

Motherhood and commercial sexual exploitation

Women have frequently talked about the links between being mothers and their involvement in selling or exchanging sex. They have described how the pressures and expectations around motherhood can be amplified due to the inequalities and stigma related to their involvement. Yet, in Scotland there have been few discussions around the specific challenges that women selling or exchanging sex face when becoming mothers and having children.

In 2024, CSE Aware undertook exploratory research in Scotland with mothers with lived experience of the 'sex industry' and the staff supporting them. Through this work we found that for some women, pressures around motherhood – especially when raising children as single mothers – can push them into commercial sexual exploitation (CSE). Equally, women already involved in selling sex must navigate huge stigma when thinking of having children, raising them and keeping them in their care.

This briefing summarises the key points that policy-makers and organisational leaders in Scotland must know in order to adequately respond to the motherhood-related needs of women involved in selling or exchanging sex.

"I started [selling sex] when my bairn was a baby – I didn't have enough money when I was on maternity leave and his dad left me and the bairn with all the bills."

Before becoming mothers

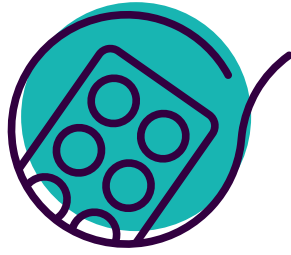
Being judged to be 'unfit mothers'

In some cases, a lack of proper understanding of women's experiences of selling sex can lead services to judge women as 'criminals', 'high-risk' or 'unfit' to protect or provide for a child. Over time, women may internalise these beliefs which can impact their own decisions around having children and caring for them.



Inconsistent service approaches around contraception

Some services encourage women to use contraception and avoid pregnancy, especially when they are seen to be dealing with multiple issues (such as substance use and mental health). However, some workers have raised concerns around women not having access to all the information on side effects and consequences when making a choice, with the potential for undue influence and pressure. Others consider contraception to be the best option to ensure women can stabilise before having children. This dilemma clearly shows how women can become caught between conflicting approaches.



Limited control to make decisions around motherhood

Women might not be able to have full control of when or if they have children, especially if they are under the control of pimps, traffickers, partners and other abusive individuals or if they are unable to stop selling sex when they want to. Women are also at higher risk of having unplanned pregnancies given the pressures punters very often place to have unprotected sex.



When having children

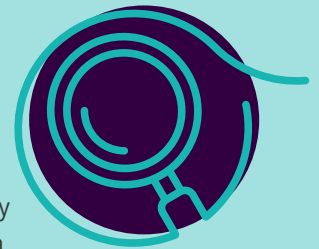
Pregnancy and continuation of involvement in selling sex

Poverty, the absence of the other parent and pressure from pimps and punters are some factors that can force women to continue seeing punters during pregnancy or shortly after giving birth. Selling sex whilst pregnant can have multiple negative emotional and physical effects on women, and the risk of experiencing violence from punters and others is still there. This issue also highlights that punters will actively seek to buy sex from pregnant women.



Feeling surveilled as mothers

Women can continue to experience judgement once they have children and there can be a pressure to "not make mistakes". At times services may expect women to quickly turn their lives around, particularly if they are considered to have a 'chaotic' lifestyle. However, such expectations can set women to fail if they are unrealistic, unclear or if women do not have supports around them to improve their circumstances.



Impacts to mental health during and after pregnancy

High numbers of women involved in the 'sex industry' experience abuse and trauma. Pregnancy and postpartum can trigger past trauma and compound any mental health issues that women already had. There are links between trauma and post-natal depression. Yet, services often lack awareness of women's involvement in selling sex and thus might not have a full understanding of women's potential for mental health struggles after birth. This can mean missed opportunities for prevention and early interventions.



Child safety and fear of social work involvement

Women have genuine fears that social work might get involved and remove their children – especially if they are homeless or experiencing abuse. Some women fear that selling sex means social work will automatically take their children away. Equally, services' lack of awareness of CSE can mean that a woman's involvement prompts services to call social work, even if the child is not at risk.



Abusers may use knowledge of a woman's involvement in selling sex to coerce them



Abusers such as partners, pimps, punters and others are known to have threatened to expose women to their community, 'out' them to their family or children, report the issue to the children's school or have social work involved.

Continued poverty and pressure to remain involved in selling sex



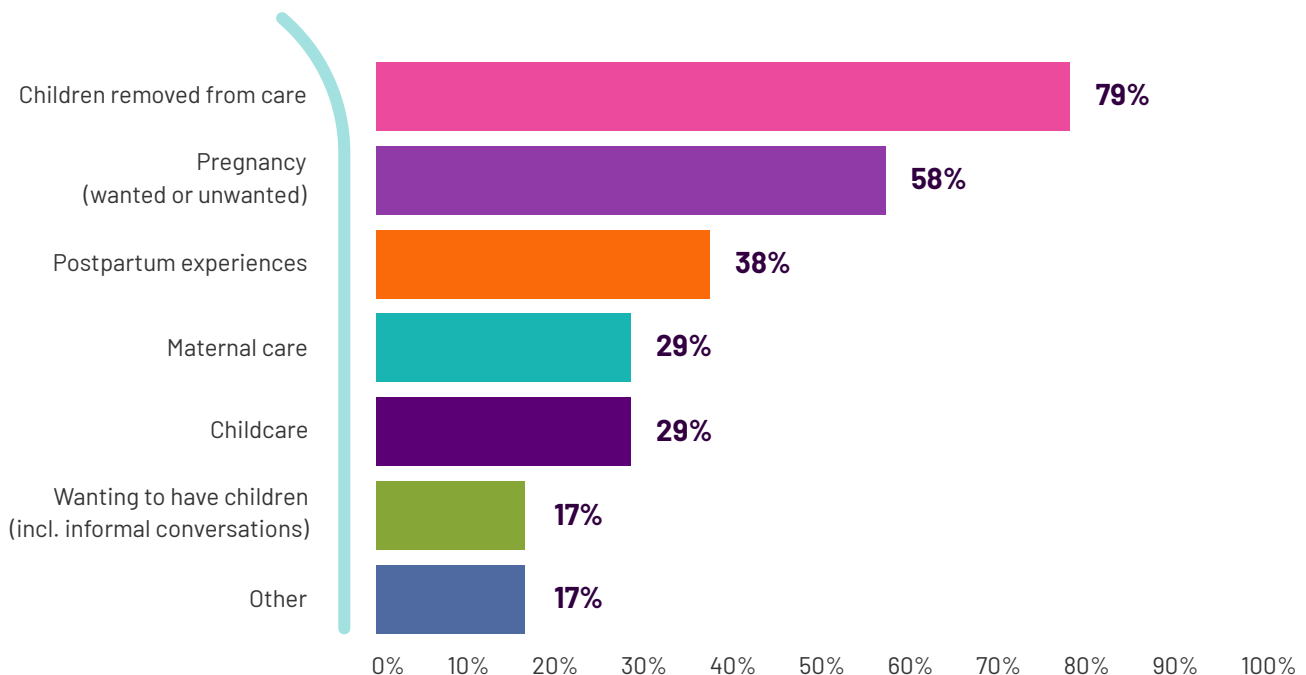
Many women start or continue to sell sex to provide for their children. In many cases, the poverty and financial need that pushed them into the 'sex industry' in the first place will remain whilst they are involved and can prevent them from stopping their involvement when they want to.

Interaction with motherhood-related services

Women involved in selling or exchanging sex have limited interactions with motherhood-related services. The lack of understanding of women's experiences can put women off from engaging. Some women have said that they do not attend maternal support because of the judgment from staff and other mothers. Women can also struggle to fit appointments around their involvement and childcare responsibilities.

In our research, we found that the top maternity-related needs staff have supported mothers involved in selling or exchanging sex with were pregnancy and, alarmingly, the removal of children from their care.

What aspects of motherhood have staff supported women who sell/exchange sex with?



Losing children to care

Losing children to care is a common experience for women selling sex, particularly those involved in survival sex and on-street prostitution. The latest [Encompass Snapshot](#) found that 80% of women who sell sex they supported had had their children removed. Our survey also found that most of the 24 support workers who responded had supported mothers involved in selling sex who had lost children to care. They also highlighted the following:

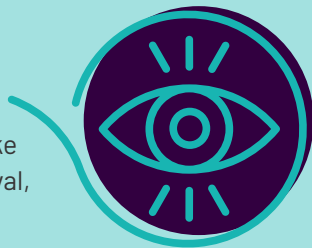
Children were not specifically removed because of selling sex

Workers were clear that involvement in selling or exchanging sex was not named as the reason for removing a child. However, the factors that led to the removal are known to be closely linked to women's involvement, such as substances, which women often use to cope with seeing punters.

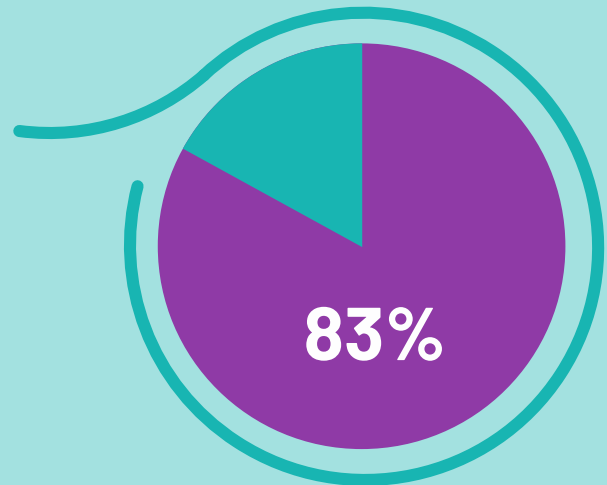


Overfocus on the mother's lifestyle

When statutory services make decisions around child removal, often women's lives are more scrutinised than the father's. Involvement in selling sex can negatively impact this assessment. Conversely, the father's domestic abuse or sex buying is usually not considered.



Staff who had supported mothers involved in selling who have lost children to care



Removal has a long-term impact on the women

Losing children to care can compound women's past traumas and mental health issues. Some women have chosen terminations or ran away to avoid losing another child. Additionally, there may be challenges for bonding and attachment, impacting early years into adulthood, as women are often unable to establish contact or recover their children.



Recommendations

1 Providers of maternal services (from antenatal clinical settings through to community midwifery and health visiting) must offer awareness training around commercial sexual exploitation. This will ensure there is a consistent understanding of women's experiences of selling and exchanging sex and adequate protocols to respond when women are involved or at risk of becoming involved.

2 Social work, child protection units and other key statutory agencies must ensure staff have a consistent and adequate understanding of CSE that challenges existing stereotypes and misconceptions around involvement in selling or exchanging sex.

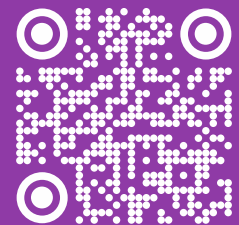
3 Guidance and implementation of Child Protection legislation must be reviewed to identify how risk is assessed in cases where mothers are involved in selling or exchanging sex. Having clear guidance will ensure staff can make informed decisions that are not based on stereotypes about women's involvement.

4 Discussions and strategy on Child Poverty must recognise and consider how women's pressures to alleviate financial need and support their children are risk factors to becoming involved in selling sex or exchanging sex.

5 Review motherhood related strategies to ensure they consider the experiences of mothers involved in selling sex. This should include reviewing the Framework for Maternity Care, The Best Start Strategy, the National Parenting Strategy, among others.

"I knew other girls in the sauna whose bairns were taken away when their drugs got too much and they couldn't cope any more. I didn't want that for me or my bairn. I was so careful."

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.

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