



Women's Support Project response to the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls' call for evidence on violence against mothers

"My eldest child's father was my pimp ... He was the catalyst for my involvement and had me back on street as soon as I was able after the birth."

"I was coerced to [sell sex] during my pregnancy."

About us

The Women's Support Project (WSP) is a Scotland-based feminist non-profit organisation working to raise awareness around violence against women and girls and to improve services for those affected. Our key area of expertise is Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSE). Our work is informed by the voices of women with lived experience of selling sex and the services supporting them.

Throughout the years, our work with women with lived experience of the 'sex industry' has highlighted that motherhood and commercial sexual exploitation are closely interrelated. This is why during 2024 we conducted research looking into how CSE impacts mothers and, conversely, how women's decisions around motherhood are impacted by their involvement in selling sex. For this research we consulted women with lived experience and frontline workers who have supported women involved in selling sex. Results from this work are available in our [report](#) and [policy briefing](#), and they revealed the complexity of navigating these two experiences. Our response here is based on this research, our own literature review and interviews with experts.

1.1. Manifestations, causes and perpetrators of violence

1.1.1. What are some of the most prominent forms of violence and extreme discrimination to which women are subjected because of their status as mothers? E.g. Economic psychological, physical and reproductive violence.

In our experience working on the issue of prostitution and commercial sexual exploitation, two of the main ways in which mothers experience violence and

extreme discrimination in Scotland include: being recruited and exploited in the 'sex industry' due to the financial pressures associated with being mothers. On the other hand, mothers already involved in selling sex can face huge barriers, stigma and discrimination because they are judged to be 'bad mothers'.

Sexual exploitation: Through our own research we have found that poverty and financial need, in many cases paired with being single mothers and other forms of abuse, can put women at risk of being exploited through commercial sex. Scottish-based organisation, One Parent Families [recently highlighted](#) that single mothers in Scotland are living with increased debt and little in the way of savings, and they are more likely to become homeless, experience in-work poverty, and be unemployed. Not only that, but mothers in Scotland have also to deal with [some of the highest childcare costs in the world](#), and for those who are separated from the other parent, there is a likelihood that they will not receive child maintenance payments from their ex-partner (according to [stats by the National Audit Office](#)). The Scottish Women Budget group [has also reported](#) that unaffordable childcare is one of the main reasons women in Scotland tend to reduce their working hours or give up work entirely. It is this lack of affordable, flexible and accessible childcare paired with financial instability and few job options that can fit around childcare arrangements that women have cited as some of the reasons they felt compelled to start selling sex. A woman responding to [our motherhood survey](#) said: *"I started 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 ... The nursery charged so much and I had to get a car to be able to manage everything cause there is no buses really in the area I live but that was more money."* For mothers who become involved in selling sex, it can become difficult to leave the 'sex industry' even when confronted with instances of violence, rape and further exploitation.

Additionally, it is important to highlight that within the 'sex industry' there is a specific 'market' for pregnant women and mothers, whereby sex buyers seek to buy or consume sex from women pre- and post-birth. As a result, exploiters do not only target mothers because of their perceived vulnerability and financial need, but also because of sex buyers' demand for this group of women.

Discrimination because of their involvement in selling sex: On the other hand, mothers who are already involved can experience multiple layers of discrimination and stigma, particularly if those around them find out about

their involvement in selling sex. This discrimination and violence can be both systemic as well as societal and individual.

In our research we found that a high proportion of women with experience of selling sex have had their children removed by social service. Whilst this did not happen directly because of their involvement in the 'sex industry', it was usually due to circumstances associated with selling sex, such as criminal activity and substance use. Nonetheless, mothers who sell sex often feel they are scrutinised more closely. Some of them have described feeling they are 'set to fail' as soon as they give birth. A woman involved in selling sex in saunas who responded to [our survey](#) shared the following worries: *"I made sure I only worked when [my son] was at his dads or when my folks had him overnight ... I kept all that separate but I was so worried someone would find out and it would be made worse for [me] and the bairn¹. 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."*

Moreover, mothers who have lost children to social services, have great difficulties in securing contact with their children. An Advice and Support worker explained to us: *"I have worked with women who, as a result of selling/exchanging sex, developed addictions and had their children removed by social services. They had great difficulty ensuring they still had contact with their children and many lost contact altogether even after they were in recovery."* This demonstrates a systemic discrimination against women involved in selling sex. It shows that lack of support for women to exit the industry and to reach stability can lead to losing a relationship with their children altogether. In some cases, services also shared with us that abusive partners who become aware of the mother being involved in selling sex, have used this in court to secure child custody and continue to abuse women by separating them from the children.

Additionally, some mothers have shared with us that they did not access motherhood-related support because they worried others in the group would find out and 'out' them or discriminate against them. Similarly, abusive partners, exploiters, sex buyers and members of the community may threaten to disclose a mother's involvement in selling sex, putting her at risk of losing her children, employment and education opportunities, and becoming ostracised in the community.

¹ Scottish word for child.

1.1.2. Is there a correlation between femicide and intimate partner violence and women's status as mothers?

1.1.3. What is the linkage between violence against mothers and violence against their children, including girls—and vice versa?

1.1.4. What are the causes of violence against mothers, and which social, economic, legal and cultural factors increase mothers' vulnerability to violence?

In Scotland, poverty and the disproportionate pressure on mothers to carry out caring responsibilities already puts them at a disadvantage compared to men. This inequality consequently increases their risk of being sexually exploited through commercial sex and abused. In point 1.1.1. above, we have already mentioned some factors that can cause this abuse and violence. Other factors to mention are how vulnerability increases for single mothers. The expectation put on single mothers to carry out caring responsibilities and bring an income to the family is in opposition to Scottish policies which do not offer financial support to all mothers and which do not cover all the childcare and associated costs a single mother will need (e.g. some women need to consider transport given many parts of Scotland are remote and distant and require the use of a car). At the same time, access to support for women who have been exploited, and particularly those with children, is limited and sometimes unavailable. This means mothers might find themselves more easily trapped in exploitative and abusive situations without recourse to support and alternatives.

1.1.5. Who are the perpetrators of violence against mothers, and under what circumstances enable these perpetrators to inflict such violence? Are there patterns of institutional complicity or impunity?

In our experience, there are several individuals who might inflict violence against mothers in the context of sexual exploitation. Whilst we might usually think of abusive partners, we also know mothers involved in the 'sex industry' can experience violence from exploiters and traffickers, pimps and sex buyers. Exploiters can be anyone – for example, some women have shared stories of being propositioned by abusive employers for sex in exchange for some extra money to cover basics. Exploiters can be members of women's circles and, when noticing their struggles with motherhood, might use the opportunity to 'offer' to pimp women out to men. In the UK, for example, housing organisation Shelter published a [report on 'sex for rent'](#) cases that occurred during the pandemic. These refer to a series of men posting online adverts seeking specifically women

in vulnerable and financially constrained situations due to lockdown, including mothers, and offering them a room to stay in exchange for sexual favours. This situation was subsequently widely reported on in the media and showed how easily exploiters and abusers will identify and use the vulnerable financial position of women. Finally, sex buyers can also inflict violence. It is known that there is a specific 'market' in the sex industry for pregnant women and mothers. Added to that, sex buyers who find out a woman has children or is pregnant, can use this information to take further advantage of a woman. They may threaten her and force her to accept sexual acts she might not usually agree to. Having to support a family can make it harder for women to refuse sex buyers and dangerous sexual requests.

1.2. Groups of women and girls particularly affected

1.2.1. Which groups of mothers are particularly affected by extreme forms of discrimination and violence, and what are the principal challenges and forms of violence they face?

In our experience, all women are vulnerable to sexual exploitation. However, from our research it is clear exploiters will target women who experience marginalisation and isolation in society. This includes mothers with learning disabilities, those who are migrant and/or racially minoritised, mothers with problematic substance use, as well as mothers who were in the care system. The system barriers these groups of women experience throughout their lifetime are often used by exploiters and abusers to introduce them to the 'sex industry'. For instance, [women with learning disabilities](#) face high levels of isolation and exploiters often use the possibility of emotional connection to exploit and profit from women. Migrant women in the UK who have the "no recourse to public funds" clause do not have access to the full set of social financial supports other women do. They are at high risk of destitution. As mothers, the pressure can be insurmountable. And while mothers should be able to access state support despite this clause, at times women might be excluded from them because services are unaware of exceptions to these rules or because women are not aware of the rights and benefits they are entitled to.

1.2.2. Are any groups of mothers particularly vulnerable to violence, exploitation or abuse on the intersection of their status as mothers intersecting with other grounds?

See response 1.2.1. above.

3.3. Targeted Policies

3.3.1. How do social-protection systems (e.g. cash transfers, family benefits, pensions) include or exclude mothers?

While Scotland overall has a number of policies that support mothers, these require changes to fully support mothers and not all women may be able to access these supports, especially if they have an immigration status. Child benefit can be a lifeline for mothers, but specific immigration clauses may exclude some mothers from this benefit. Being unable to secure child benefit can be particularly detrimental for migrant women who are experiencing domestic abuse, are a single mother or are not able to secure well-paid, formal employment. While Scotland has introduced its own benefits to reduce child poverty, like the recently introduced Child Payments, these still depend on the UK's benefit system called Universal Credit. One of the main issues with Universal Credit is that it can only be paid to one member of the household. In abusive households, it is usually the abuser that receives and retains these payments, again leaving women in a position where they might need to secure other ways to get an income to support their children.

Additionally, while Scotland funds nursery for all children, this usually kicks in for children 3 years-old and above, and this does not cover the full week of nursery. Instead, parents must cover any additional hours. For mothers, it often means they have to stop full-time employment for at least 2 years, putting women in precarious financial situations, especially in cases where income is insecure in their households. Single mothers thus require to find additional childcare which is dependent on them having the money to afford it or of having a support network that will help with childcare. This, of course, is usually not the case for mothers who are marginalised or are experiencing other issues like substance use or isolation.

Lastly, mothers from marginalised or low income groups, might often find themselves in precarious and informal employment, especially during the first years of motherhood. As a result, they will not have had accumulated a pension through their employer and might not be able to prove employment to the government to access state pension. This adds a layer of precarity that can leave mothers at further vulnerability in the later stage of their lives. And as we have discussed in this response, a lack of money can make women easy targets for exploiters or leave women with no choice but to start selling sex, no matter the age.

3.3.2. What are the responsibilities of State and non-State actors in preventing acts of violence against mothers, including in the area of business and human rights?

States have the responsibility of ensuring that mothers have truly equal opportunities in society, including living a life free from violence, including commercial sexual exploitation. In Scotland, for over a decade the government has committed to achieve a Scotland where women feel equally able to participate in society. Yet, many of the related policies around gender-based violence could do with a stronger link to the specific experiences of mothers and consideration for the additional needs that come with having children. When it comes to support, justice and participation in society, the perspective of mothers still lags behind. For instance, there is no full understanding among services of how different forms of abuse intersect with motherhood. In our area of work, we have heard from mothers and services that social work is not always fully informed of how women's need to provide for their children can be the reason behind their involvement in selling sex. Instead, women can feel judged and misunderstood and fearful of having their children taken. We believe statutory and non-statutory services must have a strong understanding of how mothers are affected by different forms of abuse, including commercial sexual exploitation, so they can provide the best support pathways and chances for mothers to overcome these experiences.

3.3.3. What factual barriers do mothers face when seeking protection and assistance, justice or reparations?

In the case of mothers involved in selling sex, the main barrier is the very real fear of being reported to social services, to the police and/or to immigration agents. While in Scotland selling sex is only partly criminalised, women may not always know their rights and the intricacies of the laws around prostitution in this country. This can be especially true for migrant women. Women have described that the fear of being reported is specifically connected to the fear of losing their children. As we have mentioned, women in the 'sex industry' do know of other mothers who have lost their children to care. While they may not have lost them specifically because of their involvement in selling sex, women are not always aware of the specifics of each case and will still fear this possibility. In some cases, it is sex buyers, exploiters and controllers who threaten and warn women against approaching protection, support and justice. This fear can translate into

mothers deciding not seek help and to feel reluctant to access justice for the abuse and exploitation they have endured. For those who do approach protections and justice, they can face stigma and judgement due to their involvement, especially if they have children. Thus the prospect of being judged and misunderstood might put women off from pursuing support and engaging with what very often is a lengthy justice system. Overall we would say that survivors of sexual abuse in Scotland experience huge hurdles to justice and have described the process as retraumatising. For women who have been exploited to commercial sex experience the barriers are even bigger and more complex as they face the judgement and stigma of their involvement in selling sex and misconceptions around how women in the 'sex industry' might experience this as exploitation.

3.4. Recommendations

3.4.1. What steps should States, courts, and independent human rights bodies take to address violence and other human rights violations and abuses suffered by mothers?

A recognition of the unique circumstances and ways in which mothers are discriminated and to adopt tangible steps to offer equal opportunities. From our perspective, it is essential that all of these bodies and actors have good awareness of commercial sexual exploitation, its causes, consequences and nuances. We find that states may have often limited understanding and thus fail to offer protections and supports for women involved in the 'sex industry', many of whom are mothers. This understanding must be embedded in policy with a budget and real steps to ensure women's experiences of exploitation are properly addressed. While many mothers involved in selling sex might still choose to not disclose their experiences, states and human right bodies must give women a chance to tell their stories in their own terms and be prepared to offer support when a woman needs it. Otherwise, we will continue to have a sector of mothers who are unable to get equal chances at life.