

The needs of women who sell or exchange sex

A briefing for elected representatives in Scotland



CSE

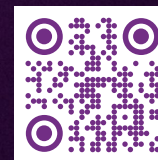
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IMPROVING KNOWLEDGE AND
RESPONSES TO COMMERCIAL
SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Introduction

CSE Aware aims to highlight to frontline services the specific needs and issues faced by women selling or exchanging sex in Scotland. Women involved and specialist services have for years highlighted the multiple, intersecting issues women face and what they need from services and leadership.

Here you will find eight infographics summarising women's main needs on issues such as housing, mental health, criminal justice, among others. Our hope is that these insights help to increase understanding of women's experiences and lead to actions that meaningfully change the lives of women involved in selling or exchanging sex in Scotland.



Housing

Lack of access to adequate housing can push women to start selling or exchanging sex, it can remain an issue while they are involved, act as a barrier when choosing to stop and force women to return to the 'sex industry' once they've moved on.

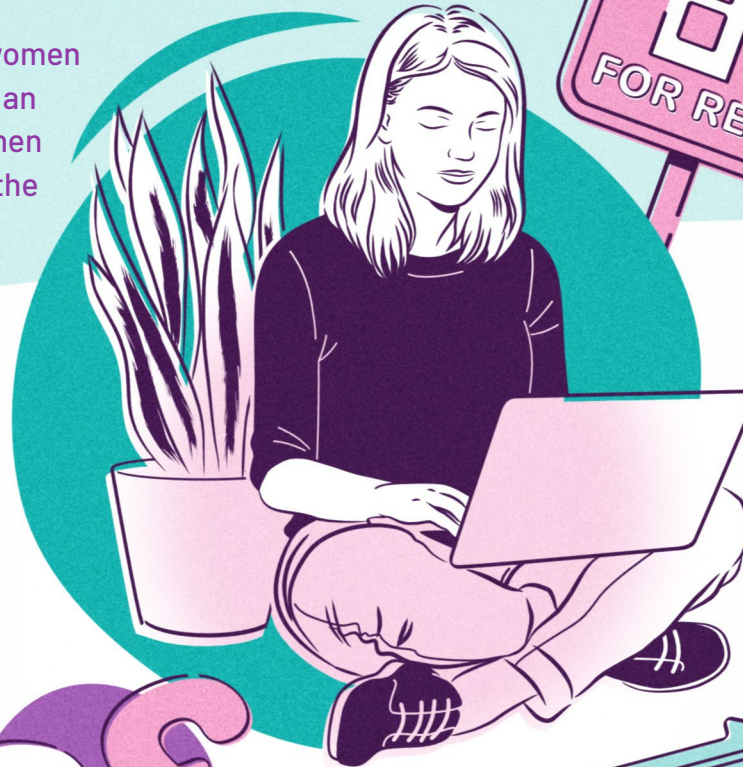
According to the Encompass Snapshot 2022, out of 101 women involved in selling or exchanging sex supported over a week by specialist services:



62% had been homeless at some point in their life

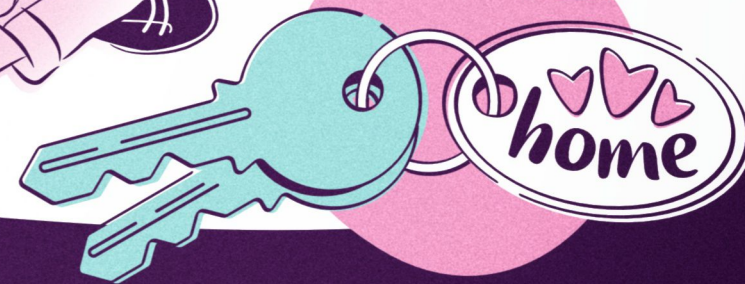


70% needed help with housing



"I moved in with a couple I knew... I was bringing money back from prostitution and it was keeping them in drugs as well. Their habits were getting kept along with mine ... it suited them to have me involved."

- Sarah Jane, from Inside Outside



Key issues

HOMELESSNESS AND DESTITUTION: women have reported being targeted for sex by men in homeless hostels; women have also described relying on punters for temporary housing.

'SEX FOR RENT': in 2020 a Shelter and ComRes survey found that 30k women in the UK were asked for sex in exchange for accommodation. Migrant women can be particularly targeted if they have 'no recourse to public funds'.

PRECARIOUS TENANCIES: women involved can struggle to prove income and some landlords have asked women for large deposits or threatened with eviction.

EVICTED: women have reported being evicted from social housing because landlords think that selling sex is illegal.

LACK OF SUPPORTED ACCOMMODATION: in Scotland there are no refuges specifically designed for women involved in selling or exchanging sex.

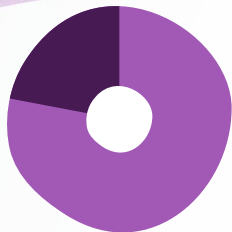
Read our full housing insights here: www.cseaware.org/housing-insights.html



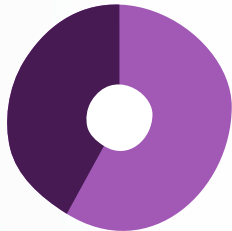
Safety

Women involved in selling or exchanging sex are at a heightened risk of physical, emotional and sexual abuse; and many have a prior history of abuse, including childhood abuse, domestic abuse and sexual violence.

In Scotland, the Encompass Snapshot 2022 found that, out of the 101 women supported over a week:



78% had experienced violence related to their involvement



58% had experienced domestic abuse



"There was a time that I was raped and I was beaten pretty badly and I literally went back to work again because I never had enough money to leave for my drugs."

– Joanne, from Inside Outside

Key issues

PHYSICAL VIOLENCE: clients' violence can be linked to their failure to get an erection, disputes over money and women maintaining boundaries around performing certain sex acts.

THREAT OF MURDER: analysis of the UK murder database for 1990-2016 concluded that people in prostitution are most at risk of homicide.

SEXUAL VIOLENCE: in 2016, 40% of 204 women selling sex who accessed a specialist service in Edinburgh disclosed experiences of rape.

EMOTIONAL ABUSE AND STIGMA: women have reported coercion and control from clients as well as harassment from members of the public.

ONLINE ABUSE: women selling sex online have reported unwanted contact, threatening or harassing messages, no payment and verbal abuse.

SEXUAL HEALTH: clients often undermine women's safety strategies by, for example, refusing to wear a condom.

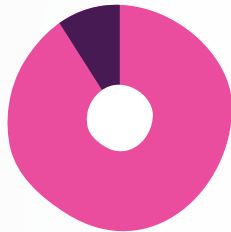
Read our full safety insights here: www.cseaware.org/safety-insights.html



Mental health

The links between mental health and selling or exchanging sex are not straight-forward. For some women mental health issues can be a pathway into the 'sex industry', for some the impact on their mental health is not fully seen until they have stopped their involvement, and for others the coping strategies used can impact long term on their mental wellbeing.

The Encompass Snapshot 2022 revealed that out of the 101 women supported over a week:



91% had disclosed a mental health issue, including trauma symptoms

Key issues

STIGMA: women involved often feel 'othered' and have heard derogatory terms used against them to discredit their experiences.

SOCIAL ISOLATION: women often maintain secrecy around their involvement and they can experience a lot of anxiety around being 'outed'. Feeling unable to openly discuss their lives has also been shown to have a detrimental impact on their mental wellbeing.

LOST SENSE OF SELF: women have highlighted that their involvement can harm or diminish their self-worth and increase feelings of shame.

VIOLENCE AND TRAUMA: many women selling or exchanging sex have past experiences of trauma and often live in a constant state of alarm and fear of experiencing violence from clients, pimps and others.

"Within prostitution, there's this thing about pleasing personalities, and I've found boundaries extremely difficult, like I didn't have the right to say no, to anyone."

– Woman involved in selling sex, from Scottish Government report

Read our full mental health insights here: www.cseaware.org/mental-health-insights.html



Trauma-informed support

Women involved in selling or exchanging sex often carry multiple and intertwined traumatic experiences. These can be linked to their involvement (the impact of unwanted sexual contact, fear or threat of violence, impact of coping mechanisms), to other forms of violence (childhood sexual abuse, domestic abuse) and to other life experiences (poverty, having children removed from their care).

Stígamót, the national violence against women organisation in Iceland, reported that out of 132 women involved in selling sex supported:



60.7%
disclosed
suicide
attempts



"You're constantly in fight or flight. . . Loads of people get killed in this [sex] industry and you know that but you take that risk because of the money, but you still know in the back of your mind all the time that if somebody walks through your door, they could potentially be the person that's going to murder you."

– Woman involved in selling sex, from Scottish Government report

What women need from services

(Based on the principles of trauma-informed practice and the Scottish Government's commissioned report *The experiences of people who sell or exchange sex and their interaction with support services* (2022).)

SAFETY: recognising the prevalence of fear in women's lives, validating women's experiences, and creating comfortable spaces or the opportunity to meet in alternative locations.

TRUST: explaining confidentiality and its limits, being consistent in how support is offered, and making sure any promises are fulfilled.

CHOICE: providing accurate information about services offered, giving different ways to access support, and being flexible as often women's life circumstances mean they cannot attend during usual working hours.

COLLABORATION: women involved on average seek support for seven different needs, which is why multi-agency collaboration is crucial as are opportunities for peer support.

EMPOWERMENT: supporting women to recognise their strengths and build hope. Support should be led by a woman's needs and not be dependent on conditions imposed by the service.

Read our full trauma-informed support insights here: www.cseaware.org/trauma-informed-support-insights.html



Substance use

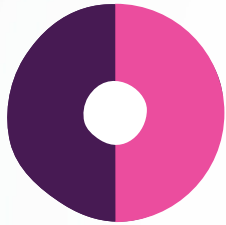
A woman's involvement in selling or exchanging sex doesn't automatically mean she uses substances. However, the vulnerability to developing a substance use issue and/or being exploited because of this dependency exists.



"... you'll get into a routine of having to have drugs to see clients and it's a downward spiral. It's like you do coke in order to escort, and if you're escorting all the time, you're doing coke all the time."

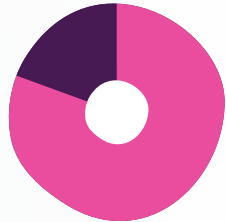
– Cassie, from Inside Outside

A UK-based study found that:



50% of women became involved in selling sex after developing a drug dependency

Research by Swansea University found that:



80.6% of women increased their drug-taking when they started selling sex



Key issues

A PATHWAY INTO SELLING SEX: women's vulnerability can be exploited by others to involve them in drug use and subsequently in prostitution.

A COPING MECHANISM: women have described using substances as a way to cope with having to see clients and to manage trauma symptoms.

RISK OF OVERDOSE: a study in Glasgow found that women who sell sex were more likely to use cocaine, inject drugs and overdose accidentally than women who don't.

DISEASE AND SEXUAL HEALTH: people who inject substances are already at risk of HIV and hepatitis. Selling or exchanging sex adds a risk of STIs due to clients' pressure to have unprotected sex.

A BARRIER TO EXITING: for women who want to stop both substance use and selling sex, lack of practical and social support can be huge barriers.

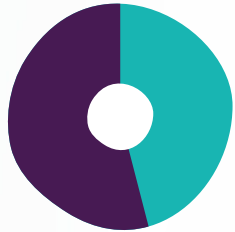
Read our full substance use insights here: www.cseaware.org/substance-use-insights.html



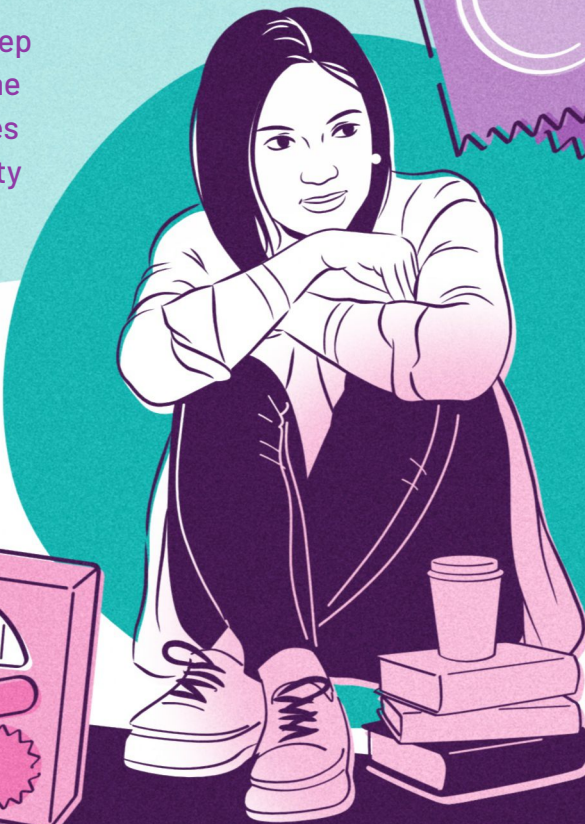
Sexual wellbeing

Women involved in selling or exchanging sex use complex strategies to protect their health and keep safe when seeing clients. Yet, being involved in the 'sex industry' presents unique risks and challenges which can impact on women's wellbeing and ability to manage their sexual health.

A needs assessment of people selling sex who accessed National Ugly Mugs services found that:



46% had experienced condom removal/refusal



"It did happen twice in the past yes [condom accidents]...I got very concerned ... if you plan to have sex with somebody without condom, without protection, you do that because you want to...but when you don't plan [that] and it happens, oh my god, that's so scary!"

- Luciana, from Confronting the Harm report

Key issues

NEGOTIATING SAFE SEX: women have reported experiencing stealthing (condom removal without consent), and clients using violence to avoid condom use.

RISK OF STIs: a sexual health clinic in Ireland reported that women selling sex experienced multiple sexual health issues, many of which were reoccurring and required repeat or ongoing treatment.

HIGHER RISK OF UNWANTED PREGNANCIES: due to the inability to access contraception and pressure from clients, pimps and partners to have unprotected sex.

FERTILITY AND PREGNANCY: a study in Bristol found that 13% of women in street prostitution did not receive antenatal care until admitted to labour.

MENSTRUATION AND MENOPAUSE: women often continue seeing clients while dealing with the physical and emotional changes of periods or menopause.

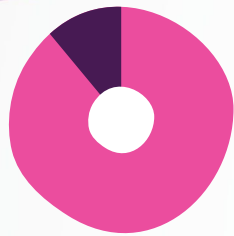
RELATIONSHIPS: women can have issues with intimacy and personal relationships.

Read our full sexual wellbeing insights here: www.cseaware.org/sexual-health-insights.html



Money and poverty

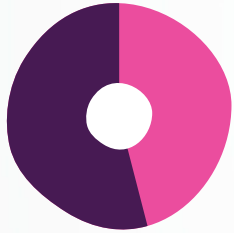
Poverty and lack of options are some of the main reasons why women start selling sex, with the earnings often used to cover basic needs such as food, housing and childcare. Yet, many women have described facing ongoing financial pressures and barriers whilst involved and when considering stopping.



In the Encompass Snapshot 2022, out of 101 women supported over a week:

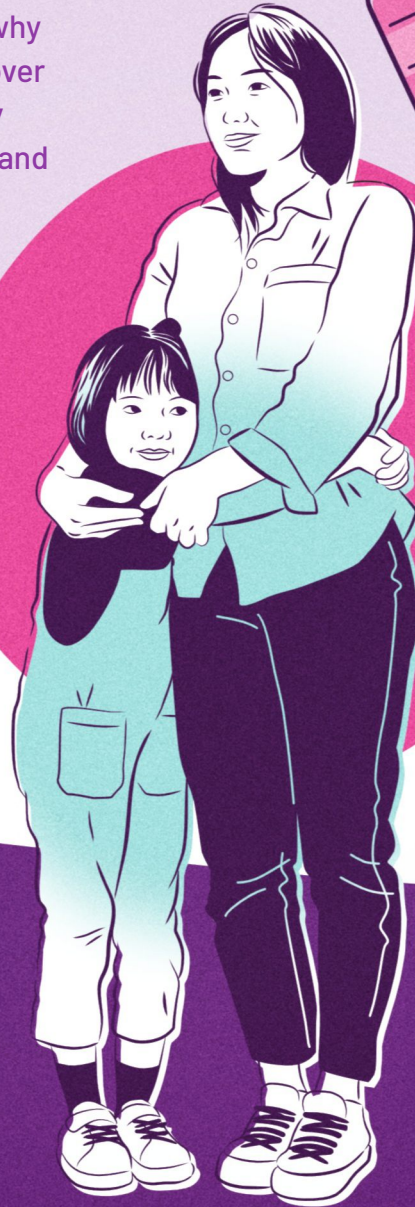
89%

were struggling to cover food, energy and housing



46%

needed support with debt



"The way it was described to me it was easy, easy money... And it wasn't... The money might be easy but it goes very easy as well. The more money that comes into your hand, the quicker you spend it. I went into [selling sex] to get money and at one stage I had some savings but they don't last."

– Katie, from Inside Outside



Key issues

POVERTY AS A DRIVER INTO SELLING SEX: women have described starting selling sex because they couldn't find adequately paid, flexible employment, and benefits were insufficient or inaccessible.

FINANCIAL PRESSURES WHILE SELLING SEX: women can face issues like continued debt and dealing with loan sharks, being exploited by others for money, and challenges to budget their earnings.

MONEY AS A BARRIER TO EXITING: the financial issues that push women into selling sex often remain when thinking of stopping. This can put huge pressure when deciding how best to move on and can leave women with no choice but to remain involved in the 'sex industry.'

Read our full money and poverty insights here: www.cseaware.org/money-and-poverty-insights.html





Criminal justice

Women involved in selling or exchanging sex can have a dual and contradictory engagement with the criminal justice system. On the one hand, in some circumstances women can face criminalisation for prostitution-related and other offenses; on the other, women experience high levels of violent crimes when selling sex, which often go underreported.



Women as victims of crime



Research in Ireland found that in 2018-2019, only:

10 out of 1,512

violent crimes against women selling sex were reported to the police

"The way prostitution is in society, men know that the women are not going to go to the police, so they can turn very violent very easily on you."

- Joanne, from Inside Outside

Key issues

BARRIERS PREVENTING WOMEN WHO SELL OR EXCHANGE SEX FROM REPORTING THE VIOLENCE:

- Victim-blaming and the normalisation of violence against women selling sex
- Being treated as criminals rather than victims of a crime
- Intimidation from perpetrators who may use the justice system against them
- Past negative encounters with the police and courts
- Being discouraged by the low conviction rate of perpetrators in Scotland

Women and criminalisation



The Encompass Snapshot 2022 found that, out of the 101 women supported over a week:

40%

had disclosed having a criminal conviction (for activities like shoplifting, assault, theft, etc)

"... I didn't look at [prostitution] in a criminal way ... I just thought well at least I'm not burgling, shoplifting or doing something like that."

- Woman involved in selling sex, from I'm No Criminal report

Key issues

IMPACTS OF GOING TO PRISON: these can be long-lasting as prison disrupts a woman's life and increases the likelihood of losing housing, employment and children (at least temporarily) - factors which can lead women to start selling sex.

IMPACT OF CRIMINAL RECORDS: the requirement to disclose these records can limit women's employment and education opportunities and prevent them from stopping selling sex when they want to. Disclosing convictions can also lead to retraumatisation and discrimination.

Read our full criminal justice insights here: www.cseaware.org/criminal-justice-insights-part1.html



“The way it was described to me it was easy, easy money... And it wasn't... The money might be easy but it goes very easy as well.”

CSE Aware is an initiative of the Women's Support Project, a charity focusing on ending violence against women which is celebrating its 40th anniversary in 2023.

For more information about CSE Aware visit: www.cseaware.org

Women's Support Project: www.womenssupportproject.org.uk

Encompass Network: www.encompassnetwork.info

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