

Supporting women exploited through the sex industry during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond

As a result of the current and developing situation with COVID-19, we call on the Welsh Government to take urgent action to protect women and children exploited through the sex industry, by including this work in the portfolio of Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV).

Women exploited through prostitution are amongst the most marginalised and stigmatised groups in our society, often missing from the VAWDASV discourse. During the current pandemic, they are at a higher risk of violence and abuse, higher risk of COVID-19 infection, more likely to experience poverty and hardship, and more likely to experience an exacerbation of difficulties with their mental health and substance misuse. There is also the wider public health element of community transmission of the virus due to multiple close contacts with those buying sex.

Isolation and social distancing can increase the means of coercive control, increase incidents of physical and sexual violence, increase economic abuse as well as limiting victim/survivors' space for action¹. We also know that isolation and social distancing also have an impact on those who have previously experienced abuse, triggering flashbacks and increasing anxiety, something that affects many victim/survivors of sexual exploitation.

Our membership of independent specialist services working with women exploited by the sex industry (Swansea Women's Aid SWAN project in Swansea, Cyfannol in Newport, Safer Wales' Street Life project in Cardiff) are taking specific precautions to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, many are reporting a number of concerns including access to safety and safe accommodation.

Welsh Women's Aid has consulted with our membership and the following points have been raised as key areas of concern in this area. We propose that these should be addressed urgently by Welsh Government and public bodies in Wales to ensure a robust response to VAWDASV during this unprecedented time.

- Women who are victims/survivors of sexual exploitation, have, more often than not also been sexually abused as children and in adolescence prior to being sexually exploited through adult based sexual exploitation. While not all sexually abused children go on to be exploited in adulthood, specialist services working with survivors of sexual exploitation report that it can put them at increased risk and increase vulnerability to adult sexual exploitation. Early findings

¹ Kelly, Liz (2003). The impact of living in exploitative or abusive conditions is that women (and children) adapt their behaviour to cope. Victims/survivors' thinking and actions are narrowed. As they attempt to live and be the perpetrator's version of who they should be, it becomes harder and harder to imagine life outside of this control and what it is to have freedom of thought and action. Liz Kelly termed this limiting 'space for action'.

from a study at Cardiff University² suggests that women who are exploited through the sex industry are likely to have been let down by systems at a young age and are more vulnerable to being targeted for sexual exploitation as adults.

- Given the current social distancing regulations set by the UK and Welsh Governments and enforced by regional police forces, this risks the increased criminalisation of vulnerable women who are exploited in the sex industry. Women exploited through the sex industry often have drug dependencies, chaotic lives and habits that leave them no option but to breach social distancing guidelines. In the longer term, their drug habits are invariably their top priority and results in a total lack of self-care. These women are likely to be disproportionately impacted by fines or arrest if stricter restrictions on leaving the house are implemented.
- Women who experience sexual exploitation face an increased risk of contracting COVID-19 since many are already physically vulnerable (for example they may have pre-existing medical conditions, drug or alcohol dependencies or other health-complicating factors). Contracting COVID-19 could have fatal implications for many women exploited by the sex industry.
- Women who experience sexual exploitation are often hidden victim/survivors of domestic abuse; being asked to spend longer time indoors with their perpetrators increases the risk of violence and/or could make the victim/survivor destitute if they choose to escape the perpetrator's violence. The struggle for survival often means that any experiences of VAWDASV, past or current, may not be at the forefront and may not be the women's presenting need.
- Many specialist frontline services report problems around the provision and suitability of refuge places for sexually exploited women. Women exploited through the sex industry have additional support needs and may not be suitable to be housed in domestic abuse refuges or emergency accommodation traditionally provided to victims/survivors of domestic abuse. Many have been stigmatised by public and third sector services and whilst measures can be taken to break down the barriers to these services (e.g. training/flexible support policies), urgent action is required to provide women with safe and appropriate accommodation. Welsh Women's Aid and its members have been calling for women fleeing sexual abuse and exploitation to be given priority under housing legislation in Wales.
- To survive, women forced into prostitution depend on food banks and charities for their next meal. Often women who are sexually exploited engage in 'survival sex' (which might mean sleeping on an associates' couch) because they are homeless and lack basic support networks. These women are also disproportionately impacted by the pressure on food bank and charity services during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Women exploited by the sex industry experience huge barriers in making claims to the Department for Work and Pensions. For example, there is an assumption that they have

² Emerging research into 'Street sex workers' pathways into prostitution' by Dr Rachel Swann of Cardiff University, provides empirical evidence relating to the number of women known to the statutory service and whether the women had been identified as a child in need (CIN) and/or flagged as a child protection (CP) case. This report will be available in June 2019. <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/people/view/SwannRE> (Accessed on 20.04.2020).

access to computers in order to make Universal Credit claims, that they have phones with credit to contact the relevant agencies and/or that they hold identification documents to verify their identity for the application process. Additionally, many women will not want to disclose sexual exploitation / prostitution for reasons of fear and/or stigma, and so will not be able to account for what they have been doing prior to make a Universal Credit claim.

- Access to condoms and other health and wellbeing supplies will be reduced, as will the sharing of [‘Ugly Mug’](#) information due to limited outreach service capacities.

Welsh Women’s Aid calls on the Welsh Government to prioritise the following key asks:

Access to safe housing:

1. Women exploited by the sex industry need access to safe, suitable accommodation which **takes into account additional support they may need**. For example, specialist services report that accommodation providers will not accept a woman unless she is on a script (for drug dependency) creating additional barriers to safe and appropriate accommodation. Specialist accommodation with a health and substance component is needed to facilitate better joined up working across the support sector.
2. Exploited women have been abused, made homeless, face destitution, are learning disabled, coerced, threatened, deceived, exploited, kept locked up or are isolated. Sexually exploited women are also more likely to have mental health conditions (such as complex PTSD) and physical illnesses (including respiratory conditions) that make them more susceptible to contracting infections such as COVID-19. These complicating factors mean that they may not be able to transition to stringent refuge or social housing rules (for example, the ‘three warnings’ rule used in refuges). **Any housing offer (whether short or long term) must be accompanied by specialist support in order to help exploited women transition mentally and physically to a point of safety.**
3. Local services report perpetrators of sexual exploitation have links to organised crime networks who would have little hesitation about entering confidential refuge properties. **Housing provision for sexually exploited women and children must be safer, in line with security measures that are provided to victims/survivors of trafficking and modern slavery.**
4. The impact of intense and prolonged trauma can also have significant impact on women’s relationships and sense of self. They may not adjust to life in emergency accommodation as quickly as other victims/survivors and may ‘dip in and out’ of accommodation whilst they build trust with service providers. They may also be brought in with very short notice (e.g. following raids). Provision of accommodation during this period is crucial so as not to lose women during the transition. **Funding a designated unit compartment which is not linked to a specific person’s housing benefit could help to safely house victims/survivors exploited by the sex industry, before they are moved to more appropriate accommodation.**

5. In line with lockdown restrictions to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, many venues used for the sexual exploitation of women (for example brothels, parlours and saunas) have also been closed down. This can amount to a financial loss and also a loss of accommodation for women who were housed in brothels. **It is critical that exploited women are seen as priority and allocated safe, appropriate housing that takes account of their multiple needs and vulnerabilities.**

Consistent focus on criminalising ‘kerb-crawlers’³ and exploiters, cease arrests for women:

6. We support a legislative framework that decriminalises those who sell sex and targets buyers, pimps and those who exploit in the context of prostitution with more robust prosecutions. **We ask for the Welsh Government guidance on working with perpetrators during the COVID-19 pandemic to make explicit reference to working with perpetrators of sexual exploitation.**
7. We welcome reports from local frontline services about trauma-informed practice from police forces who treat sexually exploited women as vulnerable and instead criminalise those who exploit them. However, this approach is not consistent across all regions. Whilst policing is not devolved, policing strategies are developed on a local and regional level. **We ask the Welsh Government to ensure that Welsh police forces and PCCs make a commitment to a long-term enforcement strategy that acknowledges the vulnerabilities of those exploited in the sex industry, in conjunction with local services working in the area and drawing on local projects to inform work.**
8. Often women who are sexually exploited and abused will not choose to report to the police for fear of repercussions and previous bad experiences with law enforcement. Currently no right to victimless prosecutions exists for incidents of sexual exploitation. **We call for there to be a right to victimless prosecutions for incidents of sexual exploitation, as there currently is for domestic abuse.**

Embed exploitation in the VAWDASV strategies, including appropriately resourcing specialist support:

9. Women exploited through the sex industry must be seen as a priority within the VAWDASV framework and offered equal protection to victims/survivors of domestic abuse. **Include women involved in prostitution in the national victim/survivor engagement framework or develop an engagement mechanism that ensures that the voices of those being exploited are central in the development of policy and strategies.**
10. Provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) is crucial for those providing continued outreach support to women in the sex industry. Services have adapted to use creative solutions where possible but **urgently require PPE for frontline workers exposed to COVID-19.**

³ Includes those who exploit women in street based settings without the use of a vehicle.

11. Actions taken to protect women exploited in the sex industry cannot be short-term solutions to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic alone. These women face uncertainty and the threat of immediate destitution once restrictions are lifted, as well as the threat of being targeted by the perpetrators of their exploitation. **Actions must form part of a long-term strategy that puts sexually exploited women at the front and centre of designing and commissioning of regional and national strategies.**

12. Services should be strengths-based, needs-led and trauma-informed. This means involving victims/survivors of sexual exploitation and the frontline workers who support these women in the commissioning and design of services. Where frontline workers (for example housing officers) lack understanding of the exploitation, violence and trauma a woman involved in the sex industry can experience, it can lead to stigmatisation and a view that the victim/survivor 'chose' to engage in the sex industry. This stance limits the victim/survivors' avenues to support and means that frontline workers can approach the situation with pre-existing prejudices or judgements. **We call on Welsh Government to produce immediate guidance for agencies and local authorities working with exploited women to address the stigma and institutional prejudice they face from frontline services. Longer term awareness raising should also be prioritised to draw on the expert knowledge of specialist women's services working to support sexually exploited women and children.**

13. Recognise that women exploited by the sex industry will have additional vulnerabilities (e.g. alcohol or drug dependencies; perpetrators from organised criminal networks; be debt-bound or hold a fear of authorities). They will need specific and tailored support. **Consideration of the needs of women exploited by the sex industry engaging with substance use must inform the response with substance use services.**

These points have been informed by Welsh Women's Aid members who work directly with women exploited through the sex industry. We welcome the opportunity to work directly with Welsh Government to ensure essential changes are made to better protect women and children exploited through the sex industry both in our response to COVID-19 and beyond.

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