

Preventing another serial killer?

Learning from projects supporting women and girls who are sexually exploited or selling sex

This insights briefing was written through conversations between the seven group members of the Women and Girls Initiative (WGI) Sexual Exploitation Action Learning Set (ALS).¹ It draws on a case study from one of the groups which offer a model of how it might be possible to prevent future serial killers, several of whom in the UK have targeted women in prostitution. Through listening to and building alliances with women, we draw lessons from the case study for policy and practice more generally.

Peter Sutcliffe died on 13th November 2020. He was the most infamous 20th century serial killer of women in Britain, but the pattern of his 'career' of violence against women was far from unique. Early assaults involved hammer blows to victim's heads as they walked home at night. Many of his later victims were women involved in prostitution: their visibility on the streets and lanes of Bradford and Leeds made them ready targets. They were women with multiple disadvantages, little support or access to services and whose experiences had led them to be extremely wary of contact with the police. Public and professional attitudes towards women who sold sex, investigatory incompetence and a punitive approach to the policing of prostitution meant that Sutcliffe wasn't caught until ten years after his first known assault.²

So what's changed in 40 years? In some places, sadly, not that much. The projects involved in producing this briefing were located in a variety of police force areas and reported variable practices. When women report violence and abuse in the context of selling sex, some are still encountering disrespect or even disbelief. Local knowledge spreads quickly, and such responses serve to reinforce a lack of faith in policing, meaning that many assaults continue not to be reported at all.

There were, however, more positive experiences in the group, and one story, in particular, provides a fantastic example of how a potential serial murderer might be stopped in his tracks early on. The group agreed that this case study, which evolved whilst we were meeting, shows just how it can be done. We have included details of the assault not to shock but to document what is all too often the experiences of women selling sex.

Stopping him in his tracks: A powerful case study of good practice

In July 2020, a nurse at a health care project for the homeless listened as a patient told her about a homeless woman he knew being attacked with a hammer. The nurse rang Gloucester Women's Centre and spoke to Louise, the exploitation lead there, 'yes, she knew the woman; yes, she'd follow it up.'

Heather was in her 30s and living in supported accommodation.³ She had been out 'looking for business' and had been picked up by a man in a white van who drove her to a supermarket car park on the pretext of using the cashpoint. Once stopped, he reached down, apparently to get his wallet, raised a hammer and hit her in the head. Luckily, she was able to get out of the van and get away. She was very shaken.

Gloucester Women's Centre has built a strong relationship with their local police over many years and work closely with a police liaison officer, PC Carolyn, who Louise immediately contacted. She paid a visit to Heather, took initial details and referred the incident to CID. Despite a hammer being involved, it wasn't initially taken very seriously, and after finding it difficult to engage with Heather, CID closed the case. However, within a few weeks there were further incidents: a Facebook post warned people that a man in a white van had tried to abduct two women. A police investigation led to an arrest, and the man was dismissed by his employer.



He was released under investigation and immediately got another job driving another white van. PC Carolyn referred the original case back to her supervisors to reopen as she believed it was linked to these subsequent attacks.

The following month he picked up a second young woman supported by the Women's Centre. Shelley was 22 and had been sleeping rough for some time. She'd been discharged from hospital into supported accommodation just the previous week.

He took her to a secluded area, distracted her and hit her over the head with something – possibly a hammer again. She managed to escape and hide. When he drove off, she knocked on doors until someone answered and called the police. She was due to make a statement next day, but she was traumatised and didn't go.

Louise and PC Carolyn went to visit Shelley at home – they agreed not to take the statement then but arranged for both her and Heather to go to the police station together to complete a video interview and ID. In the meantime, police arrested their assailant somewhat faster than anticipated so they had to go a day before they had expected to. It took real persistence on the part of PC Carolyn to coax Shelley out of bed, and once at the station there was a lot of waiting around, so it took a bit of persuasion to keep her and Heather there to complete the process (a trip to McDonald's helped!). Both women picked out the same man in the ID, which helped to ensure he was remanded in custody. He was charged in November 2020 – just a few days before Peter Sutcliffe's death. In January 2021, due to the weight of evidence, he pled guilty to all charges - meaning Heather and Shelley didn't have to face the ordeal of giving evidence in court.

- Effective systems of partnership working and communication that have been built up between the Women's Centre and the police over many years.

- A designated police liaison officer, with the right personal characteristics, working closely with the Women's Centre and having earned the trust of the women. Shelley and Heather were clear that if it had not been for PC Carolyn, they would not have gone to the police – and even if they had, they wouldn't have stuck out the process without her support.

Wider implications for policy and practice

Currently, there is no consistent approach to prostitution in England and Wales. There are areas with impressive support services and others with none, and police force areas where there are strong partnerships with support services and others where these relationships are much less developed.

National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) guidance on sex work and prostitution was updated in 2019. It makes clear that officers should not start from a position that treats sex workers as criminals but instead focus on those who commit violence and exploitation against them. It emphasises maximising safety, increasing trust and confidence in policing and encouraging those in the sex industry to report crimes and abuse.⁴ National Ugly Mugs is a scheme intended to contribute to the latter, but to date, it has not enabled the kind of successful investigations outlined above, albeit that there is a warning system of messages about dangerous men that many projects distribute to the women they are in contact with.⁵

Discussions are in train between the police, support services and academics to clarify where the police have a critical role to play, and the priorities being suggested are:

1. Building understanding
2. Operational consistency
3. Reducing vulnerability and improving safety
4. Targeting exploiters
5. Influencing the policy environment

Such priorities are to be welcomed as a clear police focus on targeting exploiters, investigating sexual exploitation and building trust would encourage those selling sex to report any violence or abuse they suffered.⁶

So what made the difference?

- The very existence of a Women's Centre that undertakes outreach in the red light area of the city and has welcomed and supported women who sell sex for many years. There was no equivalent in 1970s Bradford.
- Well networked support services across health, accommodation and rehab who know their clients well and are able to share information to keep them safe.
- Coaching, modelling and promoting a respectful and trauma-informed understanding of women's lives to encourage more enlightened professional attitudes.



However, the approach currently fails to highlight the gendered nature of prostitution: that the vast majority of those selling sex are impoverished and severely disadvantaged women, and those 'purchasing' are almost all men. Nor does it acknowledge that many women are coerced into prostitution by male partners, not just organised exploiters, or that it is connected to the same gendered expectations and attitudes that underpin sexual harassment, domestic violence and rape.

At the level of international policy, all these aspects of sexual exploitation are acknowledged. The UK is a signatory to UN conventions, CEDAW on women's rights and the Palermo Protocol that involves a legal obligation to prevent third parties from profiting from prostitution, and to work to reduce demand for prostitution as the driving force behind sex trafficking.⁷ These commitments should be reflected in UK policing guidance and practice.

The projects involved in the action learning set which created this briefing believe that community-based support services, with strong links to a dedicated and specialist police liaison officer, offer a model through which violence and abuse can be reported early, and more perpetrators may be stopped in their tracks. At the same time, they recognise the importance of raising awareness of the severe and multiple disadvantages that commonly leads women into prostitution, the risks it involves, the gender inequality that underpins the 'sex industry' and the desperate need to provide alternatives to survival sex and exploitation through the funding of Women's Centres and other community-based support services.

This briefing was drawn together by Sara Scott, DMSS Research and Liz Kelly, Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit at London Metropolitan University (CWASU), based on conversations in the Women and Girls Initiative sexual exploitation and prostitution action learning set which met during 2020 and 2021 and involved staff from the following projects:

- **A Way Out**
- **Hibiscus**
- **Nelson Trust**
- **New Futures**
- **Women and Girls Network**
- **Women @the Well**
- **Women's Community Matters**

Notes

1. Action Learning Sets are a structured method for small groups to work together and explore complicated issues by meeting regularly to create knowledge. In this case, it was the WGI funded groups whose work includes sexual exploitation of young and adult women.
2. Joan Smith (2013) *Misogynies*. London, Westbourne Press. Carol Anne Lee (2019) *Somebody's Mother, Somebody's Daughter: Victims and Survivors of the Yorkshire Ripper*. London, Micheal O'Mara Books.
3. All names have been changed.
4. See <https://library.college.police.uk/docs/appref/Sex-Work-and-Prostitution-Guidance-Jan-2019.pdf>
5. Ugly Mugs is a national organisation to which sex workers can report crimes. Anonymised warnings are then sent directly to sex workers and support projects and intelligence shared with the police: www.uglymugs.org. Feis-Bryce, A. (2016) 'National Ugly Mugs presentation', Queens University School of Law, Belfast, 3 March 2016
6. See www.npcc.police.uk/ThePoliceChiefsBlog/InternationalDaytoEndViolenceAgainstSexWorkers.aspx
7. CEDAW – the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women: www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm
UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children: www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/protocoltraffickinginpersons.aspx

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