

# Women with learning disabilities and commercial sexual exploitation

**Experts have highlighted that women with learning disabilities (LDs) are at higher risk of experiencing gender-based violence (GBV) due to the lifelong isolation, dependency and oppression they often experience. A lesser explored form of abuse women can experience is commercial sexual exploitation (CSE).**

Recently, the [Scottish Commission for People with Learning Disabilities](#) looked at the experiences of abuse of women with learning disabilities and reported that CSE was one of the forms services in Scotland most encountered.

Yet, to date there is very limited evidence and information of the involvement of women with learning disabilities in selling or exchanging sex in Scotland.

Most of the existing evidence is anecdotal and has not been documented nor analysed to truly understand the impacts on women.

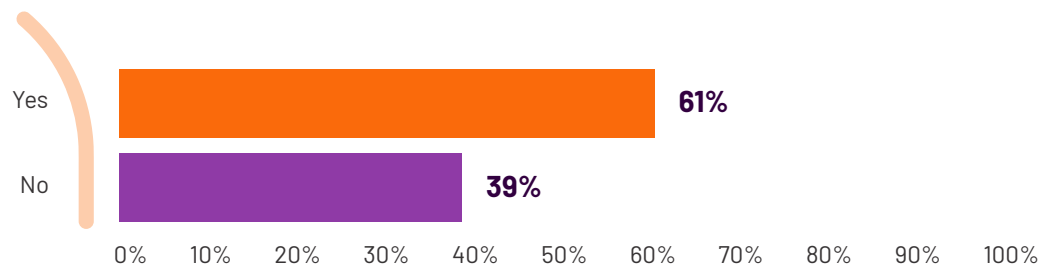
In 2024, CSE Aware undertook exploratory research with staff in services in Scotland to find out more about how CSE impacts women with learning disabilities. Through this work we were able to evidence that women do engage in selling or exchanging sex in Scotland and how the inequalities they face throughout their lives is what pushes them into this experience. We also documented important gaps in how services respond to their needs.

This briefing summarises the key points that policy-makers and organisational leaders in Scotland must consider in order to address the experiences of women with LDs involved in selling or exchanging sex.

# Learning disabled women's involvement in selling or exchanging sex

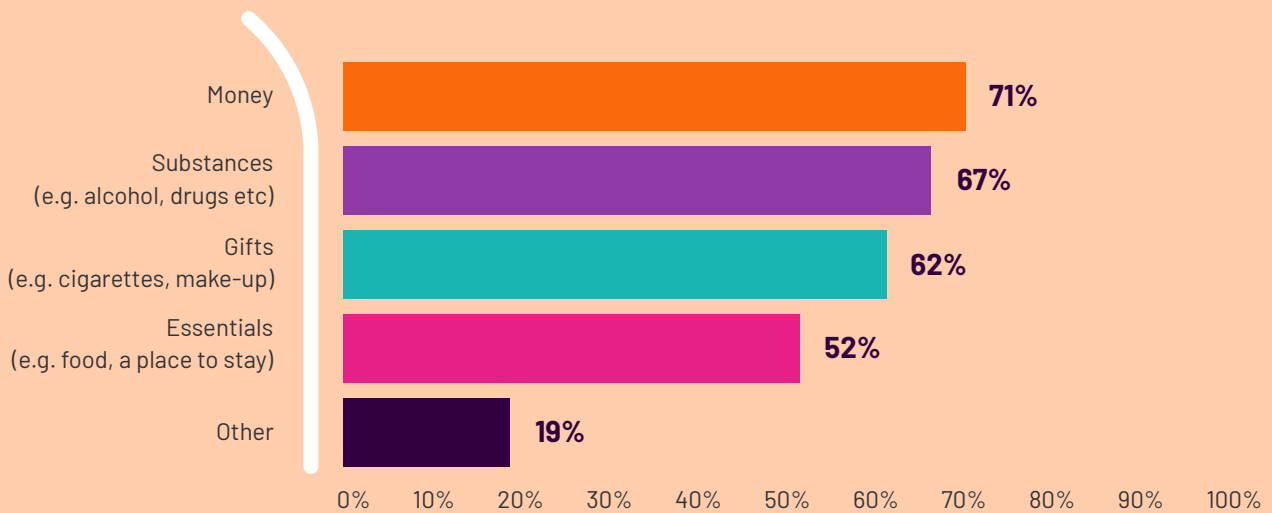
In our research, around two-thirds of the 36 workers who responded to our survey said they had supported women with LDs involved in exchanging sexual activity for a form of payment:

**Have you supported women with learning disabilities who have exchanged sexual acts for some form of payment (this could be exchanging sexual encounters, sexual images or stripping for things like money, substances, gifts, among others)?**



We also asked workers to tell us what women exchanged sexual activity for. In most cases it was money, but sexual activity was also exchanged for goods, essentials and gifts. In some cases, the exchange was for relationships, friendships and affection.

**What things did women with LDs exchange sexual acts or sexual images for?**



# What puts women with LDs at risk of commercial sexual exploitation?

## Lack of awareness about sexual wellbeing and healthy relationships

Girls and women with learning disabilities often do not receive the same education and information about what constitutes a healthy relationship, how to express and withdraw consent and how to identify abusive behaviours. Predatory male behaviour can take advantage of these information gaps and offer them some form of payment or 'reward' in exchange for sexual acts.



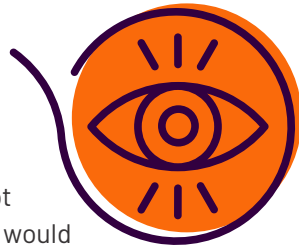
## Past history of abuse and/or neglect

Many women with learning disabilities have experienced abuse and neglect in childhood. Support workers shared how some women may normalise this in other relationships, making it harder for them to identify when they are being exploited.



## Stereotypes about women with learning disabilities

Perceptions that women do not have sexual needs or that men would not purchase sex from them can lead to services ignoring or minimising exploitative situations. Equally, perceptions of women as 'dependant', 'weak' and 'easy to manipulate' are the stereotypes that perpetrators often use to target and exploit women.



## Social isolation

Being socially excluded throughout their lives can drive women with LDs to look for connection. In some cases, women can unknowingly enter relationships or situations where the other person uses them only for sexual relationships or gets them involved in selling sex. Perpetrators may do this by pretending to be a 'friend', 'partner' or 'caring' member of the community and they may use grooming, coercion or manipulation tactics.



# What prevents women from getting adequate service responses?

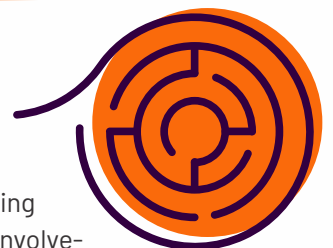
## Poor understanding of learning disabilities and the intersections with CSE

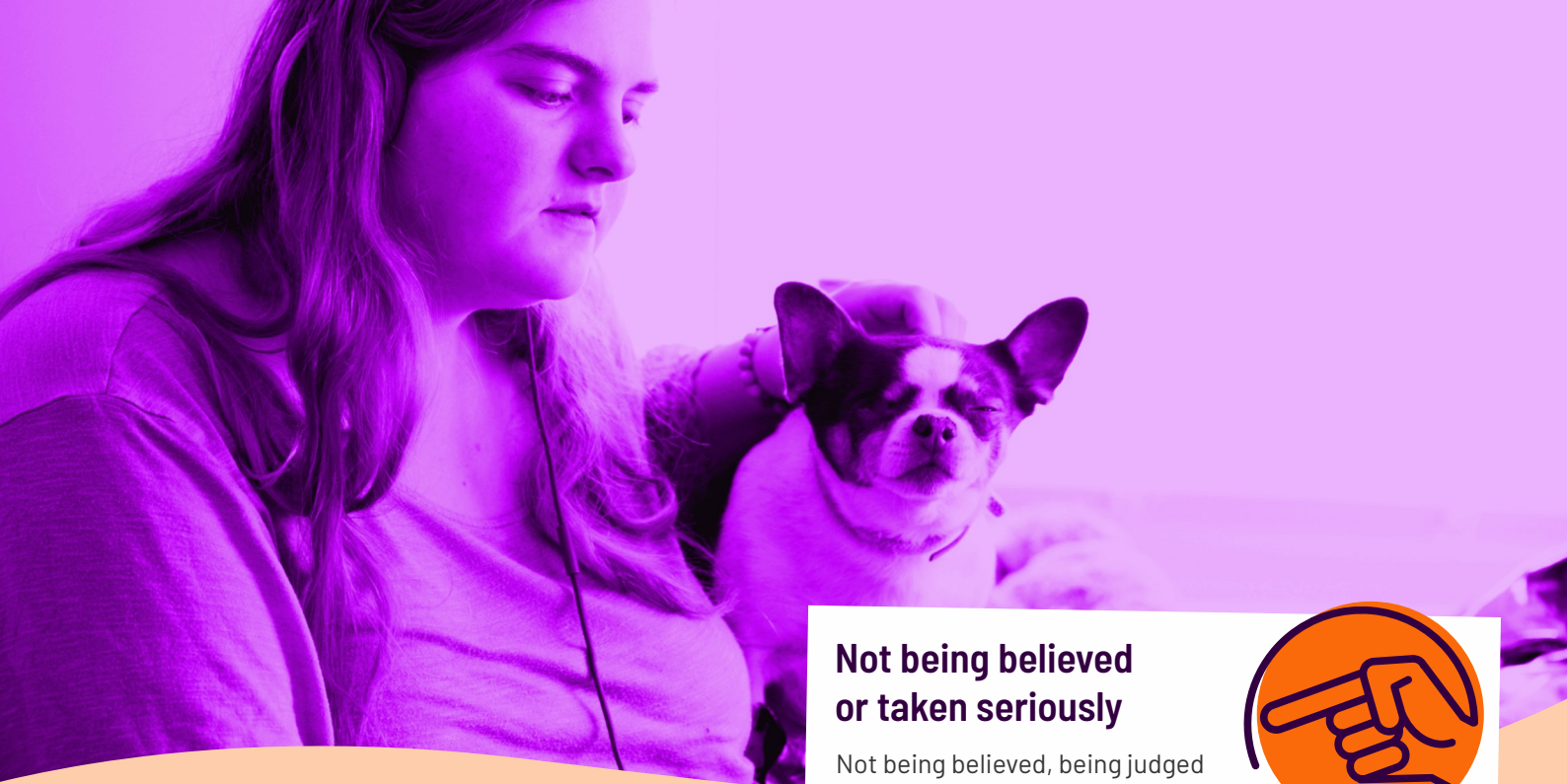
Opportunities to support and respond to women's involvement can go unaddressed due to a lack of understanding of learning disabilities. Some women can be infantilised, and a reluctance to consider their sexual wellbeing can also mean their involvement is seen as an impossibility. Others who do not have a formal diagnosis or who fall outside the stereotype of a person with learning disabilities may be labelled 'challenging' and their involvement dismissed as a 'behaviour' or 'a choice'.



## Inconsistent approaches to CSE

Lacking a clear understanding of CSE can mean women's involvement is neither explored nor are their needs met. In some cases, despite clear signs of abuse and vulnerability, services may see women's involvement as a 'lifestyle choice' that requires no attention. In others, lack of confidence in addressing CSE can lead to a complete denial that this situation is happening to a woman within a service.





## Inaccessibility of support services

Barriers can be present even before women start interacting with services. Women might not know what supports are available or whether there is any specialist support that addresses their experiences of CSE. Also, often services do not make specific adjustments for people with LDs which means women might not be able to engage with the service properly. For example, adapting how they communicate with women, offering longer support sessions, using other creative methods to facilitate conversations with women or connecting women to independent advocacy so they can better engage with the service.



## Lack of safe places to disclose

If women wish to disclose instances of CSE, often they do not have safe places to disclose, especially when support workers, services, family members and other support networks are reluctant to discuss women's experiences of selling or exchanging sex, are not proactive in opening up conversations or they threaten to respond with punitive measures.



## Not being believed or taken seriously

Not being believed, being judged and negative attitudes around women's involvement might stop women from approaching services. Women can carry shame or worry that they will be treated differently after disclosing. Stigma can also play a part in women's reluctance to disclose, especially as some women already have a lower self-esteem and may have concerns about being labelled.



## Use of punitive measures

Many women with LDs are fearful of restrictive and punitive measures, such as approaches that limit their freedom, forbid them from having intimate relationships or which threaten to take their children and/or support away. These interventions tend to overfocus on women without considering measures to stop the perpetrators. The potential of being faced with these interventions can put women off from attending services and disclosing their involvement.



## Services not meeting women's needs

The lack of holistic service responses that consider every aspect of a woman's life (including her learning disability, her involvement in CSE and other life factors) can result in a failure to meet women's needs fully. When this happens, women disengage from services, and it can be difficult to regain their trust.



# What challenges do workers encounter when responding to women's experiences?

## Insufficient training and information on learning disabilities and CSE

Many services lack adequate training and information on LDs and the adaptations they need to provide in order to effectively support women. Paired with the above is a lack of confidence in how to recognise CSE, not knowing how to address it, not feeling skilled to talk to women about these experiences and where to refer women for specialised support.



## Supporting women to understand abuse

Even if workers do have training on CSE, there can be challenges in ensuring women understand their experience as exploitative and abusive. Women's limited understanding of what is a healthy relationship as well as the continued manipulation of perpetrators can make it harder for workers to support women out of the exploitative situation.



## Continued influence of the perpetrator(s)

When it comes to selling and exchanging sex, perpetrators can continue to influence a woman's decision-making and ability to access support. Additionally, CSE often involves multiple perpetrators and there is the transactional element (in the form of payment through money, goods or relationships), both of which can be used by perpetrators to influence women's perceptions of the exploitation they are experiencing.



## Balancing women's autonomy and safety

Workers can struggle to balance women's right to make decisions about their lives with the reality of the huge risks that come with selling and exchanging and the added vulnerabilities linked to their learning disability. Currently, there is no guidance or a consistent approach on how to respond when the experiences of CSE and learning disabilities intersect. This has left workers unsure of what is the best approach to when offering support.



## Safeguarding

Currently there is a lack of clarity and guidance around how and when to apply Adult Support and Protection legislation in cases of selling or exchanging sex, as well as how to assess risk, capacity and women's underlying vulnerabilities. At the same time, some workers worry about the impacts that using these interventions can have on women. Others felt that there are no alternative measures available to use in cases where there are clear signs of harm. Our research has highlighted the urgent need to explore safeguarding in the context of CSE.



## Lack of partnership approach

There is a lack of effective joint work among specialist LDs and specialist CSE organisations. In some cases, multi-agency work is already happening due to the nature of women's needs. However, as some workers shared with us, there can be a lack of accountability and leadership when managing cases. Ineffective partnership work has limited workers responses and failed to address women's needs in full.

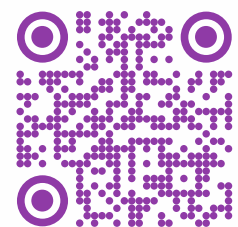




## Recommendations

- 1** As the Scottish Commission for People with Learning Disabilities has recommended we also call on the Scottish Government to commission in-depth research exploring the prevalence, dynamics and understanding of CSE among women with learning disabilities. Research should also look at current service responses and implementation of safeguarding legislation. This should include a participatory element where women with learning disabilities can in-put their views and co-create awareness-raising and prevention resources around CSE.
- 2** The Scottish Government must review the application of Adult Support and Protection legislation in relation to cases of CSE and produce guidance for frontline services. This should include the creation of a framework for responding to women and a package of support that women can avail of when moving on from this experience.
- 3** CSE and learning disabilities organisations must work together to produce accessible resources which raise awareness about commercial sexual exploitation in the context of learning disabilities, the causes, consequences and avenues for support. These should be specifically designed for, and co-created with, people with learning disabilities.
- 4** Specialist LDs and CSE organisations must come together to find the best approach to multi-agency work that serves the needs of women at the intersection of these two experiences. There should be a review of roadblocks that can limit work between agencies, the production of a framework that allows for effective multi-agency work and piloting of case conferences specifically for cases of CSE.

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](https://cseaware.org)

**CSE**  
**aware**  
IMPROVING KNOWLEDGE AND  
RESPONSES TO COMMERCIAL  
SEXUAL EXPLOITATION