

NET REACH:

Learning from online outreach with
women selling sex during Covid-19

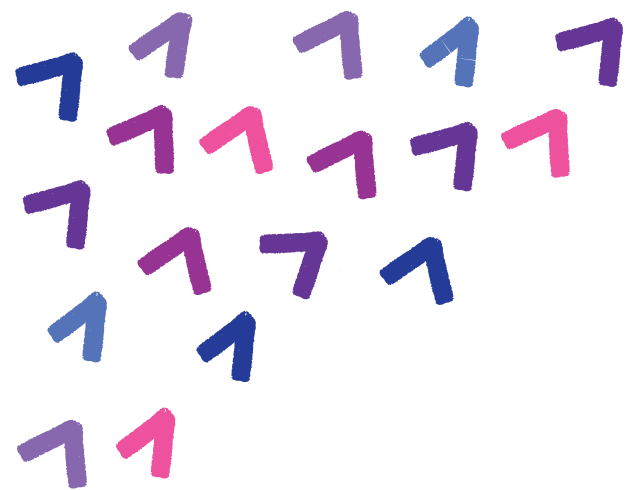
A report by Changing Lives

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Key Findings

Changing Lives produced this report to highlight our concerns that a worrying number of women are advertising to sell or exchange sex, across specialist paid platforms as well as mainstream community selling pages, as a direct result of the financial hardship created by Covid-19. We're calling for action to support women with existing vulnerabilities such as homelessness, addiction and poverty, who consistently slip through the net.

The report also found that an increasing number of women were turning to selling or exchanging sex for the first time, citing Covid-19 related challenges as the reason.

At the time of writing, on two websites that require women to pay a subscription to advertise their services alone, we found a total of 911 profiles in the areas where Changing Lives provides specialist support to women selling sex.

Our findings highlight:

- A powerful link between the poverty and destitution created by Covid-19 and women advertising to sell or exchange sex online.
- A worrying number of young women and girls advertising online, raising concerns about child sexual exploitation and ongoing vulnerability to abuse as they reach legal adulthood.
- Additional safeguarding concerns, including increased risk of physical and sexual violence, risks to safety as a result of location tracking and loss of access to vital public services during Covid-19, including sexual health and mental health services and support from safeguarding teams.

We would like to see:

- The introduction by the Minister for Safeguarding of a statutory duty on local authorities to understand and respond to the complexity of women's existing vulnerabilities, which may lead them to become involved in selling sex and/or targeted for sexual exploitation.
- Adequate, sustainable and long-term funding for trauma-informed, specialist services to support women selling sex. This should be part of locally commissioned

services to support people experiencing multiple disadvantage and young people aged 16-18. This should include dedicated netreach workers who understand how to engage and support people selling sex online, and how to recognise and report harm to the Police.

- Rapid progression of the Online Harms Bill and associated activities to tackle online abuse and exploitation, including a national reporting system for adults who are facing exploitation.
- Increased accountability of subscription-based adult websites and free community selling pages, including more stringent requirements around ID and age verification and an expectation that all websites will signpost users to sources of practical support.

1. Introduction

Changing Lives¹ produced this report to highlight our concerns that a worrying number of women are advertising to sell or exchange sex across specialist paid platforms as well as mainstream community selling pages, as a direct result of the financial hardship created by Covid-19.

We describe this as 'survival sex', to describe the experiences of women who are turning to selling or exchanging sex to meet their immediate needs: to buy food, to secure a place to stay, or to provide for their children.

Our online outreach teams connect with and support women who are advertising to sell or exchange sex online – also known as netreach. Whilst not everyone

¹Changing Lives supports over 14,000 people in the most challenging of circumstances each year. Our first project supporting women involved in sex work, survival sex and/or sexual exploitation was launched in the North East in 2006 and we are now the largest provider nationally covering Northumbria, York, Doncaster, Merseyside and Wolverhampton and Walsall.

It is our experience that the language and terminology around adults who sell sex is problematic. 'Sex work' is the term often used by those who believe that selling sex is a choice and advocate for legalisation of selling sex. Others use 'sexual exploitation' to acknowledge a power imbalance, which is often associated with gender. Government and police use 'prostitution' as the accepted term, although we do not use this terminology as it can be deemed derogatory.

At Changing Lives, we are accepting of all of these perspectives because primarily we share a commitment to the people we support. While we recognise that some may choose not to seek our support because they do not feel they are experiencing harm, those who access our services frequently face multiple challenges and are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Therefore, while we realise there is no ideal terminology, we use the phrase 'sex work, survival sex and/or sexual exploitation' as an inclusive way of expressing the experiences of the women we support.

who sells sex feels that they are exposed to harm, for many women the harms are significant. Among the most affected are women with existing vulnerabilities such as poverty, homelessness, addiction, poor mental health and past experiences of trauma and abuse.

Throughout this pandemic, nearly nine out of 10 adults in the UK who are online² have become reliant on the internet to maintain their connection with loved ones, to continue to work remotely and for entertainment. However, for the women we engage through netreach, the internet is not a place of safety. Often, they are unknown to support services and are at significant risk of online abuse as the result of an overwhelming correlation between selling sex and poverty, deprivation and social exclusion.

While the Government's Online Harms White Paper provides an opportunity to address these concerns, progress has been seriously delayed.³ Meanwhile, an increasing number of women are turning to selling sex: there was an 83% increase⁴ in the number of women accessing Changing Lives' specialist services providing support for women selling sex and experiencing sexual exploitation for the first time in the first four months of lockdown alone.

The Government has been vocal in expressing its commitment to ensure that all public services have the resources they need to support people through the pandemic. We are calling on Government to ensure that this translates into better support and legal protection for women facing existing challenges who have found themselves having to advertise online, offering to sell or exchange sex because Covid-19 has left them without any other choices.

2 Home Office (2020) Online Harms White Paper. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/online-harms-white-paper/online-harms-white-paper> [Accessed July 2020]

3 BBC (2020). Online Harms bill: Warning over 'unacceptable' delay. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-53222665> [Accessed November 2020]

4 Changing Lives (2020). Nowhere To Turn. Available online: <https://www.changing-lives.org.uk/news-stories/nowhere-to-turn/attachment/nowhere-to-turn-final-report/> [Accessed November 2020]

2. About the findings

The research highlights learning from Changing Lives' netreach across the North East of England, when the UK was in lockdown. This programme was funded jointly by police and crime commissioners in Northumbria and Durham.

Our teams conducted online outreach across multiple websites, including specialist, subscription-based adult platforms and community selling pages. This enabled them to connect with and support women who are advertising on these webpages, providing access to trauma-informed, therapeutic support and sharing information with the police and safeguarding teams where appropriate.

These findings focus in detail on two paid adult websites, encompassing over **900 profiles**, and a number of free selling pages.⁵

3. Findings

Our findings highlight:

- **A powerful link between the poverty and destitution created by Covid-19 and women advertising to sell or exchange sex online, via specialist adult websites and mainstream community selling pages.**
- **A worrying number of young women and girls advertising online, raising concerns about child sexual exploitation and ongoing vulnerability to abuse in adulthood.**
- **Additional safeguarding concerns, including increased risk of physical and sexual violence, risks to safety as a result of location tracking, and loss of access to vital public services during Covid-19, including sexual health and mental health services and support from safeguarding teams.**

⁵ Changing Lives delivers specialist services in Darlington, Doncaster, Durham, Liverpool, Northumbria, Walsall, Wolverhampton and York. Two-thirds of these profiles (66%, 597 profiles) were from across Northumbria's six local authority areas: Gateshead, Newcastle, Northumberland, North Tyneside, South Tyneside and Sunderland.

3.1 Poverty, destitution and selling sex online

Since the beginning of the first Covid-19 lockdown in March 2020, our netreach team has uncovered a high prevalence of women advertising on specialist adult websites and mainstream community selling pages.

At the time of writing, there were a total of 911 profiles on just two websites that require women to pay a subscription to advertise their services in the areas where Changing Lives provides specialist support to women selling sex, and many more across other paid platforms and free websites.

While some free websites display a 'Personals' section to advertise 'casual encounters and long-term relationships', sexual services are often more hidden, advertised under 'Beauty Services', 'Small Biz Ads' or 'Financial Services'. These adverts show a direct link between the financial hardship created by the pandemic and women finding themselves in an extremely vulnerable situation.

Sexy red head milf desperate for food n electric

Hi there im english red head single mum desperate for some help with food and electric anything at all please i have a 5 yr old daughter and i lost my job due to the place closing and im now waiting 4 weeks for a payment off universal credit its not good got no electric left so im looking to sell sexy pictures or live video calls or personalised porn vids anything at all please just desperate for some help xx

Woman who's hit hard time's.

Hi hope you're okay. I'm 31, single mother of 2 women, Struggled my way through lockdown as I lost my part time job in a cafe. But times have got harder and I'm struggling to get by day by day. Quite embarrassing coming on here to be fair. Don't really no what I expect of here, not really wanting to meet, unless I really need to. I'm slightly over weight, and probably average looking at the best lol. Like I say don't really no what I expect but hey ho let's see :) thanks x

Female student need help

Hi I am a 20yo female who recently lost her job. With the furlough scheme ending and my tennancy running out, I need a little help affording a deposit for a new place to stay.

Would really appreciate any help. I hate begging but don't know what else to do xx

3.2 Young women and girls

Our findings show concerning prevalence of young women and girls advertising to sell sex or sexual activities online. Of the 911 profiles found across the two specialist adult services we looked at in detail, they most commonly belonged to women aged 18-25. This age group accounted for almost three-fifths (59%) of women in the Northumbria area and almost half (49%) of women across all areas where Changing Lives delivers services.⁶

Age	Northumbria	All Areas
18-25	59%	49%
26-35	28%	30%
36-45	10%	13%
46-45	4%	11%
56 or over	1%	1%

For the majority of women we support, experiences of trauma and abuse start in childhood. As they reach the age of 18, legal obligations towards them change. Across statutory services we see a lack of understanding around the lasting impact: the vulnerabilities of women who are being sexually exploited do not go away once they reach adulthood.⁷ This leaves them particularly at risk of ongoing exploitation. A further challenge is that age verification is not usually required to post on free websites. This creates significant concerns around safeguarding and child sexual exploitation.

⁶ Percentages do not equal 100% due to rounding.

⁷ https://www.changing-lives.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/STAGE-Briefing_Transitions-Nov-2020.pdf

Sugar daddy wanted

I'm posting again to look for a real sugar daddy. I'll be detailed in my ad and won't reply to anyone who isn't as detailed in their reply.

To be clear I'm 16 and I'm not just looking for sex. If you expect sex every date then don't bother getting in touch with me.

I will provide sexual favours but always with a condom and at my schedule. If you don't like that, don't bother getting in touch.

If you've made it this far in my ad then please tell me what you'll offer financially replies asking me to suggest something won't receive a reply.

Thankyou

3.1 Safeguarding concerns

There are clear safeguarding concerns associated with women, particularly young women and those with existing vulnerabilities, being left with no option but to advertise sex online. Alongside the issues raised earlier in this report, our netreach teams identify several additional considerations, including:

- Some free websites allow users to pinpoint their exact location – this raises concerns around the dangers to women of publicly displaying their home address.
- Due to the closure of most public spaces during lockdown, a number of women have been forced to use their home as a location for selling sex, placing them at increased risk of physical and sexual violence.
- The loss of public services has left women without access to vital sexual health and mental health services and struggling to receive support from safeguarding teams.

4. Recommendations

This research highlights that women with existing vulnerabilities (including homelessness, addiction and poverty) have found themselves forced to advertise online, offering to sell or exchange sex because Covid-19 has left them without any other choices.

In June 2020, the Prime Minister hosted the government's first Hidden Harms virtual summit, attended by over 70 representatives including charities, frontline services and survivors of hidden harms. In the resulting report, the Government writes: "These crimes are deeply damaging and can have a long-term physical and psychological impact on victims and survivors.. rooting out these crimes from society will require a comprehensive and sustained response. To achieve that, we must maintain a relentless focus on prevention and disruption, safeguarding those at risk, supporting victims and bearing down on offenders." ⁸

To help achieve this, we calling for action to support women who consistently slip through the net.

We would like to see:

- **The introduction by the Minister for Safeguarding of a statutory duty on local authorities to ensure that staff working in statutory services are trained to understand and respond to the complexity and interrelated nature of women's existing vulnerabilities, which may lead them to become involved in selling sex and/or targeted for sexual exploitation, and that there is help to secure access to specialist support services within every local authority area. Further, we would like to see this group of women consistently recognised in national and local Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategies to ensure there is appropriate recognition of and response to their needs at strategic and policy level.**
- **Adequate, sustainable and long-term funding for trauma-informed, specialist services to support women selling sex and/or experiencing sexual exploitation, including dedicated netreach workers who understand how to engage and support people selling sex online, and how to recognise and report harm to the Police. Provision for this group of women should be included within locally commissioned services to support people experiencing multiple disadvantage and young people aged 16-18 as their support transitions from children's into adult safeguarding services. This is vital to ensure that girls and women who are particularly at risk of sexual exploitation and sexual violence are able to access the support that they need to address and ultimately overcome the trauma they have experienced.**

⁸ HM Government (2020). Prime Minister's Virtual Summit on Hidden Harms, London: HM Government.

- **Rapid progression of the Online Harms Bill and associated activities to tackle online abuse and exploitation.** Online grooming has been a growing concern for over a decade: in England and Wales it is estimated that there are up to 90 reports of online grooming or child abuse image offences recorded by the police per day.⁹ Such alarming rates have rightly warranted significant policy focus on the online abuse of children and the introduction of reporting systems, such as Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) whereby parents and children can report concerns or abuse. We would like to see the introduction of equivalent reporting system for adults who are facing exploitation. We believe that this would help to overcome barriers to reporting, such as shame and stigma, and provide a much clearer source of intelligence about online harms and crimes.
- **Increased accountability of subscription-based adult websites and free community selling pages, including more stringent requirements around ID and age verification and an expectation of all websites to publish a list of local and national support agencies who can help people experiencing financial hardship, or facing sexual exploitation.**

⁹ NSPCC (2019). Wild West Web. Available at: <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/support-us/campaigns/wild-west-web/> [Accessed July 2020]



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