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Welsh Women's Aid Briefing: Sexual Exploitation

June 2022

Introduction:

The aim of this document is to provide an overview about sexual exploitation of women by the sex industry. This brief will also discuss the work already ongoing in Wales to tackle this issue and support survivors.

Women who have experienced sexual exploitation or harm through the sex industry are often marginalised and are missing from key conversations about VAWDASV service provision and policy development. Welsh Women's Aid want to change this and are committed to advocating for parity and believe that every woman who has experienced abuse or harm should have equal opportunity to report, access services and recover from trauma.

This brief is focused solely on women who have experienced exploitation or harm within the context of the sex industry and is not intended to make broad statements about the general experiences of those within the sex industry. The term 'sexual exploitation' is being used in this document to acknowledge the coercion and control experienced by survivors of this type of abuse. This brief will discuss the current picture in Wales, the unique barriers that survivors face and provide information as to how survivors can be best supported.

Defining exploitation and harm by the Sex Industry:

Adults can be exploited in many ways, whether they present as overtly 'vulnerable' or not. Like other forms of exploitation, sexual exploitation often occurs due to a culmination of intersecting experiences and events including childhood trauma, substance misuse and poverty. 'Sex industry' is an umbrella term covering all forms of transactional sexual services and is inclusive of direct sex work such as escorting and less direct forms of sex work such as erotic dancing.

Whilst adult sexual exploitation is not currently defined in law, several parallels can be drawn from the UK Governments definition of child sexual exploitation (CSE), which notes that perpetrators capitalise on the presence of a power imbalance and use manipulation and deceit to involve a young person in sexual activity. The definition also states that the perpetrator benefits in some way from the activity and/or the activity is transactional in nature and performed in exchange for something the victim requires.



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Perhaps, most importantly however, the definition expresses that

“The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual”¹.

The indicators laid out in this definition of CSE are the same hallmarks that feature in the sexual exploitation of adults. Simply put, sexual exploitation occurs when someone is coerced, forced, or manipulated into engaging in sexual activities by a third party, or out of necessity to finance basic needs.

Whilst a child's ability to be coerced is widely discussed and recognised, there can be a lack of recognition of this same fact in adults, unless they are obviously presenting as having specific vulnerabilities or needs.

Examples of sexual exploitation or harm can include:

- Being coerced or forced into sex work by a third party such as a partner
- Having to engage in transactional sexual services to finance basic needs such as food or accommodation (widely referred to 'survival sex' and 'sex for rent' arrangements in the media)
- Inability to pursue alternatives due to multiple disadvantages such as poverty, substance misuse and/or others
- Being the victim of a crime and being unable to access support and reporting tools due to involvement in the Sex Industry
- Being unable to pursue exit pathways out of sex work due to multiple disadvantages, systemic barriers, and discrimination.
- Being the victim of modern slavery or trafficking for the purposes of involvement in sex work

It is recognised that the sex industry is highly gendered. In 2019, National Ugly Mugs, a national charity focusing on safety for sex workers, reported that 74% of their members identify as female². The House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee report into the link between Universal Credit and so-called 'survival sex' notes that those engaging in sexual activity to finance basic needs are “overwhelmingly, but not exclusively, women”³. As such, sexual exploitation should be embedded within the VAWDASV agenda as it requires a gendered informed response. However, it is

¹ Department for Education Child Sexual Exploitation Guide for practitioners, February 2017
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/591903/CSE_Guidance_Core_Document_13.02.2017.pdf

² Written evidence submitted by National Ugly Mugs, July 2020 <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/8610/pdf/>

³ Universal Credit and “survival sex”, Second Report of Session 2019-2020 The House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, October 2019
<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201919/cmselect/cmworpen/83/83.pdf>



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acknowledged that exploitation by the sex industry is also experienced men and non-binary survivors. It is equally recognised that there are different causes and consequences to this abuse.

Signs that an adult is experiencing or at risk of sexual exploitation often mirrors those widely looked out for in children⁴, and can include: -

- Going missing frequently
- Receiving gifts or favours (i.e., lifts or accommodation for the night)
- Having an older or wealthy 'boyfriend' / 'friend' or relationships that have a clear power imbalance (i.e., stark differences of social background/circumstance)
- Constantly being monitored or accompanied to appointments
- Presenting with physical injuries
- Presenting with UTI's or sexually transmitted diseases
- Being seen frequently in locations associated with 'sex work'
- Being observed getting into different vehicles
- Involvement with or increase in substance misuse
- Changes in mental health
- Social isolation – breakdown of relationships with family or friends
- Number of male visitors to a premises⁵
- In foreign nationals, having a limited knowledge of English aside from sexual vocabulary⁶
- Sleeping/living in the same premises in which they work⁷

The current picture in Wales:

Presently, there is a lack of Wales-specific data surrounding the issue of sexual exploitation of adults by the sex industry. Welsh Women's Aid have made this a priority and have begun the process of collecting data from members who deliver specialist services and have also raised the need for detailed examination of this issue with the VAWDASV Research Network for Wales.

However, there are several specialist services who are undertaking amazing projects to engage and support survivors of sexual exploitation. Initiatives such as Support, Wellbeing, Advocacy, and eNablement (SWAN) project, Streetlife and the Sexual Exploitation Advocacy Support Service (SEASS) are successfully engaging and providing support to women who are experiencing sexual exploitation.

⁴ NSPCC – 'Signs of Child Sexual Exploitation' <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-is-child-abuse/types-of-abuse/child-sexual-exploitation/>

⁵ Unseen – 'Spot the signs of Sexual Exploitation' <https://www.unseen.org/about-modern-slavery/spot-the-signs/>

⁶ ibid

⁷ ibid



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Horizon's SEASS supported 335 individuals on an outreach basis between January 2020 and January 2021⁸.

A survivor, who has been supported by Safer Wales, recently spoke with Wales Online to share the devastating impact that sexual exploitation had on her life. She was abducted from her home and trafficked across the UK for 18 months and, like many survivors of sexual exploitation, describes being a victim of child abuse and struggling with substance misuse: -

"It was the most traumatic time of my life, I had tasers to me. At the time I did not realise how bad it actually was. It was a gang who kidnapped me and held me captive. I was stuck in my bedroom with a lock on the door and they took over my house. I was not there for 18 months and it was like a drugs hub, I was not sure what was going on."⁹

"If I had a better start in life I would not have got into a situation of drugs and the trafficking. I never thought I was going to survive - it was like my world had ended and I was a no one."¹⁰

Alongside several other marginalised groups, the support needs of women experiencing sexual exploitation significantly increased during the Coronavirus pandemic. Despite this, women exploited by the sex industry were not recognised in the Governments response to the pandemic and subsequent lockdown rules. The pandemic, alongside recent world events, has only served to exacerbate existing gender inequalities within the economy and workplace. In 2020, the Women's and Equalities Committee launched several inquiries into the affects of the Covid-19 pandemic on different groups. This included looking at the gendered impact of the virus. MP Caroline Nokes who chaired the committee noted:

"Evidence shows that the economic impact has been experienced differentially by women – and in many respects, more severely. Women are more likely to have primary responsibility for childcare. They are more likely to work in the service sector, and to be in insecure or zero hours work. And more likely to be more dependent on social security, and in insecure housing. They are over-represented in jobs which are not eligible for statutory sick pay."¹¹

Evidently, women across the UK and within Wales have been acutely affected by the economic impact of recent world events. It is unsurprising then, that women are over-represented in instances of 'survival sex' and 'sex for rent'¹². It is also clear that financial hardship is a prominent feature in those who are experiencing or at risk of sexual exploitation.

Beyond the Streets, a Southampton based charity who provide a UK wide call back service for women wishing to discuss alternatives to sex work, recently published a study detailing the support needs of

⁸ Horizon Sexual Violence Services Infographic https://www.horizonsvs.org.uk/user_resources/images/contentfiles/SEASS%20infographic.pdf

⁹ Wales Online Article, 14th April 2022 <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/i-trafficked-liverpool-locked-room-23472455>

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Unequal impact of coronavirus, Women and Equalities Committee, June 2020 <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/328/women-and-equalities-committee/news/115180/unequal-impact-of-coronavirus-three-new-inquiries-launched/>

¹² The dangers women face as private renters, Generation Rent , March 22nd 2021 https://www.generationrent.org/the_dangers_women_face_as_private_renters



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women involved in the sex industry. Of the 90 women assessed, 38% identified “Coercion & Exploitation” as a support theme. The study also suggests that violence rates are more prevalent among the 34 women who disclosed coercion and/or exploitation, with 68% of those women reporting concerns around violence, harassment, or safety.¹³ The findings also suggested that the three most recurring needs of those surveyed were Mental Health, support with Family and Friend Relationships and Service access.

The intersectionality of sexual exploitation:

It is also important to note that whilst those who have experienced harm or exploitation by the sex industry are extremely marginalised in society, survivors who have intersecting and overlapping marginalised identities experience additional barriers and stigmatisation when attempting to access support or exit routes. Survivors from marginalised groups can also experience unique harms that are not experienced by survivors of other identities. For example, having to present as either male or female due to involvement in the sex industry can cause gender-fluid and non-binary individuals to experience gender dysphoria.¹⁴

Galop, a UK wide LGBT+ charity working with and for LGBT+ survivors of interpersonal abuse and violence, recently published a report highlighting the experiences of LGBT+ survivors of sexual violence and the barriers they face when engaging with the Criminal Justice process and accessing specialist support. Some key findings from this report indicate that only 12% of LGBT+ survivors reported their most significant experience of sexual violence¹⁵. Additionally, survivors generally felt that there was a lack of understanding of LGBT+ identities. Research conducted by the University of Bristol exploring the “nature and prevalence of prostitution and sex work in England and Wales today”¹⁶ suggests that the need to fund transition procedures was a recurring factor reported by transgender respondents to their surveys. Experiences of discrimination in the workplace, as well as the physical toll of transition procedures were all highlighted as barriers which meant that alternative employment options were not viable. One trans respondent is quoted as saying:

“I was desperate to fund my transition to help minimize the harassment and discrimination I was facing. Sex work for me was profitable compared to other work available, and helped get me out of the situation I was in.”¹⁷

As previously highlighted, women are disproportionately affected by economic policy and crisis, and are more likely to have caring responsibilities in addition to this. However, the effects of austerity

¹³ Support needs of women involved in the Sex Industry: Learning from frontline services Grayce Collis and Dr Katie Thorlby, January 2022

<https://beyondthestreets.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Support-needs-of-those-involved-in-the-UK-sex-industry-FINAL-for-publication.pdf>

¹⁴ National Ugly Mugs research: Sex workers of colour <https://nationaluglymugs.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/the-source-accessible.pdf>

¹⁵ Navigating the Criminal Justice System & Support Services Galop 2022 as an LGBT+ Survivor of Sexual Violence <https://galop.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Galop-Navigating-the-CJS-and-support-services-May-2022.pdf>

¹⁶ The nature and prevalence of prostitution and sex work in England and Wales today, October 2019

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/842920/Prostitution_and_Sex_Work_Report.pdf

¹⁷ Ibid



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also have a disproportionate impact on those with disabilities. Research indicates that as much as 50% of the employment undertaken by disabled people is low in pay, part-time or even short-term¹⁸. This is exacerbated by the lengthy and complicated process of claiming disability benefits. Consequently, individuals with overlapping marginalised identities may be increasingly vulnerable to exploitation or coercion into the sex industry - as well as additional barriers to exit sex work. Some figures suggest that 50% of those involved in sex work identify as disabled.¹⁹ One disabled respondent to the Bristol survey notes of their experience:

"A way of surviving while being disabled, since I can work for only a few hours a week or even a few hours a month if that's all I can manage, and manage to pay the rent."²⁰

Black, Asian and minority ethnic survivors also face distinct barriers to accessing support and reporting tools. The prevalence of systemic and institutional racism as highlighted by the Lammy Review, existing health inequalities, as well as inconsistent funding for specialist 'by and for' services are but a few additional barriers survivors face. Precarious immigration status as well as having no recourse to public funds can not only place Black, Asian and minority ethnic people at increased risk of abuse and exploitation but also deter survivors from disclosing to or accessing support. It is also important to consider how economic events and policies affect people differently, particularly when trying to identify and support those at risk of sexual exploitation. Evidence suggests that people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups were more likely to be hospitalised and seriously impacted by Covid-19, with mortality rates from Covid-19 markedly higher for Black and Asian ethnicities than White ethnic groups²¹. Despite this, there were no specific funding streams made available. For those with intersecting identities, the effects are two-fold, with research indicating that a quarter of Black, Asian and minority ethnic mothers were struggling to feed their children due to the pandemic.²²

Evidently, it is vital to examine the issue of sexual exploitation, as well as any form of violence against women and girls, through an intersectional lens. There may be different causes and consequences to exploitation, as well as different barriers to reporting and exiting. The unique impact that overlapping marginalised identities can have is discussed by a survivor who participated in the University of Bristol research:

"I started in 2014. I was in a desperate financial situation, no parents to support me and about to

¹⁸ Guardian online article - How austerity is forcing disabled women into sex work <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/jun/05/austerity-forcing-disabled-women-into-sex-work>

¹⁹ National Ugly Mugs research: Sex workers of colour <https://nationaluglymugs.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/the-source-accessible.pdf>

²⁰ The nature and prevalence of prostitution and sex work in England and Wales today, October 2019 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/842920/Prostitution_and_Sex_Work_Report.pdf

²¹ Public Health England: Disparities in the risk and outcomes of COVID-19 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/908434/Disparities_in_the_risk_and_outcomes_of_COVID_August_2020_update.pdf

²² BAME women and Covid-19 – Research evidence <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/BAME-women-and-Covid-FINAL.pdf>



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become homeless. As I am disabled and was in full time education my opportunities for work were (and remain) limited. Due to my immigration status (not meeting the habitual residency test) I don't qualify for benefits, so despite living in the UK since infancy, having had all of my education here, and never having lived elsewhere, I wasn't eligible for support from the state."²³

Forward Planning & Recommendations:

Welsh Women's Aid are pleased to be secretariat of the All-Wales Operational group for Sexually Exploited Women. This strategic group comprises of several key decision makers and membership includes National and Regional Violence against women and girls, domestic abuse, and sexual violence (VAWDASV) advisors, Police, Statutory services, and specialist services directly engaging with and supporting survivors of sexual exploitation.

The purpose of this group is to ensure those who have experienced harm and/or exploitation by the sex industry are recognised in strategic planning for VAWDASV, and the needs of survivors are addressed. The group have committed to an annual workplan which includes facilitating annual learning events, sharing good practice, and embedding a sexual exploitation focus within all areas of work including project and policy development.

There is a clear need for sustainable funding which will enable services to deliver long-term projects to build trust and engage survivors who are often experiencing several intersecting issues and vulnerabilities. It is imperative that sexual exploitation is regular feature in all discussions around violence against women and girls.

Welsh Women's Aid have also developed a resource hub on their website for members to access information, guidance, news, and legislative updates relating to sexual exploitation. We aim to keep staff and members up to date with the ongoing work in this area with future briefings.

Resources: -

Below are links to resources and information about sexual exploitation as well as the projects referenced throughout the briefing.

Swansea Women's Aid – Founded the [SWAN PROJECT](#) which supports women who are sexually exploited in Swansea. Provides outreach services, as well as practical and emotional support which aims to improve the safety and wellbeing of women accessing the service.

Thrive Women's Aid are also working in partnership with Swansea to deliver the project across [Neath Port talbot](#).

²³ The nature and prevalence of prostitution and sex work in England and Wales today, October 2019

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/842920/Prostitution_and_Sex_Work_Report.pdf



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Cyfannol Women's Aid/Horizon Sexual Violence Services – Deliver the [Sexual Exploitation Advocacy Support Service](#) (SEASS) across Gwent, which provides information, advice, support and advocacy to those who are experiencing or at risk of sexual exploitation.

Safer Wales – Deliver the [Streetlife Project](#) in Cardiff, which works to support those affected by sex work through mentoring, advocacy and access to services. They provide evening outreach and case management support.

Welsh Women's Aid - There is now a [dedicated resource hub](#) for Sexual Violence and Exploitation News, resources and webinars available to members on the Welsh Women's Aid website. Support is also available from the [Live Fear Free Helpline](#).

BAWSO – An [organisation in Wales](#) which provides practical and emotional support to black minority ethnic (BME) and migrant victims of domestic abuse, sexual violence, human trafficking, Female Genital Mutilation and forced marriage.

Beyond the Streets – A Southampton based organisation focusing on [sexual exploitation](#) and supporting women who wish to exit sex work.

Revenge Porn Helpline – The [helpline](#) supports adults who are experiencing intimate image abuse or 'revenge porn'. The Helpline has developed good relationships with social media sites and has successfully removed thousands of images. The Helpline also provide online safety advice for those engaged in sex work.

National Ugly Mugs – An [organisation](#) who provide support to those engaged in sex work, this includes the 'Ugly Mugs' reporting scheme which women can use to screen potential clients and create safety alerts.

Shelter Cymru – A Welsh housing charity who have developed various resources and toolkits providing information on [housing rights](#), including an 'Unlawful Eviction and Harassment' toolkit.