

Migrant women and commercial sexual exploitation

In Europe, Ireland and the UK it is estimated that a large proportion of individuals involved in the 'sex industry' are migrant women. Yet, in Scotland the true extent of migrant women's involvement in selling or exchanging sex is not known. This lack of official information and attention to migrant women's specific experiences has meant their needs are often overlooked and remain unaddressed.

In 2024, CSE Aware undertook exploratory research with staff and services in the UK to find out more about how migrant women are impacted by commercial sexual exploitation. Ultimately it became clear to us that the systemic inequalities, disadvantages and hostile immigration environment faced by migrant women in our country increase their risk of becoming involved and trapped in selling or exchanging sex. This context also makes it harder for them to access culturally sensitive support, explore alternatives and stop selling sex if and when they wish to.

This briefing summarises what we found, what we still don't know, and what policymakers and organisational leaders in Scotland must do to address migrant women's experiences of selling and exchanging sex.

What we know about migrant women's experiences

The UK 'hostile' immigration system can push migrant women into prostitution



Women with No Recourse to Public Funds are at higher risk of destitution. In some cases, women have had no choice but to exchange sex for food, housing or money. Additionally, women without the right to work (such as asylum-seekers or undocumented migrants) can more easily find themselves without real alternatives.

Systemic inequality and exclusion constraints migrant women's choices



Even with recourse to public funds, migrant women often face discrimination and prejudice based on their race, ethnicity, nationality and language. This can exclude them from education, stable job opportunities and access to supports. Without these, women can be pushed into selling sex or find it impossible to leave the 'sex industry'.

Profiteers, exploiters and abusers actively target vulnerable migrant women

Exploiters often target migrant women in desperate situations – that is, those unable to provide for themselves and/or children, fleeing abuse, worried about their immigration status, at risk of homelessness or destitution, and/or isolated from their community. Exploiters will use these situations to recruit or coerce women into selling sex.



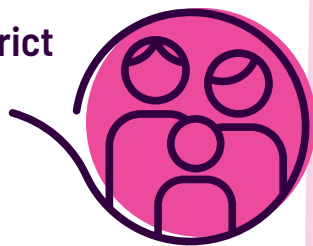
Racism is a common experience when selling sex

Migrant women have reported experiencing different levels of racism – from being advertised using stereotypes about their race, ethnicity or nationality to receiving racist comments or requests to enact racist fantasies, and in some cases experiencing sexualised racial violence from punters and members of the public. Many of these experiences have been shared anecdotally and the true extent of the racial violence against migrant women selling sex has not been properly documented.



Pressure to support family abroad can restrict migrant women's opportunities to stop selling sex when they want to

Some women start selling sex to alleviate the poverty and debt of families abroad. In some communities, there can be huge shame associated with "failing" to provide for their families and/or with returning to their home countries. This family pressure can trap women in the 'sex industry' and may even prevent them from disclosing or engaging with support services, even when in crisis.



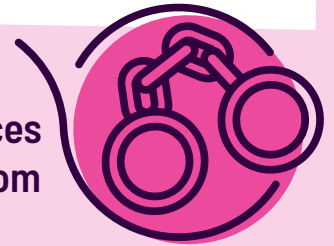
Women's involvement in selling sex can be part of, or lead to, other less considered forms of abuse

Commercial sexual exploitation and other forms of abuse can be closely interlinked. Migrant women's exploitation might be part of domestic abuse or honour-based violence. On the other hand, some women might become at risk of honour-based abuse or forced marriage if they are found to be involved in selling sex.



Fear of authorities and legal consequences can put women off from seeking support

Fear of deportation and criminalisation is one of the biggest barriers to accessing support. Particularly when women and services are not aware of the laws around prostitution and they assume women are committing a crime or must be reported to the Home Office. The lack of knowledge about women's rights and refusal to prioritise women's safety and needs, can leave them isolated and in dangerous situations.



Community dynamics can prevent women from disclosing their involvement

Some migrant women may fear disclosing their involvement because of potential negative consequences from members of their community. Women may worry about being publicly shamed, exiled from the community or facing violence and abuse from community members.



Misconceptions about migrant women's reasons for selling sex can lead to missed opportunities to meet their needs

Organisations' lack of understanding about why and how migrant women become involved in selling sex can create an environment where staff are unwilling to explore the reality of women's involvement and their short- and long-term needs. These views can stem from assumptions that women are 'content' with their experience or that they are 'using' the system and do not require support.



What we STILL don't know

How many migrant women are involved in Scotland's 'sex industry'



Past research by the Scottish Government and local councils revealed the presence of migrant women in street prostitution, saunas and brothels. However, currently we don't know how many migrant women are involved and in what settings, as well as how their involvement has changed since the pandemic.

Where are migrant women going for support



We know that few migrant women attend specialist services supporting those involved in the 'sex industry' and even fewer disclose their involvement to mainstream services. Thus, it is unclear where migrant women get support in relation to experiences of selling or exchanging sex, including for things such as violence, sexual health, mental health and exiting.

What happens when migrant women decide or have to stop selling sex



Currently there is no defined pathway of support for women who wish to stop selling sex. And for migrant women who have to deal with the additional pressures summarised above, the journey out of the 'sex industry' can be even less defined.

How their involvement impacts their integration in Scotland



Women in the 'sex industry' often struggle to feel connected to their community due to stigma and trauma. For migrant women, there can be additional challenges to making connections such as language barriers, cultural differences and the reality of discrimination. This can leave them socially isolated and excluded.

In their own words, what do migrant women want to see changed



There hasn't been a specific project involving migrant women with current and past experience of the 'sex industry' where they could express their needs and asks from policymakers.



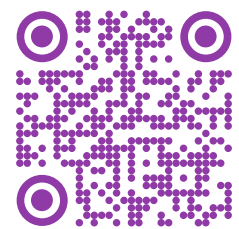
Recommendations

1 The Scottish Government must commission research on the extent of migrant women's involvement in the Scottish 'sex industry.' It should explore interactions with services and recommendations to mitigate the risk of involvement in commercial sex. Within this, there should be a participatory element where migrant women with (past and present) lived experience of the 'sex industry' are invited to share views and shape policy.

2 To fulfil their commitment to integrating new migrants, the Scottish Government and local authorities must review the current service provision for migrant women involved in selling or exchanging sex. This review should assess how statutory services respond to migrant women's involvement as well as their levels of understanding of commercial sexual exploitation. An action plan should be subsequently developed to ensure culturally-sensitive and consistent service responses that positively impact women in the long term.

3 Migrant organisations must come together in a forum to discuss the impact of commercial sexual exploitation on their female service users, share experiences of supporting women with this experience and collaborate to develop consistent support pathways that are tailored to the diverse migrant communities in Scotland.

Read our
full research
findings here



About CSE Aware: created by the Women's Support Project, CSE Aware is a platform for frontline services in Scotland to increase and share their knowledge and skills around commercial sexual exploitation (CSE). It aims to break the stigma surrounding CSE and ensure that women involved in selling or exchanging sex receive comprehensive, non-judgmental support that understands how CSE can impact their lives.

cseaware.org

