

NOWHERE TO TURN: Sexual violence among women selling sex and experiencing sexual exploitation during Covid-19

Report by Changing Lives

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Contents

Key insights	3
Introduction	4
Findings and implications	6
Conclusion and recommendations	13



Key insights

·The Covid-19 pandemic has had **devastating consequences** for women facing abuse and violence. This includes women who have been systematically targeted for sexual exploitation, or who find themselves with no option but to turn to 'survival sex', exchanging sex to meet immediate needs such as food, shelter or to provide for their children.

·There has been a **sharp increase in sexual violence** among women selling sex and/or experiencing sexual exploitation since the beginning of the pandemic. During the first four months of lockdown, there was a **179% increase** in the number of women disclosing that they have experienced sexual violence in some of Changing Lives' services.

·Women selling sex and/or experiencing sexual exploitation are faced with both **intimate partner violence** and **repeated sexual violence by multiple perpetrators**. In some of our services, **three times as many** women have disclosed that they have experienced other crimes alongside sexual violence, most commonly domestic abuse.

·At the same time, women who are supported in our temporary accommodation services have reported that perpetrators of sexual violence are **five times as likely to be a stranger** rather than someone known to the victim.

·The women we support feel they are unable to access justice. Across all of the services included in our research, there have been **zero convictions for any sexual offences** reported to the police since the beginning of 2019.

·As the pandemic continues, we are **calling for urgent action** to support women with existing vulnerabilities who are selling sex and/or experiencing sexual exploitation, including increased provision of specialist services and greater protection under the law.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has had devastating consequences for women facing abuse and violence. Lockdown measures introduced by governments across the globe as a necessary step to curb the spread of the virus has created a surge in reports of domestic abuse, sexual violence and exploitation.¹

Changing Lives is a national charity, supporting over 14,000 people in the most challenging of circumstances each year. In the past ten years, we have worked with thousands of women selling sex and/or experiencing sexual exploitation, as well as women who experience domestic abuse, or who have contact with the criminal justice system.

We decided to conduct this research because we became increasingly concerned during the early stages of the pandemic that women with existing vulnerabilities such as poverty, homelessness, poor mental health and past experiences of trauma, were at increased risk of sexual violence.

This issue can be related to, but is often distinct from, domestic abuse – also a significant and pressing concern – affecting women including those who are being systematically targeted for sexual exploitation², or who find themselves with no option but to turn to ‘survival sex’, exchanging sex to meet immediate needs such as food, shelter or to provide for their children.

1. UN Women [6 Apr 2020]. Violence against women and girls: the shadow pandemic. Available from: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/4/statement-ed-phumzile-violence-against-women-during-pandemic> [Accessed Oct 2020]

2. Sexual exploitation is defined by the World Health Organisation as: ‘Actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, power, or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another’. Available from: https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/documents/ethics/sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-pamphlet-en.pdf?sfvrsn=409b4d89_2 [Accessed Oct 2020]

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the challenges faced by women with existing vulnerabilities, leaving them with access to even fewer resources and support. Often, they find it challenging to engage with welfare services, and have been unable to raise income even through the most desperate of measures, such as begging.

As a result, Changing Lives saw an 83% increase in the number of women accessing our specialist services providing support for women selling sex and experiencing sexual exploitation for the first time in the first four months of lockdown. We continue to see unprecedented demand for our services, as well as significant and adverse impacts on women's physical and mental health, including an increase in suicide attempts and self-harm.

In April, we led a coalition of charities in calling on Government to protect women experiencing sexual violence during lockdown. Despite this, violence persists – our research shows that women with existing vulnerabilities were acutely exposed to sexual violence and repeat victimisation at the hands of multiple perpetrators during the first four months of lockdown, often intertwined with experiences of domestic abuse and other harms.

With women unsafe at home or within their communities, and unable to access support from public services that are increasingly in demand and under pressure, many have found themselves with nowhere to turn. With no end to the pandemic in sight, we are calling on Government to act now to end sexual violence and ensure that women who are selling sex and/or experiencing sexual exploitation can access safety and justice.

Findings and implications

About the research

To conduct this research, we analysed data collected across our services between March and June 2020 and conducted a survey of staff members in 15 Changing Lives services across the North East, Yorkshire and the Midlands. Together, these services supported over 1,850 women in the first four months of lockdown, through our services for women selling sex and/or experiencing sexual exploitation, as well as our criminal justice, domestic abuse and specialist support accommodation services for women.

Findings

The experiences of the women we support during lockdown highlights a sharp increase in sexual violence, characterised by entrenched patterns of abuse and exploitation. The findings also show a marked increase in repeat victimisation, whereby women are experiencing multiple crimes against them – including, but not restricted to, sexual violence, physical violence and domestic abuse. These are women who are already at increased risk of harm due to their existing vulnerabilities, such as homelessness, addiction, and poverty, but are slipping through the net when it comes to accessing the support they urgently need.

A sharp increase in sexual violence

Across the breadth of our services supporting women selling sex and/or experiencing sexual exploitation, there has been a **62% increase** in the number of women disclosing that they have experienced sexual violence during the first four months of the pandemic. We are concerned that this increase does not reflect the true extent of the sexual violence and abuse happening in our communities. For example, in the North East there has been an **179% increase** in women disclosing that they have experienced sexual violence, including instances of repeat victimisation.

We believe that the trend in the North East is closer to the reality of women's experiences, because there has been a sustained commitment and investment in multi-agency working across this area.

For example, in 2013 Northumbria Police created a Dedicated Liaison Officer role trained in supporting people selling sex and adults exposed to sexual exploitation, developed in response to recommendations from peer-led research conducted by Changing Lives which uncovered the sheer scale of the physical and sexual violence the victims had been subjected to, none of which was reported to police. Over time, this model has shown to have increased women's confidence to disclose crimes to services and report crimes to the police.³

Karen's story

Karen first came to Changing Lives in November 2019 at risk of sexual and criminal exploitation. Karen disclosed that she had been raped, and since then has continued to make regular disclosures of serious crimes against her – including rape, physical assault and aggravated robbery by multiple perpetrators.

During lockdown, these crimes escalated. At its most severe, Karen was admitted to hospital as a result of the injuries she sustained, amid concerns that her mental health had deteriorated resulting in self-harm and self-neglect.

Sexual violence, domestic abuse and other harms

During the first four months of lockdown, **three times as many** women in our specialist services have disclosed that they have experienced other crimes alongside sexual violence. Most commonly, this is **domestic abuse**, but also includes physical assault, theft, being held without consent, and intimidation. Again, the North East, the figure is far higher, with **seven times as many** women disclosing that they have also been victims of other crimes.

At the same time, we have seen an increase in perpetrators targeting places where there are groups of women with perceived vulnerabilities, such as our specialist supported accommodation for women. While the number of women in these services disclosing that they have experienced sexual violence remained largely unchanged during lockdown, the perpetrators of these crimes are **five times as likely to be a stranger** rather than someone known to the victim. The realities of this are alarming: during lockdown we have reported more than one woman missing from our supported temporary accommodation services, before being returned by the police or unknown vehicles. Some of the women have disclosed being held hostage during this missing period and have been drugged and subjected to sexual violence by one or more men.

³ Changing Lives [23 Oct 2019]. Supporting people involved in sex work to report hate crimes against them. Available from: <https://www.changing-lives.org.uk/blog/supporting-people-involved-in-sex-work-to-report-hate-crimes-against-them/> [Accessed Oct 2020]

This tells us that the women we support are experiencing significant harms, including repeated sexual violence by multiple perpetrators, as well as intimate partner violence and abuse. However, the findings indicate that the scale of abuse and exploitation, and the frequency of repeat victimisation, has been exacerbated by Covid-19.

Implications

Let down by the system

Staff in our services report that alongside the physical harms associated with sexual violence, women's experiences leave them feeling stripped of their self-worth, confidence and bearing the burden of stigma and discrimination.

“It affects every aspect of daily life. For many women who are repeatedly victimised, they lose their identity and their trauma affects their daily functioning... they become accepting that this is the way life is and believe they are not worthy of anything better.”

Staff member

Staff members highlight how women's experiences of repeat victimisation, coupled with experiences of being consistently and systematically failed by services since childhood, profoundly affects their ability to place their trust in professionals. Our staff describe the women we support as 'feeling let down by the system'.

Protection under the law

Policy and legislation to support women selling sex and experiencing sexual exploitation is fragmented, distributed widely across existing legislation rather than brought together under a single unifying framework. For example, while professionals and agencies have a general legal duty in relation to safeguarding, health and wellbeing under the Care Act 2014, there are no specific statutory responsibilities for adults who exchange sex or are being targeted for sexual exploitation, especially those at increased risk of harm due to existing and interrelated vulnerabilities such as homelessness, addiction and poverty.

This leads women who experience sexual violence outside of intimate partner relationships to believe they will not be protected under the law⁴ and makes it more difficult for specialist services to identify and support women in these circumstances. There are many examples in our services where women with existing vulnerabilities are slipping through the net.

⁴ Previous research by Changing Lives into the experiences of women involved in survival sex can be found here: <https://www.changing-lives.org.uk/expertise/research-expertise/> [Accessed 0 https://www.changing-lives.org.uk/general/%20housing-homelessness-and-sexual-exploitation/ ct 2020]

For instance, the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme (also known as Clare's Law) allows police to disclose to individuals details of their current or former partners' abusive pasts. This safeguarding process is based on the police's common law power to disclose information where it is necessary to prevent crime, but there is no equivalent process for the police to exercise these powers on behalf of women who are at risk of sexual violence at the hands of a perpetrator they live with, but not within the context of an intimate partner relationship. During lockdown, we have seen attempts to request information refused, placing women who are selling sex and/or experiencing sexual exploitation at increased risk of harm.

Chloe's story

Chloe was referred to Changing Lives as she was considered to be at risk of sexual exploitation. At just 22 years old, she has spent time living between hostels, shared housing and temporary accommodation. In March, Chloe moved into a new shared property.

As a result of lockdown, Chloe was unable to view any move-on properties through a letting agent and sourced her property online. There were four bedrooms in the property and throughout her stay, Chloe was the only female. Shortly after moving in, Chloe disclosed a sexual harassment by a male living in one of the other bedrooms.

Changing Lives submitted a Clare's Law request for information on the perpetrator, but the circumstances did not meet the criteria for a disclosure because although the perpetrator and victim lived together, they were not in an intimate partner relationship.

Chloe continued to be subject to threats and harassment by both the perpetrator and landlord, and without recourse was forced to seek alternative accommodation for her own safety.

Likewise, although housing is a known factor contributing to women's vulnerability to sexual violence and abuse⁵, those who are being sexually exploited often **struggle to access accommodation** as their circumstances are not considered to meet the threshold for emergency housing. The Domestic Abuse Bill introduces a welcome and significant clause to grant people fleeing domestic abuse automatic priority need for housing, but at present there is no equivalent for women who have experienced sexual violence outside of an intimate partner relationship. This reflects a broader lack of understanding of sexual exploitation amongst statutory services, and even when it is recognised our experience is that there are limited accommodation options for the women we support as result of the complexity of their needs.

⁵ Changing Lives [14 Jul 2020]. Improving housing support for adult survivors of sexual exploitation. Available from: <https://www.changing-lives.org.uk/general/%20housing-homelessness-and-sexual-exploitation/> [Accessed Oct 2020]

Miriam's story

Miriam was referred to Changing Lives in October 2019 as she had been sexually exploited by her then partner. She was considered to be at high risk of further exploitation, homelessness, domestic abuse, substance misuse and engaging in survival sex. Prior to the pandemic, Miriam engaged well with therapeutic support, her substance use stabilised, and her risk of engaging in survival sex had significantly reduced.

At the start of lockdown, Miriam was living at her new partner's address. During this time, Miriam disclosed domestic abuse that had escalated as her partner's substance misuse had increased, as well as experiences of violence perpetrated by strangers.

After finding herself unable to secure a safe place to stay, Miriam spent four days living in a tent with no food or possessions, before services were made aware and temporary accommodation was arranged for her.

Miriam has reported that she feels isolated, and she has struggled to maintain a tenancy of her own. Since then, she has been sofa surfing, sleeping in tents, her substance use has increased, and she has disclosed engaging in survival sex in exchange for food and a place to stay.

Access to justice

A further consideration is that women do not feel they are able to access justice, as their past experiences tell them that reporting crimes will not lead to further action. It is deeply worrying that across all of the services included in our research, there have been **zero convictions** for any sexual offences reported to the police since the beginning of 2019.

'The women [that we support] feel that the police do not do anything, and nothing proceeds further. Therefore, they feel that there is no point in reporting any incidents'

Staff member

This stark reality reflects the national picture, with sexual offences among the crimes least commonly reported to the police and with a strikingly low conviction rate. Recent estimates show that just one in five victims of sexual violence reported their experiences to the police, and only half of these were progressed further through the criminal justice system.⁶ While it is difficult to draw direct comparisons, nationally rates for rape are far lower than other crimes, with latest estimates suggesting that only 5.7% of reported rape cases ending in a conviction for the perpetrator.⁷

What is distinctive for women with existing vulnerabilities is the **multiple barriers they face in reporting crimes**. While three-quarters of the services we surveyed tell us that the women they support feel 'somewhat confident' or 'very confident' about disclosing crimes relating to sexual violence to their key workers, the opposite is true when it comes to reporting this to the police [three-quarters of services report that women feel 'somewhat unconfident' or 'very unconfident']. Of the disclosures reported to the police within our services supporting women selling sex, over two-fifths were **investigated and closed because the victim decided to withdraw**.

Our staff report that the most common reasons for this include **stigma and discrimination**, and a **fear of criminalisation**, with women often seen as the offender rather than the survivor, despite the fact that they are repeatedly exploited throughout their lives. The women we support also encounter **victim-blaming**, feeling they are being held responsible for the crimes they have experienced. This, coupled with the difficulties that comes with telling and re-telling their story, can be hugely re-traumatising.

There is an assumption that [the women we are support] are in some way responsible [for crimes against them]. In part due to some of the dangerous situations the women put themselves in, an attitude of 'what do they expect?'

Staff member

The process reporting is traumatic and invasive and does not lead to good outcomes for women. She is re-traumatised and inevitably told the case will result in no further action. This invariably exacerbates [women's existing challenges] and diminishes their faith in the services that are supposed to protect them.

Staff member

6. Office of National Statistics [2018]. Sexual offences in England and Wales: year ending March 2017. Available from: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/sexualoffencesinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2017> [Accessed Oct 2020]

7. Kelly, L., Lovett, J. and Regan, L. (2005). A gap or a chasm? Attrition in reported rape cases. 2005. Home Office Research Study.

Stretched services

In May 2020, Changing Lives joined other charities in welcoming the announcement of additional funding to assist specialist sexual violence services faced with growing demand.⁸ However, the short-term nature of this funding has not gone far enough to meet the resource implications created by growing numbers of disclosures – for example, supporting women to attend forensic examinations, give police statements and engage with wider support services. We have also seen associated costs increase, for example an increased requirement for clinical supervision to support staff members experiencing secondary trauma due to the increasing numbers of sexual and physical violence disclosures they are encountering.

At present, a common source of support for people experiencing sexual violence is through Independent Sexual Violence Adviser (ISVA) services. ISVA services provide vital emotional and practical support to meet the needs of victims or survivors, and help them throughout police investigations if they choose to report. They receive referrals from a range of sources, including from the police and self-referrals. ISVA services are central to an ecosystem of services supporting women who with pre-existing vulnerabilities who have experienced sexual violence and abuse, but they cannot do this alone. Specialist services supporting women selling sex and/or experiencing sexual exploitation are needed to build the long-term relationships that are required to build women’s trust in services so that they may disclose with confidence.

In the 15 years Changing Lives has offered specialist support services for women selling sex and/or experiencing sexual exploitation, we have learned the importance of focusing on women’s strengths and providing support which meets their individual needs and hopes to support recovery. While their experiences of sexual violence during Covid-19 may be acute, the impact of trauma and abuse is lasting and pervasive. Sustained investment in specialist services to support women selling sex and/or experiencing sexual exploitation is therefore vital.⁹

‘When women first come to our services, we often ask about their hopes, aspirations and what they love to do. I’ve supported so many women who have amazing talents... one woman spoke three languages and played three musical instruments. But when they experience trauma, they get lost to that.’

Staff member

⁸ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government [2 May 2020]. Emergency funding to support most vulnerable in society during pandemic. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/emergency-funding-to-support-most-vulnerable-in-society-during-pandemic> [Accessed Oct 2020]

⁹ Changing Lives is currently leading a partnership of six charities alongside GROW, A WAY OUT, Basis, Together Women and WomenCentre (Kirklees and Calderdale) to support women experiencing sexual exploitation across the North East and Yorkshire. This is funded through the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Tampon Tax Fund, but it is extremely rare to see statutory funding for this type of work.

Conclusions and recommendations

This research highlights that women with existing vulnerabilities were acutely exposed to sexual violence and repeat victimisation in the first four months of lockdown, with no end in sight as the pandemic continues. We are calling for action to support women with existing vulnerabilities such as homelessness, addiction and poverty, 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 that 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 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 provision for this group of women within locally commissioned services to support people experiencing multiple disadvantage. This is vital to ensure that 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.
- Provision to ensure that women selling sex and/or experiencing sexual exploitation receive adequate protections under the law. For example, we would like to see equivalent processes to Clare's Law apply to women who are cohabiting but not in a relationship with a potential perpetrator, and for women fleeing sexual exploitation to be granted a legal right to receive automatic priority access to suitable housing.



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