long-term impacts which can continue to affect someone after they have stopped selling or exchanging sex. This can be as a result of coping strategies used (drugs, alcohol, dissociation), experiences of violence or abuse or fear of these, the impact of discrimination and stigma which can cause feelings of shame and guilt.

The Encompass Snapshot showed that 121 women (80%) had disclosed a mental health issue, the majority of women (102) experienced anxiety and or depression, some women had been formally diagnosed with PTSD, Complex PTSD, EUPD, BPD while many others displayed other trauma symptoms.

✧ *'I have to put it all away in a box. Sometimes the lid comes off but then the lid goes back on again. It has to 'cos of the panic and the overwhelming feelings. The box is there, it's very much there and you can only open it bit by bit 'cos if you were to let all of it out, you would be in self-destruct mode. It would be an instant overload of I've done this, these things have happened to me.'*

*(Wendy, Inside Outside)*

- Consider what experiences the individual has had with previous services and how this has impacted on them?
- Consider what are the barriers the individual experienced when trying to access support (like the GP, clinics, alcohol/ drug use services)?
- Consider if the individual has been harmed previously in her life?
- Do assessments include information about the individuals strengths and protective efforts?

At a minimum, systems should endeavour to do no further harm. Yet, the way in which systems blame victims/ survivors or blame them for their efforts to manage their reactions can create re-traumatisation. Victims/ survivors highlight that a lack of consistent practitioners, being forced to continually re-tell their story, not being believed, long waiting lists or complex processes to access support, and physical service environments that feel unsafe and unwelcoming can be re-traumatising, consider what you can do to create a safe context for those you work with.

Taken from the Improvement Service Domestic Abuse Companion Pack

## TAKE A PERSON CENTRED APPROACH

If you are working with women via appointments, try to ensure that these take place at a time which suits the individual (early morning appointments can be difficult for some, while for others appointments outwith school times can make it harder for them to engage).

Work with the individual to identify what their support needs are and what change/difference they are looking to achieve through engaging with you. Ensure you take a non-judgemental approach and offer the individual choices and build on the strengths they have, be clear that you have hope that they can achieve the changes they are looking to make. Women involved in selling or exchanging sex have told us that having reliable and meaningful relationships can make a huge difference as can feeling listened to.

In terms of what to call their involvement in selling or exchanging sex use the language they use if they refer to themselves as a prostitute or sex worker then use these terms, if they do not see themselves in these terms then describe the activity. Avoid placing labels on individuals that they do not ascribe to themselves.

## TAKE A TRAUMA INFORMED APPROACH

Being trauma informed means being able to recognise when someone may be affected by trauma, collaboratively adjusting how we work to take this into account and responding in a way that supports recovery, does not cause further harm and recognises and supports people's resilience. The key principles underpinning trauma-informed practice, services and systems are safety, collaboration, trust, empowerment and choice.

Evidence shows that safe and supportive relationships are the best predictors of recovery following traumatic experiences. Whilst those affected by trauma may be amongst those most likely to need to engage in effective relationships with services in order to access the care, support and interventions they require, the impact of trauma on relationships means that they may be the least likely to seek or receive this help and support.

People with experience of trauma consistently highlight the importance of their relationships with workers in accessing the supports, interventions or life chances they needed. Evidence shows that the development of a trusting relationship with a worker had the greatest impact upon people's capacity to seek and receive care, support or interventions.

- Judgement, stigma, shame and blame need to be recognised and understood by professionals. If there are children involved, is the individual worried that the children are at risk of being removed from her care if she opens up?

## TAKE A RISK REDUCTION APPROACH & OFFER SUPPORT TO EXIT

Some women involved in selling or exchanging sex may want to stop whilst others may want to continue

- For those who are looking to stop (exit) help them to identify what barriers there may be and help them to access support to address these.
- Let all women know about other supports which are available to help them, welfare rights, employability services, specialist CSE services or other VAW services, sexual health clinics
- For those who want to continue take a risk reduction approach and look at how risks can be managed (see safety planning guide in further resources), be clear about the risks involved and of organisations which offer support around reporting of crimes e.g. National Ugly Mugs. Provide the support they need from you at this point taking a person-centred approach, when appropriate revisit their views on wanting to stop.
- Let them know that should they wish to stop then help is available.
- Understand that women are often working to a long-term goal, and that their engagement may be interrupted by a crisis.



“There's a lot of discrimination. I think women feel uncomfortable speaking to like, nurses or other people that provide... like, that service, like tests and things. Because if they mention that they're in sex work, even if it's just camming or if it's full-service sex work, you feel like you're gonna get looked down on.  
(Umbrella Lane Needs Assessment 2020)



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## RENT ARREARS AND FINANCIAL ISSUES

Many women are involved in selling or exchanging sex out of financial necessity. Ensure that when you are working with individuals who are having difficulties paying rent that appropriate financial support is provided. For women involved in selling or exchanging sex Victim Support Scotland have access to funding via the Scottish Government (Victims Fund) which can be accessed and may help address these issues.

## RESEARCH

- [Encompass Snapshot](#)
- [Inside Outside](#)
- [Engender, Gender, Housing and Homelessness](#)
- [Sex Work, Drug and Alcohol Use: Bringing the Voices of Sex Workers into the Policy and Service Development Framework in Wales, 2015, Dr Tracey Sagar, Debbie Jones and Dr Katrien Symons College of Law and Criminology, Swansea University](#)
- [Matheson, C.; Bon, L.; Bowman, L.; Hannah, A.; MacLeod, K. Vulnerability, Risk and Harm for People Who Use Drugs and Are Engaged in Transactional Sex: Learning for Service Delivery. \*Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health\* 2022](#)
- Breaking down the barriers: A study of how women exit prostitution, Julie Bindel, Laura Brown, Helen Easton, Roger Matthews and Lisa Reynolds Eaves and London South Bank University (LSBU)
- The Housing Needs and Experiences of Homeless Women Involved in Street Sex Work in Stoke-on-Trent, Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University

## FURTHER RESOURCES

Encompass Network, for details of specialist support agencies in Scotland and further resources such as Encompass Snapshot and Safety Planning Guide [www.encompassnetwork.info](http://www.encompassnetwork.info)

Clickbites awareness raising session, [www.cseaware.org.uk](http://www.cseaware.org.uk)

Victims Fund, <https://victimsupport.scot/victims-fund/>

Trauma Informed Practice Toolkit, <https://hub.careinspectorate.com/media/4362/trauma-informed-practice-a-toolkit-for-scotland.pdf>

Tara for specialist support and training on Trafficking [www.tarascotland.org](http://www.tarascotland.org)

You my Sister, for online mental health support <https://youmysister.org.uk/>

[Improvement Service Trauma Informed Practice Companion Guide](#)