COMMUNITY FUND

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

Understanding the realities of Adult Sexual Exploitation

November 2023

A Report by the STAGE Partnership

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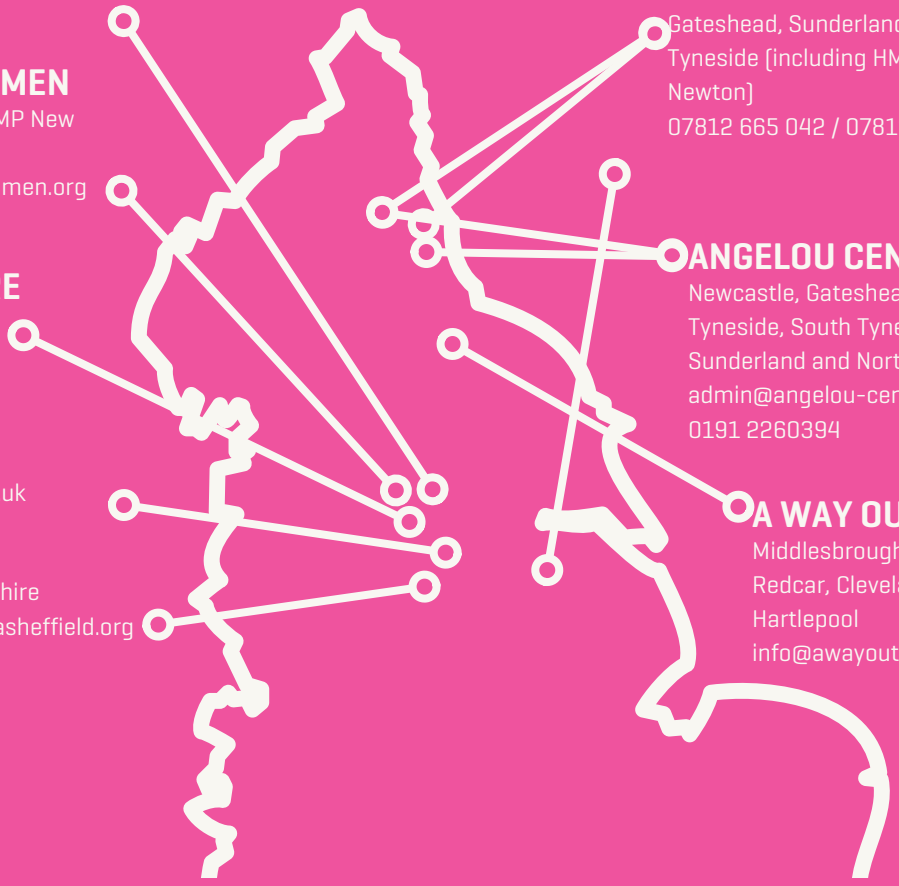

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women supported.

WHEN YOU HEAR THE WORDS SEXUAL EXPLOITATION WHAT DO YOU THINK OF?

The STAGE Partnership

"The calculated and persistent determination of perpetrators over a long period to exploit women and girls through horrific acts of abuse, violence and manipulation, targeting and grooming the most vulnerable with a dismissive disregard for the criminal justice system." – Spicer Review 2018.

Operation Sanctuary, Operation Tendersea, Operation Stovewood, Operation Applehall, Operation Cotton and Operation Linden.

In each of these cases hundreds of vulnerable young women and girls were targeted, groomed, raped, and sexually exploited across the North East and Yorkshire. Some were abducted from care homes, others plied with drugs and alcohol to the point of being unable to resist, and some were groomed to believe they were in loving relationships with their perpetrators. In 2018 the Spicer Report acknowledged for the first time that not only children but also women over 18 are being groomed and sexually exploited.

In 2019 the STAGE partnership was formed to support the women who had been targeted for abuse in each of these cases. The STAGE partnership is a consortium of charities; A Way Out, Ashiana, Angelou Centre, Basis Yorkshire, WomenCentre, Together Women, GROW and Changing Lives, who form a collective voice to share the experiences of women living on the margins of society, who have been forgotten, left behind and judged. Each organisation has a dedicated exploitation caseworker to support women through a trauma responsive model of care. Parallel to this work, the partnership advocates for local and national change. With the voices of the women we support at the heart of our work, we challenge the systems with direct, up to date, practical knowledge and experience and campaign for long-term structural change.
Since the partnership was created, we have supported over 700 women who have been groomed for sexual exploitation. However, we know that this issue is far more widespread than what we have already seen. The sexual exploitation of adults is hidden in the cracks of society across the country, whereby the most vulnerable people are systematically targeted for abuse and trapped with no way to escape.

While the STAGE partnership provides gender-specific support to women and girls who have/are experiencing exploitation, it is known that people of all genders can experience this type of abuse. Support to people of all genders is offered by many STAGE partners outside of this project.

This report seeks to shine a light on this issue, to give a voice to the women who have been left to fall through the gaps, and to change the narrative that they are simply too hard to reach.

We hope that this report will challenge you to question your own perceptions of adult sexual exploitation. – The STAGE Partnership.

Throughout this report we must acknowledge a power imbalance. These are not our stories, but the stories of people brave enough to share with someone what happened to them, and we have the honour and responsibility of learning from those stories and using that learning to seek change.

A Note on Language

Victim/Survivors: Throughout this report we sometimes refer to those who have experienced sexual exploitation as 'victim/survivors.' People who access STAGE refer to themselves and their experiences differently. Some have expressed a feeling of a journey from victim to survivor. Others can use one or the other, or both. Both terms serve different purposes and hold different meanings to each individual. The use of the term victim/survivor throughout this report aims to acknowledge this variety of experiences, and convey the empowerment held in these words.

Women: Due to the nature of this project, this report focuses on the experiences of women who have experienced adult sexual exploitation. STAGE is a gender specific project that supports all women including trans women. However, we acknowledge that sexual exploitation can happen to people of all genders. Trauma-informed and inclusive support for all genders is available from many of the STAGE partners outside of this project. STAGE also works with girls aged 16+ to meet their needs as adolescents who are transitioning into adulthood and require transitionary services.

Prostitution: 'Prostitute' is often used as a derogatory term and is an archaic use of language. On a practical level, the use of this term in legislation can act as a barrier for justice for people who do not identify as 'prostitutes' and either assume the law does not apply to them or fear the stigma associated with being seen as a 'prostitute'. Throughout this report, this term is occasionally used but is only used in quotes from others or to highlight false perceptions.

Case Studies: All the stories included in this report are the real experiences of women supported by STAGE. For the safety of those involved we have removed or altered any identifying features including names, ages, and locations.

Content Warning

This report includes case studies and quotes that depict in detail the realities of adult sexual exploitation. It also highlights the harmful perceptions of professionals towards victim/survivors. This may be triggering or retraumatising to readers.

Professional Perceptions of ASE

Police Officer: “It can’t be sexual exploitation, she’s over 18.”

Senior Housing Worker: “If you’re not kicking and screaming, then it isn’t rape.”

Doctor: “You do this because you like the attention.”

Police Officer: “You’re not a credible witness, a jury would not believe you.”

Midwife: “I can’t understand how you engage in sexual activities, yet you can’t let me check how far dilated you are.”

Police Officer: “Your history of self-harm and suicide confirm you are unstable, and who’s going to believe someone who is unstable?”

Mental Health Nurse: “I can see in your notes you have been abused, but why are you trying to talk to professionals about your sex life? I’m a mental health nurse, this is not appropriate to discuss.”

Police Officer: “I mean, did you get into their car because of the thrill? People with your diagnosis love the drama.”

Mental Health Nurse: “We can’t offer you therapy, you are too unstable, you need to forget about the past and learn to move on.”

Erica's Story

This is Erica's story told from two different perspectives. As you read this, how does this make you feel about Erica?

Erica's story is a combination of women's experiences who are supported by STAGE. Everything that has happened to Erica has happened to women supported by this partnership. However, for the safety of the women we support we have changed any identifying features and combined multiple women's stories.

Narrative One

As a teenager, Erica was sexually promiscuous and mature for her age, including having sex with several older men. Her parents found her a challenge and she was kicked out at 18.

She entered a relationship with a man named Aran who introduced her to sex work. They were together for a couple of years during which time she sold sex out of Aran's house.

When she was 19, she told the police that Aran and his associates were abusing her but there wasn't enough evidence to suggest that she hasn't just chosen to sex work.

She broke up with Aran and moved to a different town where she was placed in supported accommodation. She would regularly disappear for nights at a time, getting in taxis with people known to abuse women. The hostel threatened her with eviction as she was leaving a room vacant that could have been used for someone else.

Erica was using drugs and continued to sex work to fund her addiction. She would regularly get herself in dangerous situations, ignoring the advice of staff who told her not to go with the men.

Hostel staff felt that a lot of their time was wasted helping Erica out of entirely avoidable situations. She would regularly kick off at staff or need a crisis team called. She had been offered so much help but somehow always seemed to need more attention.

One time she overdosed and disclosed to the crisis team that she was being abused and sexually exploited. However, she refused all support when the police tried to engage. It was not clear what she expected people to do if she declined support from the most suitable agency, so she was moved to different accommodation in the hope that she would engage better there.

Erica was given her own private flat to reduce risk to other residents due to her previous behaviour while intoxicated and her decisions to associate with people who could be a risk to others. This initially went well but Erica started to fall back into old habits, including using drugs and letting organised crime gangs use her property. She continued to waste police time by reporting alleged crimes but then withdrawing her statement, suggesting it may have been more attention-seeking behaviour.

She disengaged from services and stopped speaking to her family who she had briefly begun to rebuild her relationship with. She would rarely attend appointments and then text to apologise and say she wanted to engage but then repeat this behaviour over and over.

She did eventually start engaging properly with professionals and things started to improve. She finally started taking responsibility for her life and made better decisions, including beginning a healthier relationship and applying for social housing.

Narrative Two

As a teenager, Erica was approached by Aran, a man in his 20s. He was charming and she was flattered by his attention. They began what she believed to be a genuine romantic relationship and she believed he loved her – she certainly knew that she loved him.

One day, Aran asked Erica to have sex with one of his friends. Erica was confused – she didn't want to have sex with this other man and didn't understand why Aran was asking her to do this. Aran explained that he owed this man money and needed Erica to do this. If she loved him, surely she would do this for him? Erica agreed.

This happened again and again, but so gradually she wasn't even sure how she got to the point of having sex with multiple men every week. She loved Aran and Aran loved her, so if she had to do this for him she would do it.

Erica eventually decided she'd had enough and told Aran she wouldn't have sex with any more men. He hit her and threatened to tell her family what she'd been doing.

Meanwhile, Erica's relationship with her family was incredibly difficult. They weren't happy with her disappearing overnight with no warning and didn't approve of her relationship. This eventually led to them kicking her out of the house when she turned 18.

Erica moved in with Aran for a while, where the abuse escalated and she was made to have sex with multiple men everyday. When she asked not to, Aran threatened to kick her out onto the streets.

Erica eventually went to the police. While the officer was sympathetic, they said that the case was unlikely to hold up in court as it looked like Erica had chosen to sell sex.

She was supported to access supported accommodation in a different local authority so that she could escape Aran and his associates.

In the new town the exploitation continued, but with a different group. An organised crime group used a taxi company as a cover to target and exploit vulnerable young women. They would wait outside the hostel where Erica was staying and offer them free lifts. Drivers would then take her to various addresses in the area where she would be given drugs and told to have sex with men. Erica didn't want to use the drugs at first but, when she did, she realised she could block out all the pain she had been feeling. It made it so much bearable when she had to have sex with the men if she'd taken drugs first. She was so scared of her abusers, who called her their 'slave' and threatened to kill her, but drugs helped her mentally escape, at least for a short time.

The years of abuse had a horrendous impact on Erica's mental health. She ended up overdosing and was taken to hospital. She said to the crisis team that she hadn't meant to try and kill herself but maybe wouldn't have minded if she'd died.

She disclosed the exploitation and abuse she was experiencing to the crisis team who passed it onto the police. When they approached Erica for a statement she chose not to give a report, since the last time she went to the police they didn't do anything.

Erica began engaging with a specialist sexual exploitation service who facilitated a move to new supported accommodation where she had her own flat. Things initially seemed to be positive including rebuilding her relationship with her parents. However, shortly after, her mental health began to deteriorate and she reported hearing voices that were instructing her to do horrible things. She said that the voices told her that if she didn't do what they said someone would be sacrificed. She started drinking and taking drugs again to try to drown out the voices.

She also continued to be sexually exploited and assaulted. Some of the perpetrators stayed in her flat but she was also lured to other addresses where she was sexually assaulted. She initially reported this to the police but then withdrew both statements for fear of repercussions.

During this time, relationships with both her parents and professionals broke down. She wanted to engage with services but would often miss appointments. Sometimes this was because her abusers wouldn't let her go and sometimes her mental health was so bad that she just couldn't get out of bed.

Despite all she had been through, Erica was still determined to turn things around and over time she began to re-engage with professionals and her relationship with her family started to improve. She even began staying with them on weekends.

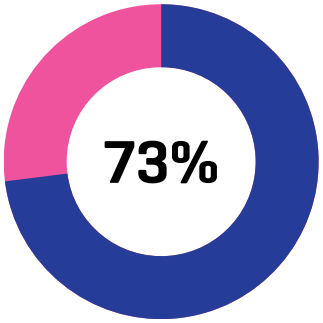
With committed support she has begun to move towards independence and away from exploitation. She has been successful with a housing application for independent living and is waiting for a property to become available. She has begun a relationship with her girlfriend and is completing a course on healthy relationships, but there are concerns that this relationship may also be abusive. Recovery from years of trauma does not happen overnight but Erica is making good progress.

1.

The Current Narrative

The Current Narrative

Over the past decade, there has rightly been a growth of concern over CSE in the UK, with several high-profile operations identifying thousands of people who have experienced this crime. Whereas understanding and responses to child sexual exploitation (CSE) have improved, particularly since the statutory definition of CSE was published in 2017[1], once an individual reaches the age of 18 there is often a sudden change in perception of their experiences by professionals and services. Adult women are more likely to be mistakenly identified as consensually engaging in sex work. This has led to countless people falling through the gaps and not receiving necessary support due to their experiences not being recognised. This section unpicks the current narrative around ASE and the response our society makes towards people who have experienced ASE, focusing on the story that should be told, and the misconceptions that leave women vulnerable to further abuse and exploitation.



For 73% of women supported by STAGE, exploitation began in adulthood.

The Spicer Review[2] - the Joint Serious Case Review that followed Newcastle's Operation Sanctuary – was one of the first formal recognitions of what many in this field had known for some time - that adults, as well as children, are being groomed for sexual exploitation. The report recognised that a person does not stop experiencing exploitation once they reach the age of 18. Furthermore, adults can be initially targeted for sexual exploitation after their 18th birthday, and perpetrators often deliberately target those who have just turned 18 because they know that the support drops off at this age.

Meena was 15 when she was introduced to her perpetrator. He began to groom Meena, supplying her with alcohol and drugs to the point she developed a dependency on alcohol. He used her fear around shame as a form of control to ensure she did not speak out about the abuse he would subject her to. Between the age of 15-18 Meena was seen as a victim of CSE and professionals did all they could to safeguard her. At 18 the exploitation was continuing. However, since moving into adult services the police and adult social care have questioned whether Meena was just making unwise choices and whether she was getting something out of these exchanges. In March 2023 Meena had a missing episode. She was located following a sexual assault. However, the responding police officer informed STAGE that this experience cannot be sexual exploitation because Meena is over 18.

The Current Narrative

Defining Adult Sexual Exploitation

Adult sexual exploitation is widely misunderstood and because of this, people have been systemically failed across the UK. We have defined adult sexual exploitation as follows:

Adult 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. Adult sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.

The current statutory definition of child sexual exploitation (CSE) was introduced in 2017. While there is still much work to be done, by formalising CSE as a specific form of abuse, this changed the trajectory and life chances for children who were being sexually exploited. Children who were once erroneously considered 'prostitutes' or as 'making poor lifestyle choices' were now recognised as groomed, abused, exploited and in need of care and support. The definition allowed criminal offences such as those in the Sexual Offences Act 2003 to be used more effectively, rather than justice and safeguarding decisions being impeded by speculation over a child's ability to consent to their abuse.

There is no such statutory definition for adult sexual exploitation, despite that fact that it follows similar patterns, whether it's happening to adults or children.

Features of Sexual Exploitation

All sexual exploitation is sexual abuse, but not all sexual abuse is sexual exploitation. There are certain key features of this form of abuse that make it exploitation.

Firstly, perpetrators of sexual exploitation create or take advantage of an imbalance of power through coercion, manipulation, and deception. This can be a one-off occurrence or a systematic campaign of manipulation and abuse, and can range from opportunistic to complex organised abuse. Many people experiencing sexual exploitation have previous experiences of trauma and social exclusion, which are compounded by the trauma of being sexually exploited.

Perpetrators become very skilled in targeting people who have unmet needs to create the power imbalance that they use to abuse and exploit. This includes targeting people at particular moments of vulnerability including when they are experiencing addiction, homelessness, domestic abuse, contact with the criminal justice system, or family breakdown.

Secondly, in sexual exploitation cases, sexual services are often, but not always, exchanged for something the victim needs or wants. This is not a simple sales transaction. What makes it exploitative is when the perpetrator is taking advantage of, and disproportionately gaining from, the fact that the victim needs or wants something, and in some cases may be instrumental in creating that need. The 'benefit' to the victim could include survival needs (e.g. food, shelter, money), emotional needs (e.g. affection), non-essential needs, and the prevention of something negative (e.g. violence, shame). The fact that the victim 'benefits' in some way from the exchange is sometimes taken as an indicator that the exchange was consensual, but this ignores the imbalance of power at play.

The perpetrator also benefits in some way. In some cases, the benefit to the perpetrator may simply be a feeling of power or sexual gratification through the provision of sexual services that were acquired by taking advantage of an unmet need or vulnerability. In many cases, the perpetrator may benefit financially or socially (e.g. through increased status). Even in cases where the victim of exploitation 'benefits' themselves, the transaction always disproportionately benefits the perpetrator.

Another key feature of sexual exploitation is the absence of meaningful consent. A key difference between CSE and ASE is that no child can legally consent to sex, whereas most adults can. The question of whether the victim consented or not is at the centre of much criminal legislation and has a major impact on the perception of people who have been sexually exploited. Although most adults have the capacity to consent to sexual activity, there are numerous reasons beyond physical force that mean a person may be unable to fully consent, including but not limited to:

- Seeing no reasonable alternative to engaging in sexual activity, for example, if they see it as the only option to meet a survival need. Tactics used by perpetrators can include cutting women off from other sources of support or convincing them that providing sexual services is their only option.
- Having a reasonable belief that failing to comply would result in perceived negative consequences for themselves or others, such as physical violence, loss of accommodation, or sharing of intimate images. What counts as a negative consequence may vary from person to person and be influenced by cultural factors.
- Having fluctuating capacity to consent, where their current state of mental health, trauma responses and/or intoxication may vary and hence their ability to consent also varies. For example, trauma responses can lead people to freeze in dangerous situations as a protective mechanism.

Grooming

Grooming is a common technique used to manipulate people for sexual exploitation, which has a negative impact on people's ability to consent and make capacitated decisions. While the grooming of children is more widely understood, for adults this often is not the case. However, adult sexual grooming has considerable overlaps of perpetrators' behaviours and tactics to that of child sexual grooming.

Grooming is a deliberate process to limit the freedoms of an individual by gaining control over their lives and actions. This often begins in an apparently positive way – the perpetrator showers their target with attention, affection, or gifts. They create a bond and build trust with their target, positioning themselves so that their victim is fully dependent on them, not only for physical needs such as food or shelter, but also emotionally. This can take place through isolation from family, peers, and social networks, through controlling an individual's access to communication, housing, sustenance, or substances, and through threat, humiliation, degradation, and violence. Grooming is targeted and gradual, and therefore it is often difficult to recognise.

Technology

Technology can be utilised for sexual exploitation, both to initiate the exploitative arrangement and for the sexual activity itself. With technology and online spaces constantly developing and growing, this has also created a space for perpetrators of human trafficking, commercial sexual exploitation and modern slavery to increase at an unprecedented rate. Adult Service Websites (ASWs), where most sexual services are advertised, negotiated, and facilitated in the UK, are a space where traffickers can manipulate, entrap, coerce, and force individuals into selling services. The role of ASWs in facilitating offending behaviour is complicated and unregulated. It is commonly known that ASW adverts are not always being accessed by the person within the profile and can be controlled by an organised crime group (OCG) or one individual, such as a 'pimp', a partner, family member, or associate.

There are also concerns that perpetrators are using dating apps for sexual exploitation, although the evidence base is limited. There has also been a recent rise in the number of sexually coerced extortion cases, also referred to as 'sextortion'. Sextortion is a form of intimate image abuse whereby a sexual relationship develops online, sexual images are exchanged, and/or sexual encounters occur within a video call/online space. The victim of this crime is extorted for money or further sexual services and blackmailed with their intimate content.

Trafficking

Many high-profile cases of sexual exploitation have involved trafficking from overseas, and therefore, public perceptions have come to correlate the two.

While it is, of course, vital to acknowledge the role of trafficking overseas in cases of sexual exploitation, it is also important to not conflate the issues into one. Sexual exploitation may not include any form of human trafficking or could involve trafficking within the United Kingdom. For example, many women supported by STAGE are taken from their home and trafficked to a variety of locations within their local area where they are given drugs and alcohol and sexually exploited. For those exploited online, they may never even leave their own home.

Distinction between Sexual Exploitation and Sex Work

Because adult sexual exploitation takes place between people who are at the legal age of consent, and can often involve exchanging sexual activity for something the victim needs or wants, there is often a presumption that meaningful consent has been granted and that therefore the interaction constitutes consensual sex work.

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. Sexual exploitation on the face of it can look like legitimate sex work, however such interactions are not consensual, and the perpetrator is disproportionately profiting from the exchange.

The distinction between sex work and sexual exploitation is not always clear and the reality for most people involved is complex. There are forms of sex work that are rooted in structural failings such as survival sex, whereby a person is not coerced into sexual activity, but they are constrained by social and/or economic vulnerabilities. In cases such as these, sexual activity is exchanged for a survival need such as housing, food, tobacco, protection, alcohol, or drugs. The degree to which a person buying sex is knowingly taking advantage of this survival need can vary, however we recognise that not all people who are engaging in survival sex are being exploited.

As well as meaning that those experiencing sexual exploitation are often missed, conflating sex work and sexual exploitation, can lead to further vulnerabilities for sex workers. This misrecognition can deter those involved in sex work from accessing services and advice about safe working practices, if they perceive that they will be simply seen as exploited, without services recognising their sense of agency (even if this is limited). Many do not feel that language relating to 'victim' and 'survivor' are reflective of their experiences and can feel excluded from services who might mean well but can stigmatise with their language and approach.

"Professionals always used to say I wanted to be a prostitute when I was 11, 12, 13. What I wanted was one of those men to take me home and look after me, to escape what was going on at home. Social Services didn't take me into foster care when I said what was going on at home, so I was trying to escape a different way. "

Criminal Offences

There is no specific offence of sexual exploitation of adults, and instead a range of criminal offences can be used to prosecute such cases, including:

- Arranging or facilitating the travel of another person with a view to exploitation (human trafficking)
- Holding someone in slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour
- Causing or inciting prostitution for gain
- Controlling prostitution for gain
- Paying for sexual services of a prostitute subjected to force
- Controlling or coercive behaviour
- Rape
- Sexual assault
- Other forms of assault
- Threats to kill
- Kidnap and false imprisonment
- Administering a substance with intent

We will explore barriers to justice in more detail below, but the challenge that many victims/survivors face is not that there is no suitable criminal legislation, but rather that their situations are not recognised as any of the offences listed above. It is difficult to estimate the prevalence of police-recorded crimes related to sexual exploitation as most of the relevant offences can also refer to other forms of exploitation and abuse.

Responses to Adult Sexual Exploitation

Women experiencing sexual exploitation are often facing multiple disadvantages that systems and services are not equipped to deal with.

"By silencing people's stories of trauma, we are sending a message. We are saying that the world cannot tolerate your trauma, we do not want to listen because it is too much, you are too much, your way of being is too much.

So we establish criteria to banish you, push you further away from the human connection you so desperately seek. We label you with emotionally unstable personality disorder, violent, aggressive and a problem, so you will go away, exiled from society because "you do not engage". - Trauma and Wellbeing Lead

Many women supported by STAGE experience multiple disadvantages which compounds trauma upon trauma. This includes being affected by sexual exploitation but also perhaps addiction, homelessness, crime, poverty, social exclusion and other forms of abuse and exploitation. People's attitudes and behaviours are often completely normal responses to sexual violence and abuse. Despite this, their behaviours are often described as 'challenging' and used as an excuse to exclude them from services, when it should be seen as a trauma response with staff equipped to de-escalate and support. They are seen as 'too complex' when no services or multi-agency arrangements exist that are designed to address complexity. They are seen as 'hard to engage' when it is the services or systems that are hard to engage with.

We need to look deeper than the behaviours we see and stop labelling these as 'too difficult' or 'too complex', but instead start asking what has happened to someone, and how we can help.

When she was 25 years old, Chloe was groomed by a man who convinced her they were in a loving relationship, but who had actually targeted her for sexual exploitation, forcing her to engage in sexual activities with other women. He introduced Chloe to drugs and alcohol and made her cut ties with her mother, the only family member currently present in her life.

When Chloe was referred to STAGE, she was initially sceptical of the service and believed that we would be unable to help her. She later disclosed that this was due to other organisations refusing to work with her as they deemed her to be 'high risk'. She was shocked to hear that anyone would actually continue working with her.

Her abuse compounded by being rejected by multiple services had left Chloe believing she was completely undeserving of love and support. She is currently in a good relationship but felt that she was undeserving of a 'good' partner.

People who have experienced sexual exploitation are often labelled as 'making poor choices' rather than being seen as victim/survivors of abuse.

Rooted in the misconception that an adult cannot experience sexual exploitation, is the belief that people are simply 'making poor choices'. Women supported by STAGE have recalled multiple instances of professionals questioning them using victim-blaming language such as "why did you get back into the car?" and "why did you stay with them?" This fails to acknowledge the level of control and abuse taking place in cases of sexual exploitation. There are a number of reasons why a person may be unable to leave the exploitative situation, and they should never be blamed for this.

Perpetrators of sexual exploitation use various methods to limit their victim's choices: grooming; coercive control; isolation from friends and family; controlling access to housing or food; threats, humiliation, degradation, and violence. What is perceived as a poor choice often isn't a choice at all. If this isn't recognised, victim-blaming statements such as these are perpetuated.

The impact of ongoing abuse can also have a serious effect on a person's actions. The immediate response to abuse and trauma is often categorised into the fight, flight or freeze response, or becoming hyper-aroused and hypo-aroused. These states of being, which exist outside of our windows of tolerance, have a significant impact on an individual's behaviour. In a state of hyper-arousal an individual can experience hypervigilance, anger, and feelings of being overwhelmed. This can lead to difficulties concentrating, angry outbursts, and self-destructive behaviours. Hypo-arousal is associated with shutting down and dissociating, which can result in extreme fatigue, depression, and withdrawal. People are not 'making poor choices' but experiencing very normal responses to trauma.

The process of normalised trauma, particularly from a young age, can lead to individuals seeing abuse as a normal part of a relationship. One young person supported by STAGE told her caseworker that she didn't want to go to the police because she thought her perpetrator "wasn't doing anything wrong" and felt she would be dismissed as wasting police time. Another woman supported by STAGE told us that she was "undeserving of a 'good' partner."

Many people who have experienced sexual exploitation form what is called a 'trauma bond' with their abuser. This is an intense emotional bond brought about through a cycle of abuse and positive reinforcement, creating an attachment that is difficult to break. Regular displays of positive or affectionate behaviour are used to reinforce the abusive relationship, making it difficult for people to leave or to go against what their abuser wants them to do.

Sexual exploitation also involves the exchange of something that the victim/survivor needs or wants. This can put an individual in an impossible situation in which they are unable to 'make the right choice,' and this is often rooted in structural failings upon the most vulnerable people. In many cases, this can be a choice between returning to a perpetrator or being able to feed their children. One woman supported by STAGE reflected that "at least when I was being exploited, we weren't worried about this" regarding money and food for her children.

Very normal responses to trauma are often falsely perceived as being signs of 'lying' or 'unreliable.'

Trauma responses and measures taken to protect themselves often lead to people being dismissed as lying or unreliable. This is particularly common when reporting crimes to the police.

Many people who have experienced significant trauma dissociate during questioning and are unable to accurately recount what happened to them. One woman who accesses STAGE described becoming a completely different person due to the trauma of the interviewing process and said things that contradicted her previous statements because of this.

The impact of trauma and the coercive nature of sexual exploitation can also create issues in cases where a person's consent is a fundamental factor in whether a crime took place. As a response to the trauma along with feelings of shame many people can blame themselves or downplay their experiences. When they change their story in this way, this often is not recognised as a trauma response, but instead they are perceived as being unreliable or lying about what has happened to them.

Women supported by STAGE have withdrawn police statements for a variety of reasons, including negative experiences with the police, fear of repercussions or threats of harm from perpetrators, or becoming retraumatised by the investigation process. However, if they then try to report a future crime, this can then be used against them as they are seen as being unreliable.

Megan's experiences of sexual exploitation began at the age of 14. At 16, she gave birth to her first child, who was removed and placed for adoption. At this time, Megan was part of a police investigation into child sexual exploitation, for which she provided statements and evidence in relation to around 20 perpetrators.

Megan retracted one of these allegations, stating that she had lied and that she was in a relationship with the man the allegation related to. Megan was 16 at this time, the man was in his late 30s. She was threatened with perjury and a number of senior officers and professionals had to advocate on her behalf to have the charges against her dropped.

Over the next few years, Megan was supported to understand what had happened to her and shared that she had withdrawn her statement due to her trauma, threats and intimidation.

Megan was later abducted and raped by two men who were linked to the gang who had exploited her in her childhood. This was witnessed by two members of the public who contacted the police. Megan was taken to the SARC where physical evidence was collected, and she gave her statement. The two men were arrested, and one was held on remand due to the scale of evidence.

A few days before the trial was due to commence, the Crown Prosecution Service dropped the case. Megan was informed that this was due to her not being "a reliable witness" because of "the previous false report". The case was escalated up to the National Crime Agency, who sought to gather information behind why Megan withdrew her statement when she was 16. Despite this, no further action was taken to prosecute her abusers.

Megan was offered an apology by the police, who acknowledged their failings and that Megan had been significantly let down. This did not matter to Megan, however, as it made no difference to justice being served. In the meeting, Megan stated "This means that anybody can do anything they like to me and get away with it".

It is vital that all professionals involved with victim/survivors of sexual exploitation understand the impact of this trauma and abuse on a person's behaviour. They are not 'lying' or 'unreliable' but processing severe and often ongoing trauma.

Adult Sexual Exploitation, and the victim/survivors of ASE are widely misunderstood. The false narratives placed onto these individuals can perpetuate harmful narratives of victim-blaming and can prevent vulnerable people from accessing the support that they need and are entitled to.

2.

The Impact of this Narrative

"We are working with the most vulnerable women. Their voices are being overlooked by other services and are deemed as 'too complex', these women are massively misunderstood, and their abuse is seen to be consensual once they are classed as an adult. This is clearly not the case, and we need to recognise these are not 'poor choices' and she is not 'putting herself at risk' she is someone that is being targeted and needs to be listened to not blamed. "- STAGE Caseworker

From the misconceptions and false narratives placed onto people experiencing adult sexual exploitation, comes structural failings to support those who are the most vulnerable. Once we understand the true reality of these people's lives, we can see the foundations that need to be put in place to allow people to move on from their abuse and trauma:

- Protection from ongoing and future exploitation
- Independence to reduce reliance on perpetrators of exploitation and to empower women in their recovery
- Support to process ongoing trauma

Achieving all of these things often takes a multi-agency approach. However, as this report will illustrate, people experiencing sexual exploitation face significant barriers to accessing support because of the widespread lack of understanding outlined in Section One. Black and minoritised women face additional challenges and exclusion from services due to systemic racism and lack of cultural competence across various sectors. Women with insecure immigration status and those with no recourse to public funds are particularly vulnerable.

Protection

For people experiencing sexual exploitation, protection from further harm is a priority. As detailed in Section One, women are often dismissed as making 'poor choices', including choosing to put themselves in harm's way. Once we understand that these 'choices' are not being made freely, we can begin to understand the need for professionals, including law enforcement and safeguarding, to take action to protect people from current and future abuse.

Children subject to sexual exploitation often receive wraparound support which drops off once they turn 18. The criteria for adult safeguarding support from local authorities are different for those for children and therefore adults have been rejected from support on the basis that "sexual exploitation only happens to children". Children are considered to be vulnerable because of their age, whereas adults are often only considered vulnerable if they have a learning difficulty or disability. Nothing about their situation other than their age has changed, yet suddenly vulnerability is seen as reducing or disappearing entirely.

At the age of 17, Sarah was targeted by a group who sexually exploited her. Children's social care assessed her as vulnerable, not only due to her age but due to her difficulty assessing risk and retaining information. Despite indications of both, she was never given a formal mental health or learning disability diagnosis. Once she turned 18, Sarah was not allocated to a social worker from adult social care since she did not meet the threshold of need.

A thematic review of Safeguarding Adult Reviews[3] involving ASE conducted by Teeswide Safeguarding Adults Board identified numerous significant gaps in the system to effectively protect adults experiencing sexual exploitation. This leaves adults with law enforcement as their only means of protection, but they face significant barriers to both justice and ongoing protection from further exploitation. The women supported by STAGE are unfortunately the women who are often missed, or whose cases are seen as being too complicated, and so end up falling through the gaps at every stage in the criminal justice process.

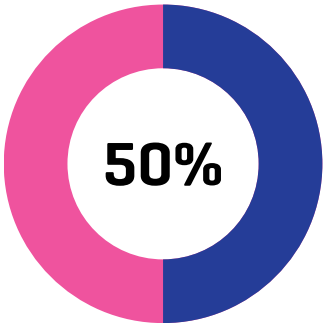
Many of the women supported by STAGE have experienced not being believed or having cases dropped due to insufficient evidence, often linked to them being seen as an 'unreliable witness'. While there are pockets of good practice and some excellent police officers who take the time to listen and understand, it is also far too common for women to encounter police officers who lack understanding of how trauma, grooming and coercive control can influence both someone's ability to recall and communicate information, and their capacity to consent to sexual activity.

Women who access STAGE have also told us how the process of telling their story to the police and engaging in the subsequent investigation have been retraumatising and has undone a lot of the work they have done to heal from their traumatic experiences.

One STAGE caseworker told us about a woman who was very well known to the police due to experiences of trauma, being a care leaver and having a long history of reporting things to the police. Her support worker told us:

"I felt really uncomfortable being in the room and with the way they spoke to her, they were belittling and demeaning and victim-blaming in the comments they would make. Both she and I felt like she wasn't believed or treated respectfully. We spoke to another officer from a different team which she did have a positive experience in the end but the thought 'they don't believe me anyway, so what's the point' can stick in their minds. We tried to pick up the pieces, but this needed to be done by the police to restore her faith in them." - STAGE Caseworker

The lack of understanding of adult sexual exploitation from police staff has also led to instances of victim-blaming language in police investigations. Women supported by STAGE have felt that at times they were on trial themselves due to questions like "Why did you get back into the car?" and "Why did you stay with them?" One woman, who was known to the police as being involved in sex work, was raped by a lorry driver but was told by police that she was putting herself at risk due to her work. Similarly, in instances where cases have made it to court, victim/survivors have faced victim-blaming language throughout cross-examination. Women supported by STAGE have told us that court proceedings can feel like a continuation of their abuse and manipulation, particularly during cross-examination when defence barristers can ask questions in a way that further exacerbates trauma and distress.



50% of women accessing STAGE who reported crimes against them to the police did not feel they were believed.

Stigma surrounding mental health diagnoses and drug and alcohol dependency can also feed into the likelihood of women receiving a positive outcome when reporting crimes to the police. One woman supported by STAGE was told by the police "Your history of self-harm and suicide confirm you are unstable, and who's going to believe someone who's unstable? You're not a credible witness, a jury would not believe you."

Black and minoritised women are also more likely to experience stigmatisation within the process of police investigations, which has led to disparities in conviction results. Young Black women, for example, often face the stereotype of being aggressive and therefore responsible for the violence they have experienced.

Research by Katrina Hohl and Elizabeth Stanko in 2015 found that the interaction between suspects and victims' ethnicities affects the chance of an incident being recorded as a crime[4]. Compared to cases where the suspect is non-white, a white suspect is twice as likely to get a 'no crime' outcome if his victim is white and 11 times more likely to get a 'no crime' outcome if their victim is non-white.

There are sometimes legitimate reasons why prosecution is not an option, including when victims/survivors are unwilling to go through a re-traumatising court process, but women often find that contact from the police often drops off once a case is closed, despite the exploitation being ongoing. This leaves them even more vulnerable to perpetrators who now feel that they can act with impunity.

A multi-agency response is often the most effective approach to protecting women from current and future exploitation. This allows coordinated safeguarding, disruption, and prosecution activities to work side by side, looking at all options to ensure women are protected. Such a model exists in the North East, where Northumbria Police work with other statutory and non-statutory partners to safeguard victims of all forms of exploitation.

Information sharing between partners creates a full picture of what is going on in people's lives and the vulnerabilities they are experiencing. For women with multiple unmet needs, it can also contribute to a person-centred approach that allows agencies who all know just one part of a person's story to bring it together and consider the whole narrative. Housing is an important step towards independence, but the location of this housing is key to protecting people from further abuse. Perpetrators of sexual exploitation will work hard to bring their victims back under their control, and often know the locations of supported accommodation in their local area. Particularly for those who have been targeted by an entire group of perpetrators, the only safe option is getting as far away as possible, meaning they need accommodation in a different local authority. This is not always possible as local authorities and other refuge provision often have restrictions on who they can take from outside their area, and women struggle to prove that they meet the criteria.

Charlotte had been sexually exploited and trafficked in her hometown for a year when she reached out to a housing service in a different local authority area. She was offered temporary accommodation for the night and a train ticket to her hometown for the next morning and was told that she needed to return home. She was advised to contact her hometown housing agency as her local connection was to that area, and this council had no duty of care towards her. The Housing Officer also contacted Charlotte's mother who advised that she could stay with her. As a result, their position was that Charlotte was not homeless as she had a safe place in which to reside with family. However, Charlotte was not safe in this area. Charlotte's perpetrators knew both her and her mother's address and had taken her from there previously.

Charlotte sought help from both the police and the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), in the hopes that they would help her to access safe housing in an area separate from her perpetrators. The police officers involved contacted the housing service and explained that Charlotte couldn't safely return to her hometown or stay in her mother's home, and that she should be accommodated through them. That night, Charlotte stayed overnight in the police station, without access to a mobile phone for updates on her housing situation. The following day, she was informed that the housing service had continued to state that Charlotte needed to return to her hometown and could live with her mother, and that they had provided her with a train ticket to do so.

Independence

The nature of sexual exploitation means that the women we support are often dependent upon their perpetrators for things like money, accommodation, food, or drugs. The impact of grooming means that many people are also emotionally dependent upon their abusers. Misconceptions about adult sexual exploitation create barriers to accessing services such as social security, housing and healthcare that would support individuals to reach independence. This has left women supported by STAGE trapped in a cycle of abuse and co-dependence with their perpetrators.

Financial Dependence

Women often remained trapped in exploitative situations because they see no alternative to make ends meet. With the rising cost of living, households across the country are struggling to pay for rent, food, and utilities – for women experiencing sexual exploitation this makes it extremely difficult to escape their abusers and, in some cases, has caused women to return to their abusers.

Services have seen more women turning to sex work to deal with the rising cost of living. While some do this as a legitimate career choice, others do so because they feel they have no other option and, for women with multiple unmet needs, such arrangements can be highly exploitative. Selling sex in order to meet immediate survival needs is often referred to as 'survival sex'. While we all ultimately work to pay the bills, people engaging in survival sex are often constrained by economic vulnerabilities and many seek to leave sex work if possible.

STAGE takes the position that sex work is not inherently exploitative and the degree to which survival sex arrangements are exploitative can vary. In some cases, the person buying sex may be entirely unaware that the other person is selling sex reluctantly because she sees no other ways to pay the bills. In other cases, perpetrators deliberately target people experiencing addiction, homelessness, or financial insecurity because they know that there is a vulnerability they can take advantage of. The challenge that many women face is that exploitative arrangements are mistakenly identified as the women freely choosing to sell sex.

For women experiencing sexual exploitation it can be very challenging to gain financial independence. Many women have no fixed address, bank account, identification, or record of their National Insurance number, which can make it difficult to apply for benefits. Without their own bank account, wages or benefits are paid into another person's account, often going straight to their abusers.

Furthermore, current Universal Credit rates have been assessed by multiple organisations to be leaving people in poverty and destitution. Archetype analysis by the Poverty Strategy Commission found that a single person who is unemployed but looking for work and relying solely on Universal Credit would be in deep poverty (calculated as being more than 50% below the poverty line) even before any benefit deductions such as repayments of advance payments. A lone parent with a young child would also be below the poverty line – 37% of all people in poverty are living in a family with no work expectations[5].

Unless urgent action is taken to ensure that Universal Credit rates actually reflect the cost of living, people will continue to be vulnerable to exploitation.

Amber originally chose to sell sex but found herself working for an escort agency which took advantage of its staff. After making a statement to the police she found herself homeless and, after initially being placed in a B&B where she was exploited by the owner, she was housed in a family home due to the lack of one-bedroom properties in the area. This meant that her housing benefit did not cover the entirety of her rent and she ended up in rent arrears. She didn't want to return to sex work but did so in order to make ends meet.

By this point she was using drugs and alcohol to dissociate from the trauma she had experienced and to cope with meeting clients, so she ended up in a vicious cycle where most of her money went to fund her addiction, so she had to continue to sell sex and use drugs to cope with this.

When Amber disclosed to her social worker that she was engaging in survival sex, the social worker dismissed her and told her that there are a lot of people on Universal Credit who manage, so she should too.

Emotional Dependence

One of the hardest things for many people to understand is the emotional attachment that often exists between victims/survivors of sexual exploitation and their abusers. A common method of exploitation seen within STAGE is grooming, where perpetrators build a relationship, trust, and connection with their victims with the intention of using that relationship to later abuse and exploit them. This can involve making an individual emotionally dependent on their abuser, including cutting off contact with other friends and family. Victim/survivors may not view the relationship as exploitative because they believe that their abuser loves them. Even once the abuse escalates, that emotional dependency can remain. They may still believe that, as long as they behave the right way, the relationship will go back to the way it was in the early days.

Although perpetrators of sexual exploitation often target people with pre-existing vulnerabilities such as homelessness or addiction, grooming and coercive control can happen to anyone. Cassandra Wiener, a coercive control researcher, writes:

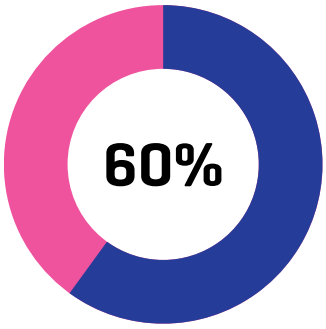
> **"Victims of coercive control are vulnerable, but not because they are weak, character-deficient, or mentally unwell. They are vulnerable because they have been groomed."[6]**

It is important for professionals to firstly acknowledge this vulnerability linked to emotional dependency. Feeling an attachment to their abuser, or even returning to them, does not mean that exploitation is not occurring. People also should not be dismissed for making 'poor choices' – emotional dependency and attachment is not a logical choice but rather linked to our impulses, coping processes, and responses to trauma.

Breaking this emotional dependency is not always easy, and it is crucial that people are supported to develop alternative healthier relationships, whether that is reconnecting with family and friends or integrating with new communities.

"You've gotta find what you like to do, what food you like. You have to learn what your choices are. For someone who's in an abusive relationship, they'll get forced to eat something or get forced to wear certain clothes, it's never their choice." – A woman supported by STAGE

Immigration Status and Independence



60% of women accessing STAGE who have experienced trafficking from overseas said they were uncomfortable talking to statutory agencies because they have feared that they will be criminalised due to their immigration status

Many people are, or perceive themselves to be, dependent on their abusers for their ability to remain in the country and for all other forms of support if they have no recourse to public funds. Some are specifically targeted and trapped in abuse because of their immigration status. Perpetrators use threats to report people with insecure immigration status to the Home Office as means of control, and many people are afraid to report their abuse to police for fear that their details will be passed onto immigration control.

"Women fear the police and they fear the Home Office, when they are in this situation day in and day out, they're told if you step out of line, if you don't do as I say, I will call the police and you know what would happen. You'd get locked up. You'd be in detention, or you will get deported, so it's just extremely difficult because women live in fear." - STAGE Caseworker

This fear has, unfortunately, in some cases been confirmed. One woman supported by STAGE was trafficked to the UK where her abuser married her. He took intimate images of her to sell to his friends and members of their community and threatened her with an imitation firearm to ensure her compliance. She reported this to the police but, fearing repercussions from her husband, she decided to withdraw her statement. Rather than taking her withdrawal as a sign of further abuse and coercive control, the police officer dealing with her case told her "I'm going to report you to the Home Office. I think you're abusing the system". Rather than being protected from her husband, she now risked deportation and the abuse from her husband escalated.

"They know where my family are and they've been threatening my parents, my parents are elderly, we are poor." – A woman supported by STAGE

It is vital that women experiencing sexual exploitation can seek protection and justice from the police without the fear of deportation hanging over them. The Home Office has repeatedly rejected calls for an information firewall to prevent immigration status information from being shared from the police to the Home Office. They have outlined an alternative proposal to establishing a firewall to be implemented through an Immigration Enforcement Migrant Victims Protocol which would ensure that no immigration enforcement action is taken against victims while investigation and prosecution proceedings are ongoing, or while they are receiving support to make an application to regularise their stay. However, women have reported that this does not alleviate their fears as immigration enforcement action could still take place as soon as an investigation is over meaning that, if a case falls through due to insufficient evidence or women withdrawing their statements due to pressure from their abusers, they still risk deportation. We urge the Home Office to reconsider their position and to consider further options such as restrictions on data sharing between the Home Office and police to ensure that it can be done for safeguarding purposes but not for immigration enforcement.

"But I'm in England. In England they should be helping me. You know, this is what I expect in England, that I wouldn't be treated like this, that people would be there to support me and they're just not." – A woman supported by STAGE

People with no recourse to public funds are often entirely financially dependent on their abusers and may not be able to achieve financial independence through either paid work or benefits. Their only options are generally to access support from a local charity, if there is one in the area providing this kind of support, or to go through the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). The NRM refers to the framework used to identify potential victims of human trafficking and modern slavery and refer them to specialist support including accommodation, weekly subsistence, and emotional and practical help. It is not only for people with insecure immigration status but is often the only option for this group.

Only 'first responder organisations' can make a referral to the NRM, which includes statutory and non-statutory organisations such as police forces, local authorities and the Salvation Army. However, many STAGE caseworkers have interacted with police officers that were not aware of the NRM and thus failed to refer or signpost individuals that were at high risk of exploitation. The Home Office provides extensive resources on modern slavery and the NRM, and the College of Policing offers specific courses to support police and other law enforcement officers in spotting the signs of modern slavery, yet more needs to be done to ensure widespread awareness and effective implementation of the guidance and training across the entire police force.

Although there are benefits to being referred to the NRM, particularly in terms of eligibility for support, it is crucial that the NRM is not used as a blanket response to the needs of women experiencing sexual exploitation, particularly those with insecure immigration status. For example, if the exploitation is taking place within an intimate partner relationship women may also be eligible to apply for a destitute domestic violence concession, meaning they can claim public funds such as Universal Credit while applying to settle in the UK – a process that tends to be much quicker than the NRM.

Reema moved from Bangladesh to the UK after marrying her husband against the wishes of her family. Her family believed that she had behaved dishonourably and brought shame to their family so disowned her and cut off all contact. This left Reema entirely dependent on her husband as she was in the country on a spousal visa. She had no recourse to public funds so was entirely reliant on her husband and his family for shelter, food and all essential items.

Once Reema moved in with her husband, she began to be subjected to high levels of violence and abuse. He would regularly physically assault Reema when he was angry and raped her multiple times a day. He also allowed his friend to rape her in exchange for money. Alongside this she was treated as a domestic slave and forced to do all the household chores at her mother-in-law's house, only being allowed to leave the house when her mother-in-law gave permission. Her mother-in-law would openly tell family and friends that she had a slave from Bangladesh.

Reema's husband and family regularly told her that, if she tried to leave the house, they would call the Home Office who would have her deported. They told her that, when she returned to Bangladesh, they would have her killed or would allow her own family to kill her because of her 'shameful' actions.

Reema's husband later told her that he had found a new wife and would be divorcing her and sending her back to Bangladesh to be killed. He kicked her out of the house and applied to the Home Office to curtail her visa. Reema sought refuge with family living in the UK but once again was subject to domestic servitude. Her Auntie would regularly tell her she was a dishonourable and shameful woman and therefore deserved this treatment.

Once Reema came to the attention of local services, actions were taken to help her escape her abuse. Reema speaks limited English but was provided with a culturally competent Bengali speaking advocate who offered emotional support with a human rights framework, emphasising her basic right to live free from abuse. Having initially declined a refuge space, Reema agreed that she did need safe accommodation and a safety plan was established. She was able to access a specialist immigration solicitor and a destitution domestic violence concession was submitted, allowing her to access public funds and removing the threat of being deported.

After receiving support to open a bank account and apply for benefits, Reema was financially independent for the first time in her life. She was given family law advice to discuss divorce proceedings and protective orders, and is accessing specialist culturally-informed recovery services, helping her move towards independent living.

Substance Dependency

A common tactic used by perpetrators of sexual exploitation is to give women drugs, either through coercion or physical force, to make them more compliant and to create a substance dependency. This creates a dependency not only on the drugs themselves but on the person who provides the drugs, particularly for substances where there are no legal purchase options as is the case with alcohol.

Other people develop addictions to drugs or alcohol as a coping mechanism. The reasons behind people's addiction can be complex and stopping drug or alcohol use is not often an easy matter. Some victim/survivors use drugs or alcohol to numb the pain associated with their abuse and trauma, both physical and mental. Many report using drugs so that they can dissociate while having sex with their abusers. Stopping substance use means not only facing the physiological effects of withdrawal but also fully embracing their pain. The prospect of this, particularly when the abuse is still ongoing, is simply too much for many people.

Many refuge accommodation providers require residents to be abstinent from drugs and alcohol, meaning women must achieve abstinence before they can escape their abuser – an entirely unrealistic option for many. When drugs or alcohol are being used to cope with traumatic situations, people need to be removed from those situations first, then the drug or alcohol use can be addressed. This means that we need more trauma-informed refuge and temporary accommodation options which do not require abstinence. This could include dispersed refuge accommodation or larger scale refuges with staff trained to deal with behaviours linked to intoxication and addiction.

People who are ready to do so also need access to trauma-informed recovery services. Many of the women supported by STAGE are aware of how to access recovery services but services do not always fit their needs. Due to years of underfunding many treatment and recovery services are not able to offer the full range of psychosocial interventions required to tackle the trauma behind addiction and not all services offer gender-specific provision.

A range of treatment and recovery options are important. While some people may benefit from a mixed-gender space, some women who have experienced complex trauma often benefit from gender-specific recovery spaces. A recent report by the Centre for Justice Innovation found that women accessing treatment in mixed-gender spaces could find the service to be chaotic, intimidating, and unsafe and some women were targeted by men for sexual exploitation[7]. Women supported by STAGE partners have reported feeling anxious about running into people who they fear, such as abusive former partners, and will call their support worker when they arrive so that they can be safely escorted in. Gender-specific spaces alleviate these concerns and create an environment where women often feel more comfortable disclosing abuse.

Women supported by STAGE have also reported a lack of cultural sensitivity when trying to access recovery support. Some women fear that reports of them accessing recovery services will reach their communities, while others have experienced misconceptions about their culture of religion acting as a barrier to support.

"When I told my GP I thought I relied too much on alcohol, it didn't feel like they really took me seriously because of my culture. Like it was impossible for any Muslim to have an addiction to drink."- A woman supported by STAGE

Without the right support, women remain dependent on their abusers and trapped in a cycle of abuse and exploitation. Giving them independence is not just about shifting their dependency from their abuser to another agency or professional but giving them the tools and adapting systems so that they can eventually do things themselves without support.

"I can go shopping by myself. I can do many things before that I didn't think I could do because I always panicked and thought I need someone there with me. But then my case worker was like- "try"- so I tried it, it didn't work at first, but the more you try, you're like- 'my God, I've done it!'"
- A woman supported by STAGE

Processing Ongoing Trauma

Even when people have all the other foundations for escaping exploitation, the impact of the complex trauma they have experienced still remains. Trauma impacts how people think and behave and can act as a barrier to accessing vital services when perfectly natural trauma responses are dismissed as 'challenging behaviour'. Survivors of sexual exploitation need both services that are genuinely trauma-informed and support to process and manage their trauma.

'Trauma-informed' is becoming such a buzz word that it is sometimes meaningless. To be trauma-informed is not just to be aware that people accessing a service may have been through horrendous situations, but to understand and appropriately respond to how that can permeate their thoughts and behaviours and how it can be exacerbated by their physical environment, the way other people act, and the systems they have to navigate.

Trauma responses are often described as 'kicking off' or 'making a scene', rather than very natural responses to what a person is processing. Systems that are difficult to navigate even for people who have not experienced trauma or mental ill health, become impossible to access.

"All these things contributed and I was unaware of why I was like that and why I flew off the handle, why I was getting myself into trouble. It took me to police custody."

"I realised that a lot of my personality traits weren't actually personality traits, it's just like inbuilt defence mechanisms for trauma. I'm finding out who I am for the first time."

Healthcare is a prime example of a sector where making the system more trauma-informed could have wide-reaching effects on reducing health inequalities. Systems that are difficult to navigate combined with the fact that many women engaging with services are likely to be experiencing significant pain or discomfort is a perfect recipe for triggering a trauma response.

No healthcare professional should be subject to abuse, but more could be done to ensure that people who have experienced complex trauma are able to access the help they need, without triggering these responses and with safe ways to de-escalate them when they happen.

More needs to be done to ensure that sectors such as healthcare, welfare and housing are accessible to all. In the meantime, ensuring that there are provisions in each local area or region that can provide genuinely trauma-informed support is vital. For example, one GP service in Bradford is well known for supporting people with vulnerabilities, including experiences of homelessness, selling sex, asylum seeking and trafficking and modern slavery. They offer longer appointments and do a full health check with women, given the likelihood that they may be experiencing multiple health concerns but will rarely see a doctor.

As well as ensuring that services are accessible to people who have experienced complex trauma, people who have experienced sexual exploitation also benefit from support to process their trauma, giving them the tools they need to recover and independently navigate systems and services. Sometimes this can be talking with someone who understands and takes the time to really listen, but it may also require more structured trauma stabilisation courses or professional mental health support including talking therapies.

"You can't just forget about your past, can you? And it causes me so much trauma, even to this day. You do need to talk about things, otherwise they're all just stuck in my head, and I end up like feeling that I'm just going to explode, and it's just awful."

"If I'm panicking, I just pick up my knitting needles and it takes away the anxiety straight away. It's really strange, I think it's because your hands are busy and your brain's concentrating on what you're doing."

"I think the best one for me was actually looking at mindfulness of emotions, because it turned out that I was either dissociating or going to the high end of manic and I wasn't focusing on what my body was telling me and my emotions."

Mainstream rape and sexual assault services are not always the best fit for this kind of support. Sexual exploitation is not simply a series of sexual assaults but a long-term campaign of coercive control and intimidation. Independent Sexual Violence Advisers (ISVAs) tend to have high caseloads, offer time-limited support and are more focused on people going through the criminal justice process (although this may vary by provider). People experiencing sexual exploitation may need long-term support lasting up to several years before they are ready to move on.

3.

Changing the Narrative

For far too long, misconceptions and stereotypes have left victim/survivors vulnerable to further sexual exploitation and unable to move on from and recover from the trauma they have experienced. The false narrative must be changed so that society can better respond to the needs of these people. In this section we set out practical steps that must be taken to help us not only change the narrative of what adult sexual exploitation is but change the narrative for each person who has experienced this horrendous abuse.

Statutory Definition and Guidance

Understanding and responses to child sexual exploitation (CSE) are comparatively much better than those of adult sexual exploitation, in part because there is a statutory definition of CSE. A definition alone does not change things overnight, but it does ensure that everyone is working to the same understanding of the issue and false perceptions can be more easily challenged.

The current statutory definition of CSE was introduced in 2017. A clear and comprehensive definition of what constitutes CSE offered crucial guidance for law enforcement, social services, and other relevant authorities, helping them recognise a broader range of exploitative behaviours and situations. The statutory definition was also seen as a means to enhance collaboration between different agencies who had previously been operating on different definitions or no definition at all. This improved partnership working and in turn led to more effective and coordinated efforts to safeguard children at risk.

There is no such statutory definition for ASE, despite the fact that it can follow similar patterns and often continues or begins in adulthood. This means that even agencies who have a better understanding of CSE are vulnerable to the misconceptions regarding ASE that we have already detailed. The Thematic Serious Case Review published in 2018 following Operation Sanctuary, known as the Spicer Review, highlights that the national framework of legislation and guidance for safeguarding adults from sexual exploitation has been subject to piecemeal development and reforms, and requires urgent review. A comprehensive definition and guidance would allow existing legislation, including the Sexual Offences Act 2003, the Care Act 2014 and the Modern Slavery Act 2015 to be used more effectively in ASE cases.

We recommend that the government consult on a comprehensive statutory definition of adult sexual exploitation and guidance for key agencies to be introduced through secondary legislation.

National Strategy

In July 2021, the Home Office published its strategy to tackle violence against women and girls[8]. While including several welcome steps to tackle gender-based violence, the strategy does not acknowledge the full reality of adult sexual exploitation – indeed it is barely mentioned at all.

The section on 'Prostitution and sex work' betrays a lack of understanding of the association between sex work and exploitation. The strategy says "We know that prostitution and sex work can lead to the exploitation of women and involve sex trafficking and modern slavery". While true, this fails to acknowledge that the direction of causation can go both ways and that sexual exploitation does not always take the form of someone being forced or coerced into sex work. The strategy's commitments to tackle sexual exploitation are vague and only 'address those aspects of sex work and prostitution that have the potential to cause harm or exploitation', rather than considering the other factors that lead to exploitation.

The strategy also discusses 'sex for rent' – where provision of sex is exchanged for accommodation at reduced or no cost – with a commitment to better understand the effectiveness of existing offences to tackle this issue. This led to a consultation on 'sex for rent' from April to June 2023, the results of which are yet to be published at the time of writing.

Similarly, the latest Modern Slavery Strategy, published in 2014 under the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government, primarily talks about sexual exploitation in the context of trafficking, which does not apply to all cases, and focuses heavily on foreign nationals brought to the UK and forced into commercial sex work[9]. The vast majority of actions focus solely on child sexual exploitation.

It is time for a strategy focusing specifically on adult sexual exploitation in all its forms, bringing together a focus and actions from both violence and women and girls and modern slavery. While we cannot go in depth into all the things such a strategy should contain in this report, we propose that the following areas should be addressed.

Prevalence of ASE	Due to the nature of ASE, any efforts to measure prevalence are likely to underestimate it, but currently very few measures are taken. Safeguarding teams within local authorities are required to report on numbers of people they have supported who are experiencing different forms of exploitation, but it is possible that they are all reporting different things due to a lack of consistent definition. Crime data is also difficult to assess as there is no specific crime of sexual exploitation unless it involves trafficking. Various offences can be applied, including rape, but there is no way to extract sexual exploitation cases from other rape cases. This is similar to domestic abuse in the sense that there is no crime of domestic abuse, but rather crimes varying from violent offences to criminal damage are flagged as involving domestic abuse. The difficulties of measuring the prevalence of ASE could be resolved by introducing an exploitation flag across all police systems.
Understanding and Recognition of ASE	To ensure prevention and earlier identification of ASE, more people need to be able to recognise the signs of exploitation. We would like to see training rolled out to professionals likely to come into contact with people at risk of exploitation including GPs, staff in addiction and recovery services, social services and housing staff. We would also like to see measures taken to improve public awareness and understanding of ASE.
Targeting Perpetrators	Perpetrators of ASE can vary from organised crime groups systematically targeting vulnerable people and who know how to avoid detection and prosecution to otherwise law-abiding opportunistic individuals who take advantage of a situation, possibly not even realising that what they are doing is against the law. More research is needed to identify what works to tackle perpetrators, but action must be taken to address all types of exploitation.
Identifying & Addressing Vulnerability	It is not enough just to focus on perpetrators. If the underlying vulnerability to exploitation is not addressed, victim/survivors often find themselves escaping one abuser only to fall into the hands of another. To end the cycle of abuse, it is important to identify and address vulnerabilities, including poverty, homelessness, and addiction. Many victim/survivors have multiple unmet needs requiring a coordinated multi-agency approach.
Criminal Justice Processes	There is a lot of work ongoing through Operation Soteria Bluestone to improve the experiences of rape victims going through the criminal justice process and to increase the prosecution rates. We would like to see this work expanded to include the needs of those often deemed as 'unreliable witnesses' due to factors such as addiction, their career selling sex, or their previous encounters with the police.

Supporting Victims	Even when ASE is appropriately identified, there is a postcode lottery for accessing suitable support. Mainstream rape and sexual assault services are often designed more for one-off incidents or for people going through the criminal justice system and lack the capacity or training to deal with the complex long-term abuse and exploitation that people have experienced. The National Referral Mechanism is also not always the most suitable option for people experiencing ASE and there may be barriers to accessing this kind of support. Victim/survivors are sometimes initially referred to services supporting people selling sex as their exploitation has not been recognised. Many of these services support both people selling sex and people experiencing sexual exploitation and are therefore able to ensure that everyone receives the appropriate form of support. However, in these cases it is unlikely that a referral would be made to rape and sexual assault services due to the lack of recognition that these crimes had even occurred. We recommend that the government fund specialist support for victims/survivors of adult sexual exploitation, including support outside of mainstream rape and sexual assault provision.
Immigration Status	Any strategy to tackle ASE needs to take into consideration the additional vulnerabilities faced by those with insecure immigration status, who often have no recourse to public funds and who fear deportation if they report their abuse. This includes those who may have been trafficked into the country who are at additional risk of being punished for entering the country illegally.
Safe Accommodation	Work needs to be done to ensure that people escaping any form of abuse or exploitation are able to access safe and secure housing. This should include ensuring that local authorities provide a range of refuge accommodation, including options open to people who are still using drugs or alcohol.

Empowering people to change their narrative

"The more you open up, the more you feel like you can talk, the more you feel like you can shout. And you feel like people are actually listening- you don't feel like you're in this bubble anymore. Or like you're suffocating. You feel like you've got room to grow. Just like a flower, you can open up and that's it- you're blossoming nicely." - A woman supported by STAGE

We cannot change the narrative for those who have experienced sexual exploitation unless we empower them to share their own story and make sure we're ready to listen when they do. Whether it's a GP's office or the Houses of Parliament, these people's voices have been silenced for too long, allowing this false narrative about their lives to persist.

"There wasn't anybody who was listening. I mean, not even not listening, because I didn't really say anything. Getting attacked in the street in broad daylight, people walking past shopping. I didn't have to say anything, you could see it. Next door could hear it and nobody did anything.

I never had anyone who I was able to tell about what happened to me. I would tell my doctor. I've been referred to psychologists over the years. Counsellors. Nobody did anything.

Talking about it and telling the whole story for the first time ever was a bit more like a relief as well on the other side of it. I struggled at first. I thought I don't know how to say this. I really don't know how to say it and then I just said it and it just all came out. Obviously it was upsetting but I thought, you know what, people are actually listening."

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