



CSE

aware

IMPROVING KNOWLEDGE AND
RESPONSES TO COMMERCIAL
SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

MIGRANT WOMEN

EXPERIENCES OF MIGRANT WOMEN SELLING OR EXCHANGING SEX IN THE UK

SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

2024

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Figures from Europe and the UK have highlighted a [high proportion of migrant women](#) involved in the sex industry. Yet, in the UK, and in Scotland in particular, very little is known about migrant women's experiences of selling or exchanging sex and their interaction with services.

In response to this gap, CSE Aware conducted a small scoping exercise to identify what we know and what we don't know about migrant women and their involvement in the sex industry in Scotland. Whilst limited in its scope and findings, this report aims to be a conversation-starter and to demonstrate why migrant women must be at the centre of conversations around commercial sexual exploitation in Scotland.

METHODOLOGY

This report is based on research conducted using two methods of data collection which took place during April and May 2024:

Focus group: we undertook a focus group with 5 staff members from services in the UK who have experience of supporting migrant women involved in selling or exchanging sex. The group met online and discussed three main questions.

Survey: we designed two surveys – one for women with lived experience and one for support services. Whilst we received 13 responses from support services; we did not, however, receive any responses from women. The lack of engagement from women speaks both to the limitations of a survey as a tool to engage with this particular population, as well as the limited channels CSE Aware has to reach migrant women with lived experience. Different methods of engagement and more time and connections are needed in order to bring in meaningful participation from migrant women involved in selling sex.

RECRUITMENT AND LIMITATIONS

While this report provides an overview of some of the key issues for migrant women involved in selling sex, the findings are limited in that they represent the views of staff in support services. Therefore, the examples and themes in this report represent the experiences of women who are already engaged with support services and who are either experiencing particular vulnerabilities or have reached the point where they feel able to seek support. Additional work is needed to fully explore the experiences of migrant women who are not linked to services and understand their channels and networks of support.

PARTICIPANTS

FOCUS GROUP

5 staff members participated

SECTORS REPRESENTED:

VAWG Trafficking Adult sexual exploitation

ORGANISATION'S LOCATION:

3 in Scotland 2 in England

ALL HAVE SUPPORTED

migrant women involved in selling or exchanging sex.

SURVEY

13 staff members responded the survey

MAIN SECTORS REPRESENTED:

Violence Against Women Advice/ Support Healthcare

ALL FROM ORGANISATIONS BASED IN SCOTLAND

8 HAD SUPPORTED

migrant women involved in selling or exchanging sex.

WOMEN SUPPORTED WERE INVOLVED IN:

On-street prostitution saunas brothels online ads
online platforms sex trafficked

REASONS FOR MIGRANT WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE UK'S SEX INDUSTRY

Survey and focus group participants identified a range of reasons why migrant women become involved in selling sex. As with most women, many of these reasons are linked to inequality and a context of vulnerability. For migrant women, however, the difference is that their involvement can be linked to circumstances faced in UK but also in their home countries. Above all, what we found is that some women move to the UK as a result of their involvement and others become involved in selling sex months and years after settling in the UK.

FACTORS IN THE UK

In the UK, the systemic inequality faced from being migrants and the immigration system itself were identified as key factors that constrained women's choices and ultimately led to exploitation or involvement in the sex industry.

The UK's 'hostile' immigration system

Participants in both the survey and focus group identified the UK immigration system and its 'hostile environment' policy as major push factors into prostitution, especially for those who have No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF).¹

NRPF prevents women from accessing social safety nets which can in turn push women into destitution. Participants said that selling sex was one of the few alternatives migrant women could avail of to avoid such vulnerability:

There are many reasons why migrant women can have the NRPF condition, including holding certain types of visas or because they are undocumented. In the focus group, workers shared that the migrant women they supported had NRPF because they were either international students, have an open asylum claim, have failed to secure asylum, have a spousal visa, have overstayed their visa or are undocumented.

"For women with NRPF [selling sex] is a way to avoid homelessness, is a way to have a roof over their heads even if that roof is exploitative, because if you're a woman with NRPF you only would qualify for homelessness if you have children or a disability."

¹ There are many reasons why migrant women can have the NRPF condition, including holding certain types of visas or because they are undocumented. In the focus group, workers shared that the migrant women involved in selling sex they have supported had NRPF because they are either international students, have an open asylum claim, have failed to secure asylum, have a spousal visa, they overstayed their visa or are undocumented.

Otherwise, it takes a lot of service advocacy to have that changed. ... Within say the women's aid network and services offering refuge, there're not a lot of refuges who can feasibly take a woman or family who has NRPF as a factor. And there are even fewer that ... also have a specialism in supporting women who've experienced any kind of sexual violence."

As explained in the above quote, for women fleeing abuse who have NRPF there is very limited access to emergency housing, and with no right to claim benefits, the options can few or even non-existent. As one worker explained:

"women basically [say] – it's either me returning to my perpetrator and me being able to feed and clothe my baby or not returning to my perpetrator and we don't have food and clothes."

In these cases, worker pointed out women might start selling sex to find safety and be able to cover basic needs.

The UK's 'hostile environment' policy can also mean that women who become undocumented or lose their immigration status can easily end up in exploitative situations:

"[A woman] came to the country from Nigeria on a temp visa to work as a nanny, the visa expired and did not return to Nigeria. She was unable to have mainstream employment and was exploited through selling sex for survival."

Systemic inequalities and constrained choices

As migrants, women can face systemic inequalities and exclusion which can constrain their options or remove access to real alternatives. A survey respondent, for example pointed out the inability to access employment when there is a *"lack of recognition of qualifications [women] earned in their home country."*

Some workers reflected on how minority ethnic communities, many of whom are migrants, are overrepresented in unstable jobs and this can be a conduit into the sex industry. For some women in precarious employment, this was the case when they suddenly lost their jobs during the pandemic:

"We've got women who were working under the counter, cash-in-hand jobs, like cleaning jobs and then those dried out during COVID. So what we've found is that a fair few women were pushed into prostitution during COVID ... and then as we know it's very difficult to exit. So once they're in it's very difficult to get out."

Even if women have recourse to public funds, the process to access social supports and benefits can be complex and prove insufficient to meet their basic needs:

"I have a couple of migrant women who had NRPF when I started and now have had their status come through and they now have recourse to public funds, but even then there's

them and housing are desperate not to house them. And there is a lot of gatekeeping from local authorities and a lot of fighting and pushing and getting housing solicitors involved."

"There's a lack of genuine alternatives to make a living. Even if you qualify for the Domestic Violence Concession ... or if you qualify for Universal Credit, it's not a lot of money and it's a process in itself ... moving around [when selling sex], lack of community, possible language barrier, you are not necessarily going to know that those [supports] are an option or how to go about them."

A participant pointed out that for some women selling sex can become a source of income and financial stability that cannot be matched in the current socioeconomic landscape of the UK:

"Realistically we have no real alternatives to the money, the funds that you can get through being involved in selling sex. So if you take away the addiction, mental health issues, the trauma, financially we have nothing to offer these women that can counteract that financial 'instantaneous money'."

Exploitation of migrant women's vulnerability

Workers shared several examples of how individuals can use migrant women's context of vulnerability to introduce them to the sex industry and in some cases profit from women's involvement:

"A woman entered the country on a student visa and upon completion of her studies gained a post study work visa. The woman had no recourse to public funds. Unfortunately her mental health prevented her from seeking employment and her status as no recourse to public funds led to her involvement in prostitution. This coupled with substance misuse led to coercion from a violent drug dealer to become a drug mule. This man later started to traffic her for sex with his associates. This man used her [immigration] status in the country to intimidate her and control her."

In some cases, women can be coerced into exchanging sex for things other than money, such as accommodation:

"When women are already involved in selling sex, the punters then do try to become that 'I'll protect you' and then [women] go and live with them and they're at risk of obviously exploitation from that male. But also to sustain the tenancy with that male then they are also pimped out by the male to friends and other people."

In other cases, it can be other women who provide the route into selling sex:

"For some migrant women when we do get them housed in emergency accommodation ... they can sometimes then be coerced or other women will bring them in to be involved in prostitution ... whether that be on the street or in-calls and out-calls ... the majority of women in these women hostels are British and Scottish white women that have huge addiction issues ... so a lot of women are thinking 'you come with me and I get a cut of you

or I can exploit you a bit.' It's survival behaviour. Other women exploit women as well to survive."

FACTORS IN WOMEN'S HOME COUNTRIES

Additionally, participants identified factors in women's home countries which can contribute to their involvement in the UK sex industry.

Much as in the UK, in women's home countries, poverty, gender-based violence and overall financial need can be used by exploiters to introduce women to the sex industry:

"Women often come to service through being coerced and believe they are coming to the UK to work in nail salons/ nanny's and other forms of employment to find when travelling or on arrival this not to be the case. Women come from countries with lack of opportunity to make money and will be involved in the UK and send a great proportion of money to family back home."

Workers mentioned that, in some communities, a main factor can be the pressure women face to make money and provide for parents, grandparents, siblings and other family members. A participant mentioned examples of how in some countries and communities, the shame of poverty and debt can result in families offering women to traffickers:

"Debt is a major factor for families. That the family has borrowed money or there's been political unrest and the women are being sold to meet these debts."

Respondents also emphasised how the pressure to provide for families can obfuscate the reality of the exploitation they are experiencing:

"Women who come from ethnic minorities within Romania, the Roma, where there's abject poverty ... they're exploited on a daily basis. And the women are maybe given £20, £30, £40 which is a huge amount of money that they can send to their families that have nothing."

"We've supported women that have clearly been trafficked ... but they just want to get away from us. They don't want to be in our accommodation because they know how much money can be made. Obviously they're exploited and the majority of the money goes to the pimps and procurers but the limited amount of money they're given is enough to keep them there."

Finally, respondents listed other factors such as the glamourised portrayal of selling sex as an attractive and viable option for women coming into the UK to make "easy money", as well as women's lack of awareness of what selling sex will be like, and in some cases previous involvement in their home countries' sex industry. These factors demonstrate how migrant women's involvement in selling sex is also linked to the global nature and marketing of the sex industry.

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EXPERIENCES WHILE INVOLVED IN SELLING OR EXCHANGING SEX

As part of the focus group, we asked participants to identify what makes migrant women's experiences of the sex industry different from women who are not migrant. The main themes discussed were issues around identity and racism, pressures to send money back home and increased risk of other forms of abuse.

IDENTITY AND RACISM

Among the experiences explored were those related to the attitudes, discrimination and in some cases fetishisation of migrant women because of their nationality and/or ethnic origin. A worker gave the example of how migrant women's ethnic and national identities are used by pimps and traffickers to market women on one hand, and sought specifically by UK punters on the other.

"When I went on a brothel visit, one of the community enforcement officers that was there told me that what we see from those women in the brothels is that they clearly are from the Roma community, they're also from a darker complexion. And something that will always stay with me is that apparently there's something about all the men who buy sexual access from those women, there's something about [the women] looking Asian, that's something that the men want ... which is why those particularly young Roma women are brought over so much. So there's both within their community the trafficking that happens but it's very much connected to what the men in the UK are wanting."

Another participant referred to the issue of women being advertised as being from a nationality different from their real one in order to get more punters. This speaks to the racism entrenched in the sex industry and how punters often will select women based on stereotypes they hold about certain nationalities and ethnicities:

"[in the past] working with women in the off-street sex industry ... quite a number of the women that were involved there would have been from the Baltic states (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia) and they would say that they had to be advertised as something else and it felt quite demeaning to them, that it felt dehumanising in a way because they couldn't say 'I'm a Latvian and I'm proud to be a Latvian' they had to say 'I'm Icelandic or a Norwegian or something different."

Now, the women that we currently support [in our service], maybe it would just be the Romanian women that have told me that it was better for them or it was better for the

pimp, that they would earn more money if he advertised them as different to Roma or Romanian – as Slovakian or something else.”

DEPENDENCY OF FAMILY ABROAD

A key theme in the discussions of our focus group were the pressures that women carry to provide money to families abroad. As seen in the previous section, for some women, alleviating the poverty and debt of their families was their initial route into selling sex. A participant shared an example of how this pressure can continue once in the UK and can keep women in a cycle of exploitation:

“Years ago we’ve done a reception centre and what we found with the Romanian women was that there were evident indicators of trafficking. However, they were sending money home and they didn’t want that to be disturbed so ... [there was] total distrust in our services, they would then say ‘no, repatriate me, send me back’ and then they would come back into the UK to be exploited through prostitution to continue to send money home.”

Another worker explained that for some migrant women there is huge shame associated with “failing” to provide for their families and with the idea of returning to their home countries:

“Quite a number of particularly Nigerian women that would be sent to what they told was abroad to Italy and for them to take help that was offered to help them exit their situation or identify as a victim of trafficking and to be returned to their country would mean the shame of failure. And it’s a cultural thing within the Edo states or Abuja for you to come back there having failed as a migrant. It’s quite similar for some of the Vietnamese women that we see – there’s the shame that you bring to your family if you don’t work hard, save money and send money back home.”

INCREASED RISK OF OTHER FORMS OF ABUSE

Workers highlighted that in some cases migrant women’s involvement can directly lead to other less considered forms of abuse. A participant explained how this can be the case with honour-based abuse and forced marriage:

“We have seen scenarios where women come to the UK on tourist visa or as an international student thinking they’re coming to a job that falls through, doesn’t exist or isn’t what they thought it was going to be. They’re then brought into exploitation and their families find out about that or the family that they’re staying with finds out about that as part of their community and that puts [the women] at risk of ‘if we marry her off it will stop this behaviour’ or it puts her at risk of honour violence depending on what country she is due to return to.”

The same participant pointed out how migrant women might not be believed by services when reporting exploitation and these other forms of abuse:

“A woman I spoke recently [in our service] who had experienced trafficking herself, came to the UK ... had been able to exit and then her child was at risk from trafficking and she tried to report this to statutory services, and essentially the service said that that only happens in movies ... they treated it as an exaggeration ... one of the concerns is that one of the potential traffickers was the father and they essentially treated it as her making allegations against the father in a child custody case.”

BARRIERS TO SUPPORT

While migrant women in the UK are known to be involved in selling or exchanging sex, few attend specialist services and even fewer disclose their involvement to mainstream services. For this reason, we asked participants in our survey and focus group to identify potential barriers to women’s engagement. The key barriers identified were fear of authority and criminalisation, services understanding of women’s involvement in selling sex, third party influence and practical barriers.

FEAR OF AUTHORITY AND LEGAL CONSEQUENCES

Workers coincided that the fear of facing legal consequences and the impact to their immigration status can prevent migrant women from coming forward to services. As one worker put it:

“I believe the main thing that prevents women accessing services is the fear of being deported. Most women don’t know the law in Scotland regarding prostitution and believe they will be imprisoned.”

Other participants mentioned that migrant women can be worried that interacting with services will *“affect their immigration claim,”* they may fear being *“reported to the home office/police or the DWP/benefits team,”* have a *“fear of police (perceived and actual)”* or a *“lack of knowledge of [their] legal rights.”*

A participant highlighted how having an insecure immigration status can be a major roadblock when, for example, women consider whether to report a crime:

“[with] migrant women and non-migrant ... there’s fear of police and distrust. However, there’s the additional caveats of what happens if I report that and I am here illegally and I don’t have the right documents – will I be criminalised for certain other aspects? ... other non-migrant women wouldn’t have that additional worry because that’s not relevant to them.”

On the point of being criminalised, a participant described the complexity for women who become part of the exploitation of other women and the potential legal repercussions of coming forward about their own experiences:

"I used to work on a helpline – there was a woman who used to call who was in a situation where there was nowhere for her to go because the traffickers were around and the only option then was to be 'promoted' to being a Madam of the brothel and then of course what comes with that is that fear and guilt and shame of being an exploiter herself when obviously we know is more complicated than that So it's that barrier of not being able to go the police in any way because also you're implicated in the abuse of other women or the traffickers have made it so that you're implicated or at least you feel that you are."

Moreover, a worker pointed out that for some women there can already be a lack of trust in anyone in a position of authority because of the social and political context in their home countries:

"Some women ... [are] not really free to speak because why would they trust any individuals ... when they have a past experience in their own country where there's been authoritarianism, they can't trust the authorities, and the authorities have sometimes been involved in [women's] abuse."

SERVICES' UNDERSTANDING OF WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN SELLING SEX

Some workers emphasised that services' understanding of women's involvement in selling sex can impact the support received. A participant said that the framing of selling sex as a 'choice' can place the blame on migrant women for their experiences, reinforce stereotypes about migrants, and ultimately deny women the supports they may need:

"Sometimes within services there is a cultural thing of 'oh well, you came here to do that [sell sex], that's the reason you've come here, you are making good money, you're touring² and you're sending this money back' and there is this misinterpretation of the reality of it. When you are a non-migrant woman there is more ... understanding of the exploitation whereas if you are a migrant woman and you've come here and you are getting a service but you've come here specifically to tour, for instance, then it is almost like 'oh well you're choosing that' without taking into account all of the other background things that are going on."

The lack of a service-wide approach to commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) can also result in staff feeling unconfident about how to address women's involvement:

"There's protocols for domestic abuse ... whereas when you see CSE, a lot of people dismiss, shut down, don't explore further because there's a fear within certain workers that they don't know what to do with this information ... I think there is a real kind of 'don't ask, don't want to know' because – what am I doing when you tell me this?"

² Touring refers to women who move between cities and towns offering sexual services. Women usually advertise online and remain in a specific location for a short period of time (usually days or weeks at a time).

Participants also felt that the framing of selling sex as a 'choice' can result in less supports being available for migrant women who cannot access them through the usual routes due to their immigration status:

"If a woman has experienced domestic abuse so automatically in priority need. Whereas a woman who is sexually exploited, it doesn't count in the same way. So having to make a case for that sort of violence and abuse, because again ... some people just see it as a choice and therefore 'oh you came here to do that 'work' and not seeing automatically as violence and abuse."

THIRD PARTIES' INFLUENCE

Respondents mentioned that often individuals in women's lives can influence the decision to approach/ avoid services and disclose involvement in the sex industry. Participants mentioned women's "fear of exile from their community" and "coercive control" and a worker described the following example:

"There certainly is some reluctance I think for particularly Vietnamese women ... to disclose anything that could get back to them. There's maybe a fear even sometimes with Chinese face-to-face interpreters because it's such a small community and the word will get back that they've been engaging with services."

PRACTICAL BARRIERS

In addition to women's perceptions of services and services own attitudes toward selling and exchanging sex, respondents shared a range of practical things that can prevent women from approaching services.

Workers felt that women might be "*unaware of support routes*" and "*how to navigate these services*" given the fact that some women are not familiar with the social services landscape in the UK. A worker specifically referred to how hard it can be to support women engaged in 'touring':

"Women do a few months in a certain city and move on and make more money because they're new in that area so that's why they move around. [Women touring are] really hard to engage with and to maintain engagement."

While there was acknowledgment of the need to ensure women are aware of services, a participant felt that for services specialising in supporting women involved in selling sex and victims of sex trafficking, there has to be a balance between advertising a specialist service and ensuring the service is discreet:

"The barrier sometimes is that there's services, agencies, women who don't even know that there's services that can offer that level of support ... and it's also striking the balance because we don't want to have everyone know about [our service] and then lose the autonomy that women are granted from accessing it."

Language interpretation was repeatedly cited as a barrier – workers said that at times there isn't good quality interpretation available in all languages:

“Access to good quality interpreting services has a cost and the availability of good interpreting services. And I'm sure that everybody comes across that in the day to day: NHS don't have access to particular languages because they're not available ... so women can't express their needs if they feel able to do that, to come forward ... they don't have interpreting services at their fingertips.”

Additionally, a participant raised the fact that interpreters can bring a power dynamic that women may find difficult to circumvent in order to open up about their experiences:

“If you have a face-to-face interpreter that you need for maybe more complex narratives that you're involved with, it's sometimes difficult if the woman doesn't trust. We've seen women not trusting someone or felt ashamed because someone had a headdress on. [The woman] revered the interpreter but didn't want to tell what had happened to her for fear that she was going to be judged by a more devout religious woman.”

Finally, workers in the focus group emphasised that due to the systemic discrimination and exclusion migrant women face, they often require high levels of advocacy to access services. However, some services might lack the capacity to provide such support:

“I do think there is a huge amount of pressure on staff to advocate and not even just to go with the woman that you're supporting, but to really fight ... to get the services that are legally required as well as just basic human needs.”

PRACTICE POINTS

Participants in the focus group identified the following practice points that services should consider in order to better support migrant women involved in selling or exchanging sex:

- **Challenge the stereotypes you have about migrant women's reasons for selling sex:** understand that there can be many reasons for women's involvement, and these are often linked to situations of financial need, abuse, and the threat of exploitation, among others. Challenge stereotypes that reduce migrant women's involvement to their 'culture', to 'just a choice' or to 'taking advantage of the system'. Instead, build trust to have open conversations about her involvement and offer to explore alternatives if she wishes to. It can take time for any woman involved in selling sex to open up about her involvement – and for a migrant woman it might be double as hard if she is not aware of her rights and feels there can be an impact on her immigration status and her ability to stay in the UK.

- **Always check women feel comfortable with the support worker they've been assigned:** do not assume that a woman is more comfortable with a worker from their same or opposite ethnicity, nationality and even religion. It is important take into account her preferences so she feels confident and supported to share her experiences.
- **When involving interpreters or mediating conversations with third parties, ensure the interactions is directed at the woman:** empower women to be in control of the service they're receiving and conversations they are part of. This includes making sure that workers and services always direct themselves to the women, even when a support worker and/or interpreter are mediating the conversation.
- **Ensure women fully understand the information that is being communicated to them:** when advocating for a woman, always double-check that she has understood the information she's receiving in conversations or in writing. Even if a woman is fluent in English, it's important to be clear as women might not always feel confident to say that they have missed or misunderstood the information.
- **Make sure women feel respected:** although perhaps an obvious point for any woman receiving support, it is essential to understand that migrant women might have faced discrimination and exclusion whilst navigating services in the UK. It is important that women feel respected, which includes avoiding rushing through appointments and giving them the time they need, as well making sure she feels in control and at the centre of the support she is receiving from you.



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