

“It’s All I Know”

Experiences of Sex Work, Survival Sex and Sexual Exploitation in Doncaster

Findings from the Amber Project

September 2024



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Executive Summary

This paper sets out the results of a survey completed with women with experiences of sex work, survival sex or sexual exploitation who have received support from the Amber Project in Doncaster. The survey explores reasons why women enter, remain in or return to sex work and highlights gaps in support that prevent women fleeing sexual exploitation or leaving sex work if that is what they want.

Due to the small sample size and the fact that the Amber Project primarily supports street sex workers, who are more likely to experience multiple unmet needs and vulnerabilities, these findings should not be taken as representative of all sex workers.

All women surveyed used the term 'sex work' and/or 'street sex work' to describe their experiences however, using the Harm Reduction Compass as a guide, we could identify survival sex and/or sexual exploitation in many women's experiences. This highlights the importance of professionals being able to identify signs of exploitation as women will not necessarily identify themselves. This can be done through both specialist provision like Amber, where staff can build up trust and relationships, as well as mainstream services such as the police and healthcare professionals who may be a woman's first point of contact.

Women felt that efforts to avoid people entering sex work in the first place should target the underlying reasons why women enter sex work, as opposed to anything targeted at sex work itself. Drug use and addiction was the most common reason for women both entering and returning to sex work. Similarly, no longer needing to fund a drug habit was cited as a reason for exiting sex work. Several women reported using drugs to cope with previous experiences, including childhood sexual abuse, as well as to cope with the daily reality of sex work.

The influence of others is another common factor. Four women were exploited by their boyfriend/partner, often to fund their addictions, and being around other people who use drugs contributed to women who had previously exited sex work returning to it. This related to concerns around inappropriate housing, including being accommodated with other people using drugs.

Financial hardship was not cited as a reason for entering sex work in the first place, with the exception of buying drugs, but featured more strongly in people's reasons for returning to sex work. 13 out of 16 women said that, if they could make the same money doing a different type of work, they would change jobs. However, several questioned whether it would actually be possible for them to earn the same money doing a different type of work and therefore stated a preference for sex work due to the higher levels of pay and greater flexibility. Others questioned whether they would ever be able to get another job due to their drug use.

Most of the women had experienced sexual assault during their time as a sex worker but had very negative experiences when reporting to the police. Multiple women were told by police officers that this is what they should expect due to their work. None of the women who reported to the police said that their case progressed any further.

Several women acknowledged that they need to want to change and some blamed themselves for not engaging with support. They value services that focus on relationships, including peer support from people who understand their situation. Services should not use women's unwillingness to engage as an excuse for not making their services as accessible as possible. There is a need for more joined-up and holistic support, including better communication between services. This includes providing options for women who face barriers to housing due to their drug use.

The findings indicate crucial components of support for women with experiences of sex work, survival sex and sexual exploitation which should be provided as part of a holistic package:

- **Long-term, non-judgemental outreach support**
- **Informed mainstream services to ensure minimum levels of understanding and ability to identify exploitation and vulnerability**
- **Flexible, gender-informed addiction and recovery services**
- **Safe, gender-specific, trauma-informed accommodation, including provision for those with higher levels of complexity**
- **Sustainable income**
- **Multi-agency case management**

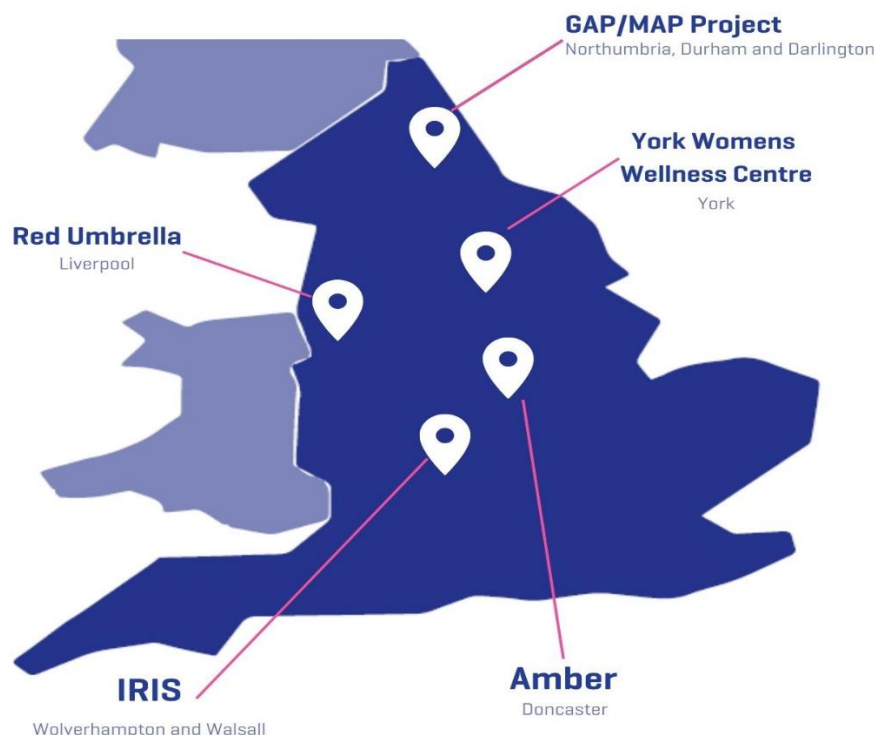
About Changing Lives

Changing Lives is a national charity supporting over 15,000 people to change their lives for the better every year.

We have around 100 projects in England, supporting people in the most challenging of circumstances including sex work, survival sex, sexual exploitation, homelessness, addiction, long-term unemployment, domestic abuse, involvement with the criminal justice system and more. Many of the people we support experience multiple unmet needs and require support to navigate systems that are not designed to deal with complexity.

Changing Lives is one of the UK's largest providers of support to people with experience of sex work, survival sex and sexual exploitation. Our first project supporting women selling sex was launched in the North East in 2006 and we now provide services in several parts of the country including the North East, Merseyside, York, Doncaster and Wolverhampton. In 2023 we received funding from the Home Office to expand our services with the Netreach project, which provides outreach and support to women selling sex online, including those experiencing or at risk of sexual exploitation.

Our sex work, survival sex and sexual exploitation services primarily support women but are open to people of all genders.



About Amber

The women surveyed for this report all access support from the Amber Project in Doncaster.

Amber provides support to women and men with experiences of sex work, survival sex and sexual exploitation in Doncaster. This work was first commissioned in 2014 in response to an identified risk to individuals and communities linked to sex work. The project engages with people through outreach and other means to empower, encourage and facilitate them to work with both mainstream services and other local community provision.

The project offers non-judgemental, trauma-informed support that is led by what people themselves want. This may involve supporting people through safeguarding and police reports; access to health services; safety advice and support; or support to transition out of sex work if that is what they want.



Sex Work, Survival Sex and Sexual Exploitation

We find it helpful to distinguish between sex work, survival sex and sexual exploitation, but acknowledge that there are not always clear dividing lines between these categories.

We define the categories as follows:

- **Sex work** is a broad term for various sexual activities, where the person providing sexual services profits in some way, often financially. There are forms of sex work that are consensual, where the person selling sex chooses to do so either because they feel comfortable and hold agency in this work, or because they feel it best fits their needs.
- **Survival sex** is a form of sex work rooted in structural failings, whereby a person is not coerced into sexual activity, but is instead constrained by social and/or economic vulnerabilities. In cases such as these, provision of sexual activity is motivated by a survival need such as housing, food, tobacco, protection, alcohol, or drugs. Although people engaging in survival sex are more vulnerable to sexual exploitation, we recognise that not all people who are engaging in survival sex are being exploited, as the degree to which a person buying sex is knowingly taking advantage of this survival need can vary.
- **Sexual exploitation** is a form of sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a person aged 18 or over into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. The victim cannot consent to sexual activity if they see no reasonable alternative to engaging in the activity or have a reasonable belief that non-engagement would result in perceived negative consequences for themselves or others.

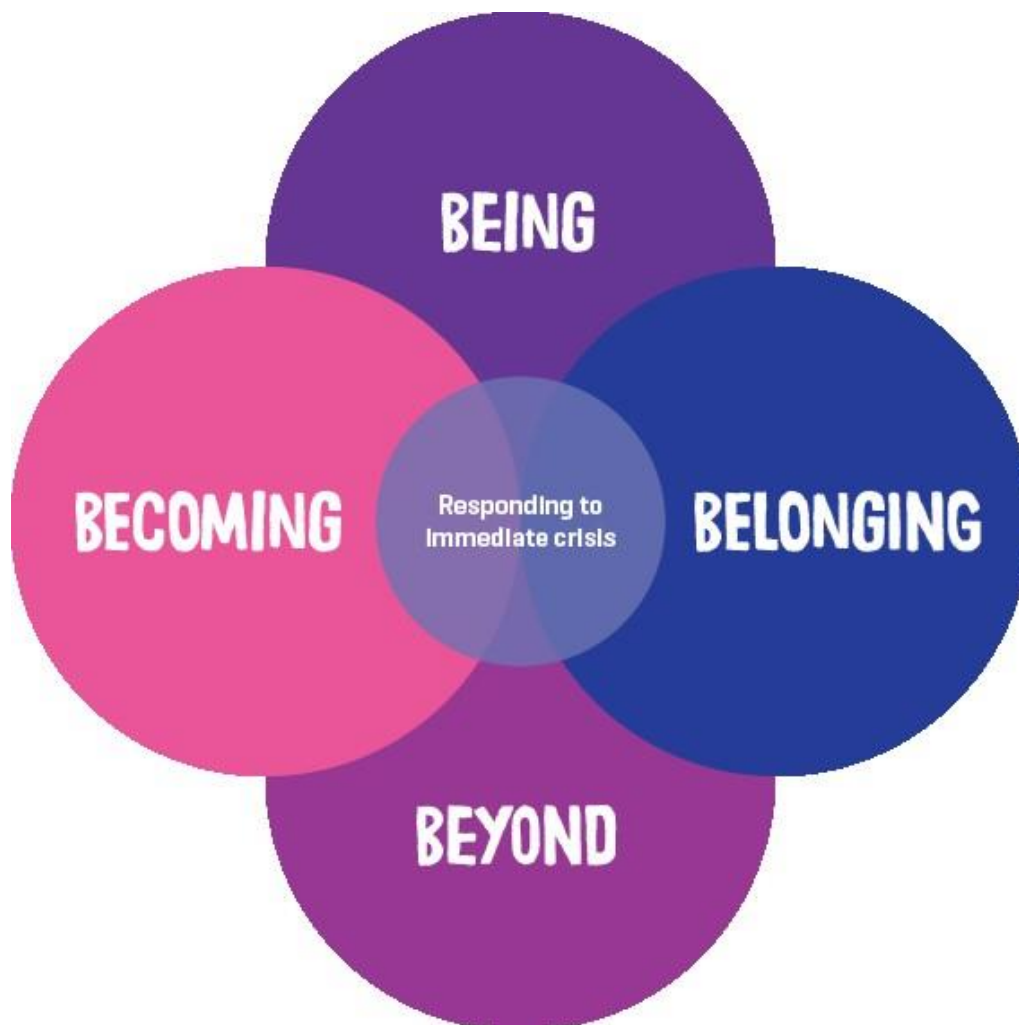
The distinction between sex work, survival sex and sexual exploitation does not, however, deny that exploitation occurs within sex work, or that people who engage in any form of sex work are at risk of exploitation. The reality for most people involved is complex.

Our Approach to Support

Being, Becoming, Belonging and Beyond

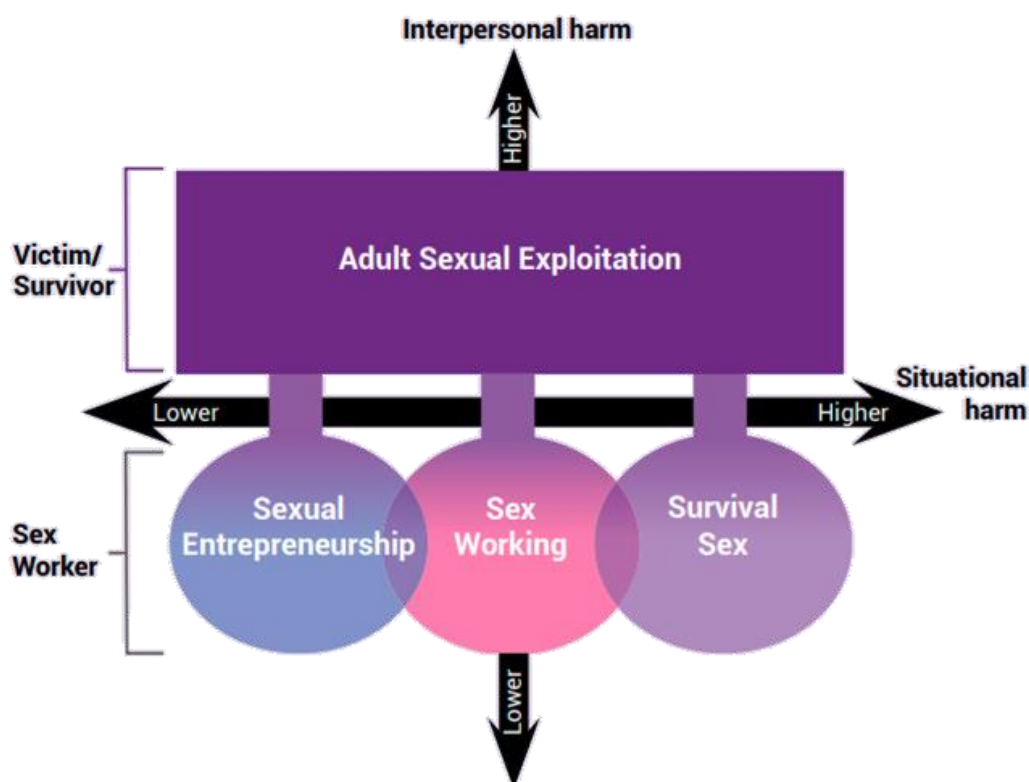
Changing Lives follows a framework called Being, Becoming, Belonging and Beyond (BBBB) across all our services. BBBB is not a linear process – it describes the elements we put in place to help people overcome challenges caused by social injustice.

- **BEING:** We help people feel accepted and safe
- **BECOMING:** We help people understand and overcome trauma and other experiences
- **BELONGING:** We enable people to feel safe and belong in the spaces we provide and move away from services and find long term support
- **BEYOND:** We work to ensure that other services and the wider system support people's progress



Harm Reduction Compass

The Harm Reduction Compass¹ is an operational model used by the National Police Chiefs' Council to inform the police response to sex work and sexual exploitation. It is also helpful in informing our position as it recognises that criminalisation is not always the answer when supporting people with experience of sex work, survival sex or sexual exploitation.



The model distinguishes between interpersonal harm (e.g. coercive behaviour, organised exploitation by OCGs) and situational harm (e.g. mental health problems, economic vulnerability, addiction). Exploitation involves a higher level of interpersonal harm, which requires a criminal justice approach.

Where levels of interpersonal harm are lower, but situational harm is higher (i.e. survival sex), a social justice and community-based approach is encouraged instead to reduce vulnerability. In cases where both interpersonal and situational harm are lower, there is little to no response required unless people request it.

¹ Sanders, T., Vajzovic, D., Brooks-Gordon, B., & Mulvihill, N. (2020). Policing vulnerability in sex work: the harm reduction compass model. *Policing and Society*, 31(9), 1100–1116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2020.1837825>

Findings

16 women who access support from Amber completed a survey with their key worker. The women gave informed consent to participate, and all data has been anonymised.

Women's perceptions of their experiences

All 16 women surveyed used the term 'sex work' and/or 'street sex work' to describe their experiences. However, using the Harm Reduction Compass as a guide, we could identify survival sex and/or sexual exploitation in many women's experiences.

- 14 of the 16 participants described survival sex in their responses
- 7 of the 16 participants describe sexual exploitation in their responses

Why women entered sex work

Women were asked the reason why they entered sex work. Figure 1 sets out the frequency of answers. Some women cited multiple reasons (e.g. a boyfriend/partner encouraging them to sell sex to fund both their drug habits).

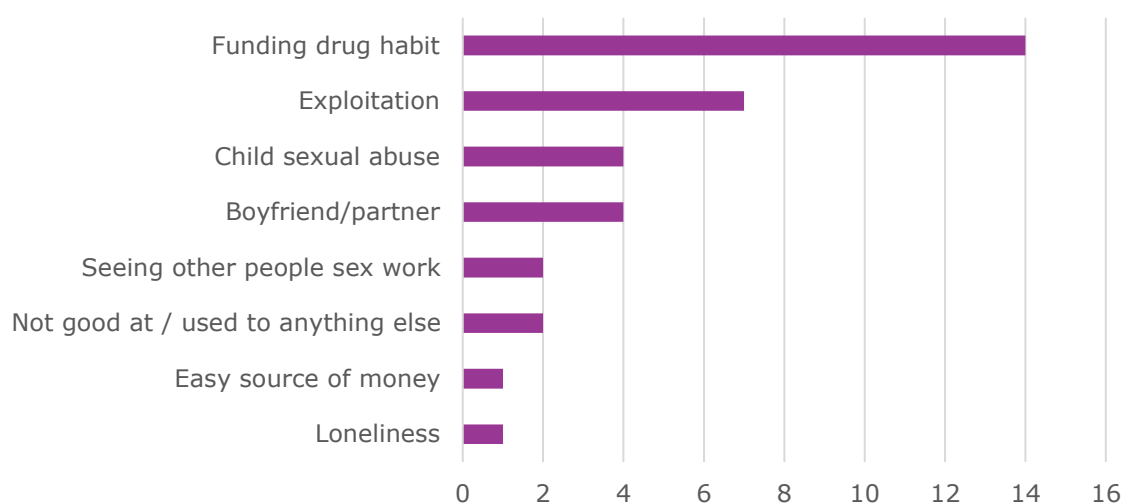
The most common reason for entering sex work was funding a drug habit, with 14 out of 16 women giving this response. Within these, the reasons behind their drug habit varied. Several reported using drugs to cope with previous experiences, including childhood sexual abuse. One reported her boyfriend injecting her with drugs while she was drunk.

"My boyfriend got me into drugs, he used to inject me when I was drunk. I had to do sex work to fund my habit."

Four women were exploited by their boyfriend/partner, often to fund their addictions. Following experiences of childhood sexual abuse or exploitation in either childhood or adulthood, women made reference to their bodies feeling damaged/violated.

"I got abused from a little girl, took drugs to forget about it. I then needed to make money to fund my habit. I thought it's the only thing I am good at and was used to, my body being used, so did sex work."

Figure 1: Reasons given for entering sex work



“I was trafficked when I was 13yrs old. I saw my mum sex working so I thought it was normal to have sex with people. I thought everyone did it. To mask all the rapes, violence and the stuff I had done. I started taking drugs, I did sex work to fund it.”

Exiting sex work

12 out of the 16 women had previously exited sex work.

The most common reason was no longer needing to sell sex for drugs – six women reported getting clean, one woman reported someone else paying for her habit.

Housing was another common reason. Three women mentioned relocating to another town/area and three women mentioned being given housing as a contributing factor.

Returning to sex work

The most common reason for returning to sex work was a renewed need to fund a drugs habit – five out of the 12 women who had previously exited sex work cited this as a reason.

“To deal with my thoughts and the stuff that happened to me in the past I started using again.”

Financial reasons were not cited as a reason for entering sex work in the first place, with the exception of buying drugs, but featured more strongly

in people's reasons for returning to sex work. Three women mentioned financial reasons (non-drug-related) as the reason for their return to sex work. Some women recalled engaging in sex work occasionally if they had one-off financial demands such as paying for their child's birthday.

"I have had a few times where I have left but never for long, something always happens so I go back to what I know I am good at to make money."

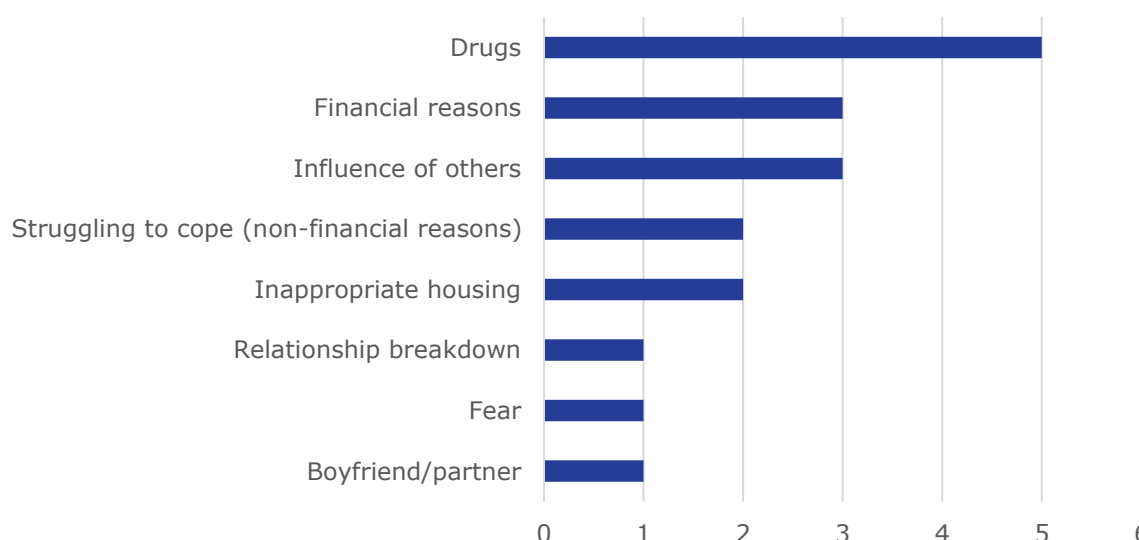
Three women mentioned the influence of others as a factor. Of these, two mentioned that they started using drugs again due to being around other people using drugs, and one mentioned that her partner started using again but did not specify whether she was using too or just returned to sex work to fund her partner's drug habit.

Inappropriate housing featured in two women's reasons. One could not afford her previous accommodation so was placed in supported accommodation with other people using drugs. One mentioned living in a 'rat-infested' property.

Two women mentioned struggling to cope for reasons other than finances. They found 'normality' hard to deal with, including having to process things that had happened to them in the past.

"I could not cope with everything being normal. I did it to myself. I started to miss appointments and I was back at square one."

Figure 2: Reasons for returning to sex work



Alternatives to sex work

Women were asked “If you could make the same money doing a different type of work, would you change jobs?” 13 out of 16 women said that they would change jobs; one said no; and two gave an unclear answer.

“I’d work anywhere for a proper life.”

The reasons given for choosing to stay in sex work included women not wanting anyone else telling them what to do; being able to work their own hours.

“I can’t do anything else. It’s all I know and I would not want anyone else telling me what to do.”

Reasons given for preferring different work to sex work included:

- More structure
 - Dangers associated with sex work
 - Seen as a ‘proper life’
 - The effect of sex work on mental health and wellbeing
 - Ambitions to enter a specific career (e.g. teaching)
-

“Yes and no. No one wants to do sex work! I can’t get a normal job because of my drugs. I can work when I want - you can’t do that in a normal job.”

Some questioned the premise of the question, as it assumed that it would be possible to earn the same money doing a different type of work. Several women questioned whether that would actually be possible for them and stated a preference for sex work due to the higher levels of pay, even if they might in theory prefer to do something else.

Not all women thought that sex work pays better than other jobs – one woman responded “*The money is s**t for sex work, it’s less than minimum wage*”. Others questioned whether they would ever be able to get another job due to their drug use.

Sexual assault

14 out of 16 women reported that they had experienced sexual abuse/assault during their time as a sex worker. Of these, 10 reported the assault to the police. Amongst the four who had experienced sexual assault but had not reported to the police, there were various reasons given:

- Previous negative experiences with the police, including discrimination against sex workers.
- Felt like the assault wasn't serious enough.
- Felt like they would not be believed.
- Fear of other people's responses (e.g. being looked at like "a victim or slag")
- Having got used to it and it's what happens

"No point. They think you are scum anyway. I tried to once a few years ago but they were judgemental like I was wasting their time. There is one officer that talks to us girls like s**t."

Many of those who did report the assault had negative experiences with the police, including multiple women being told that this is what they should expect due to their work. Others felt like they weren't believed or that the police were disinterested.

"I was told that I should expect to be attacked doing the job I do. I've been attacked a few times since, but I won't report after they said that. The officers were women too, that's s**t."

One woman said that her case was closed because police could not get in touch with her – she was homeless and had lost her phone. Another woman did not follow through with the case due to her perpetrator threatening her. She did not receive any support to escape her perpetrator.

None of the women who reported to the police said that the case progressed any further.

"Nothing ever come of it, when I did report it was like they thought I was lying."

Support needs

Women were asked if there is anything more agencies can do to prevent people entering sex work or helping people out of it. Several women blamed themselves for not engaging with the support that already exists and acknowledged that they need to want to change.

“I think we have good services at the moment. They always try. It’s me. I need to want to change.”

Related to this is the need for services to focus on relationships with the women. This would mean that, when they are ready for a change, the relationship is already there and quick action can be taken. Services should be proactive in their outreach, rather than only working with those who are more willing to engage. One respondent also mentioned the importance of peer support from people who understand their situation.

“Be more supportive, like take us for a day out, like a theme park or wildlife park.”

“More funding for outreach services.”

Several women highlighted the need for more joined-up and holistic support, including better communication between services. One woman recommended “one system for all agencies”. The need for join up between addiction and housing support was particularly apparent. Several women said that they would need to get off drugs before they could accept support to exit sex work, but also acknowledged that it would be difficult to address their drug use without safe accommodation.

“Have safe accommodation so I can settle. Instead of getting accommodation that is s**t and awful. I can’t sort my drug use out if I don’t have accommodation. I want my own not shared.”

Suggestions of how to avoid women entering sex work in the first place centred on addressing the underlying reasons why women enter sex work, as opposed to anything targeted at sex work itself. This could include earlier intervention and support for children experiencing abuse and better housing.

“I wish they would of helped me earlier when I was being abused. I wish school would of noticed, but no one cared at the time. It was my friend at school that told a teacher.”

“If services had done something instead of saying I was bad, going nowhere in life, all that s**t they say. They were stupid, kids don’t act bad - there’s always a reason.”

Several women also highlighted the role of policing and the justice system.

“Make sure that men are done properly for the crimes they commit against girls.”

“Stopping men abusing women, tougher sentences for them and not let them get away with it.”

Women were also asked what additional support they need that is not currently available. Better housing again featured – although there are housing options they are not always the right fit and women are excluded by strict criteria and rules.

A couple of women said that it would be helpful if more services operated later on in the day/evening, as they struggle to access services during the day.

“We need more support, more services open later on in the evening. This I when we come alive cos we sleep till early evening.”

Discussion and Recommendations

Discussion

There are limitations associated with this research which means it **cannot be taken to be representative of all sex workers**. Firstly, the sample size is fairly small with just 16 participants. Secondly, although Amber is open to people with many different experiences of sex work, survival sex and sexual exploitation, it primarily targets those involved in street sex work. **People with additional vulnerabilities and unmet needs are disproportionately represented in street sex work, and most will fall under the category of survival sex and/or sexual exploitation.**

The fact that all women identified themselves as sex workers but almost half described experiences that professionals could recognise as sexual exploitation highlights the **importance of professionals in multiple fields being able to identify signs of exploitation**. It is a delicate balance between giving women autonomy and the ability to identify themselves as they see fit, and acknowledging that women may be unaware that what they are experiencing is sexual exploitation or otherwise unwilling or unable to describe their experiences as such.

This demonstrates the importance of **specialist provision** like Amber where experienced staff can build up trust and relationship, allowing them to identify what is really going on in women's lives, but relying solely on these services for identification of those at risk of or experiencing exploitation is not enough. **These services are not available everywhere and, even where they are, may not have sufficient capacity or resources.**

Many women's **first point of contact** might be a police officer or healthcare professional who also have a key role to play in identification of vulnerabilities and exploitation. The survey did not explore experiences with healthcare professionals but did expose **discrimination, stigmatisation and victim-blaming on the part of police officers.**

Relationships with specialist services and/or peer support is important for women who often distrust public services due to previous negative experiences. **Investing in outreach and building those relationships gradually ensures, when women are ready to access support, the groundwork has been done.**

Drug use and addiction feature heavily in women's responses, both as contributing factors to entering and staying in sex work, but also as a **coping mechanism** for previous traumatic experiences and the impact of sex work / sexual exploitation itself. **Addiction also acts as a barrier to accessing other vital support such as safe accommodation.** This can

be difficult for services to address, as people must be ready to tackle their addiction and face the emotions that they have been using drugs or alcohol to numb.

It was notable that **financial hardship** was not cited as a reason for entering sex work in the first place, with the exception of money for buying drugs, but featured in reasons for returning to sex work. Sex work will often be seen as an option to fall back on when women face financial difficulty, despite the impact it may have on their health, safety and wellbeing. This highlights the importance of supporting people with experience of sex work, survival sex and sexual exploitation to achieve genuine financial stability. This includes both ensuring a sufficient income – i.e. more than the basic rate of Universal Credit which is not enough to make ends meet – and helping women manage their outgoings (e.g. budgeting advice).

Our findings highlight the challenges in supporting those who wish to exit sex work to do so as well as the fact that this may not be what people choose. It is vital that we ensure that those who engage in sex work are able to do so safely. This will take **legislative, societal and cultural changes**, as well as the support of specialist services like Amber.

Recommendations

The findings indicate crucial components of support for women with experiences of sex work, survival sex and sexual exploitation which should be provided as part of a holistic package:

- **Long-term, non-judgemental outreach support.** Many women have had their trust in services and/or other people shattered and it takes time to build up that trust. Alongside this, women may not be ready to access support when it is first offered to them but, if there is an opportunity for a relationship with support services to develop, they will be able to access help more easily when the right time comes. We urge local commissioners to introduce or maintain funding for these services, but would also like to see a national strategic approach to providing this support to end the current postcode lottery.
- **Informed mainstream services.** While we would not expect all mainstream service staff to become experts in this area, there does need to be a minimum level of understanding of sexual exploitation in order to identify and better support women at risk. There needs to be training for police, healthcare professionals and other frontline organisations who are likely to come into contact with people experiencing sex work, survival sex and sexual exploitation to identify the signs of exploitation and to know where to make onward referrals.

- **Flexible, gender-informed addiction and recovery services.** Many of the mainstream practices of addiction and recovery services are not fit for the needs of women, especially those with experience of sex work, survival sex or sexual exploitation. The needs of women need to be explicitly considered in service design, ideally through a co-production process, including consideration of the timings of service offers, waiting times, and requirements to attend services rather than services going to where the women are.
- **Safe, gender-specific, trauma-informed accommodation, including provision for those with higher levels of complexity.** Across the country there is inadequate provision of accommodation that meets the needs of women with experience of sex work, survival sex and sexual exploitation. Where gender-specific provision does exist, it is often unable to support women with higher levels of complexity, including ongoing substance use, despite this being the cohort most in need of this kind of support. There need to be accommodation options where the criteria and rules reflect the needs of this cohort. We urge local authorities to include this in their local homelessness strategies and national government to consider it in the upcoming cross-departmental homelessness strategy.
- **Sustainable income.** Financial insecurity makes women vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Women need support to maximise their income (e.g. claiming all eligible benefits, obtaining employment) and to manage their outgoings (e.g. budget advice). As part of the upcoming merger of Jobcentre Plus and the National Careers Service, there needs to be more targeted support for this cohort as well as a review of the sufficiency of current Universal Credit rates.
- **Multi-agency case management.** Where women are accessing multiple services at the same time, there needs to be improved communication between them to avoid duplication, asking women to repeat traumatic experiences multiple times, and to ensure that there are no gaps in support. Police officers should work closely with support services, including in maintaining contact with women who may be difficult to locate (e.g. when she is homeless and does not have access to a phone).



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