

Specialist support is necessary to help women involved in prostitution deal with their substance use. This includes the provision of drug and alcohol treatment within services for women involved in prostitution. But it must also mean that agencies providing treatment recognise the links between substance misuse and prostitution and offer appropriate support.

The **DrugScope/AVA report 'The Challenge of Change: Improving services for women involved in prostitution and substance misuse'** (2013) concluded that women can end up in a vicious circle of using drugs to cope with the life, and selling sex to fund their own addiction, and often the addiction of others. It concluded that there was a need for more flexibility from services on issues like opening hours, childcare arrangements, appropriate keyworkers and access to domestic and sexual violence support, as well as for more tailored recovery pathways alongside harm reduction work for women who want to move out of prostitution, including support with housing and employment.

### Working with women in the criminal justice system

Involvement in the criminal justice system often features heavily in the lives of women engaged in prostitution. Prison sentences, fines, and court orders can have a catastrophic effect on women's lives, leaving some at greater risk of homelessness. However, contact with the criminal justice system also provides opportunities to engage with women involved with prostitution.

**St Mungo's** works in partnership with **Together** to provide ringfenced accommodation for women at risk of being remanded into custody where no other suitable accommodation is available.

We heard from other organisations who work with women who are involved in prostitution and who are in the criminal justice system. **Trust**, an organisation offering support to vulnerable women in South London, also runs a court diversion scheme providing support through a specialist court worker.

**Brighter Futures**, which works with vulnerable women in Stoke on Trent, provides support and supervision to women who are subject to Engagement and Support Orders. These are an alternative to fines issued for soliciting. They are a multi agency approach to supporting women.

In summary, homeless women involved in prostitution can have extremely complex needs and challenges including experiences of past and ongoing violence and abuse. In addition, they face significant stigma, particularly where they are also homeless and have a substance use problem.

Specialist support that is non-judgemental and understands the range of problems they can experience is essential to enable recovery. We were pleased to find out about the different ways organisations across the country are providing this specialist support.

### Thank you again to all who submitted

If you would like to view all the submissions in full for this theme, please visit [www.rebuildingshatteredlives.org](http://www.rebuildingshatteredlives.org) and click on the 'Women involved in prostitution' theme. This is the final theme in the campaign, but we will be publishing a report drawing together the submission in early 2014.

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# Rebuilding Shattered Lives

## Rebuilding Shattered Lives theme round up: Women involved in prostitution\*

Led by Expert Group members Davina James-Hanman, Director of AVA (Against Violence and Abuse) and Marcus Roberts, Chief Executive, DrugScope



Davina James-Hanman, Director of AVA (Against Violence and Abuse)



Marcus Roberts, Chief Executive, DrugScope

### Introduction

Experiences of homelessness and involvement in prostitution are sadly often closely interlinked. 24% of the women that St Mungo's worked with in 2013 are currently, or have in the past, been involved in prostitution. The figure rises to 36% amongst those women who have slept rough.

Providing support to homeless women engaged in prostitution, to help them recover, can be challenging. Perhaps unsurprisingly amongst homeless women, those involved in prostitution often face the most complex needs, including experiences of violence and problematic substance use. Many will fear prosecution, and even leaving that aside, prostitution remains stigmatised.

The contributions we received provided a wealth of information about women who are engaged in prostitution: who they are, why they do it, the effects on their health and wellbeing, and the challenges they face in leaving prostitution.

We heard from innovative services which offer support to women who want to exit prostitution as well as those which seek to reduce the harm women experience.

We also heard from women who are, or have been, involved in prostitution. These contributions provide an insight into the often extreme circumstances that lead

To view any of the submissions in full, see the website, [www.rebuildingshatteredlives.org](http://www.rebuildingshatteredlives.org)

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women into prostitution, and what support works for them. Better understanding of this will help us to provide better services and lobby for more provision of support.

We would like to thank everyone who contributed to this, the last theme of our call for submissions, and to the campaign overall. It has been inspiring to hear so many success stories from across the UK and internationally.

We look forward to launching a report drawing together what we have heard and making recommendations in the spring.

*\* For the purpose of this blog, we have used 'women involved in prostitution' as a term that does not define women by the act of selling sex, but also recognises that selling sex is not a job like any other. We are aware that different agencies use different terminology and actively sought contributions from a range of different standpoints.*

## Summary of Submissions

### Experiences of violence, trauma and exploitation

Contributions to this theme revealed that experiences of past and ongoing violence are a prominent feature in the lives of many women involved in prostitution. The resulting trauma needs to be addressed if they are to recover.

Eaves found that 72% of the women involved in prostitution interviewed for a study had suffered some form of violence during childhood. This can often compound women's feelings of worthlessness. Their report argues that:

*"Specific specialist support around sexual violence and trauma should be made available for women seeking to leave or who have exited prostitution."* Bindel, Brown, Easton, Matthews and Reynolds, (2013), **'Breaking Down the Barriers; A Study of How Women Exit Prostitution'**

This trauma and violence often continues while women are engaged in prostitution. The **Safer Glasgow** annual report on **'Routes Out'** notes that women involved in prostitution are at high risk of physical and sexual assault: women involved in street prostitution are 12 times more likely to be murdered than all women in equivalent age groups.

### Provision of support for complex needs

It is evident from the submissions that many women who are engaged in prostitution have complex, interlinked and often entrenched needs. There was widespread agreement that women need holistic support to recover.

**Eaves' 'Capital Exploits'** report explains *'The aspect of service provision most valued by women was combined practical and emotional support usually provided by specialist services. Support that went beyond immediate help in terms of women's current involvement in prostitution and helped with all aspects of their lives was described as being really valuable and needed. Diversionary activities to keep women occupied, women only services and services which were welcoming, safe and understanding were also viewed as important.'* Bindle, Breslin and Brown, 'Capital Exploits' (2013). Published by Eaves and commissioned by the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime



*'at One25, we support women through all the different stages of their journey. We know that in order for a woman to make changes, she needs to have first built a trusting relationship with a service and its people. One25 are not unique in providing this however and we could not produce excellent outcomes in isolation. We work together with a range of excellent services in Bristol to enable any woman seeking change to take the necessary steps to accomplish their goal.'*

Addiction Treatment Caseworker, **One25, Bristol**

### Either/Or? Minimising harm and supporting exit from prostitution

Many contributions raised the importance of harm reduction services alongside support to exit prostitution for those currently involved in prostitution.

**Routes Out** offers drop in and outreach harm minimisation services. These offer condoms, needle exchange, safety advice, personal alarms and the sharing of information on dangerous punters.

The **Faculty for Homeless and Inclusion Health** Standards for Commissioners say: *'Specialist outreach services for sex workers are vital to improving access [to health services] and should include enhanced access to primary care and not be confined to sexual health and contraception.'*

Other services focus on supporting women to exit prostitution, often offering harm minimisation services as well.

**The Chrysalis Project** in Lambeth, run by St Mungo's and Commonweal Housing, provides a three phase service for women engaged in prostitution. It offers a unique accommodation based exiting service. Chrysalis takes a proactive approach to exiting, openly encouraging women to consider exiting and supporting them to do so.

### Alcohol and drug use

St Mungo's experience of working with women involved in prostitution has shown that almost all use alcohol or drugs problematically – 84% in 2013. Substance use can be a driver pushing women into prostitution, and can make recovery more difficult.



*'Id lost my house in sussex due to not paying rent, I slept in Brixton in bushes, garages and shop door ways it was here that I found crack, what a 1st time buzz, then you crave it so bad and have no cash, I was begging on the streets, on trains and selling sex to men, in the end st mungos found me a perswaded me to move to a hostel, I was reluctant as it would mean I ws further away from the dealers...,my health started to inprove dramticy after a while I started seeing a drug worker...,i have been clean for 1 l years now I have a house with a garden and 3 more children that live with me...i owe my life to st mungos.'* Former St Mungo's client, her words as written

Substance use can leave women vulnerable to abuse while engaged in prostitution, and may be related to a greater risk of pregnancy or STIs. Alcohol and drugs are also used as a coping mechanism:

*'Just to forget about what just happened for the last couple of hours, what I had to go through. Yeah, and the dirt, cheesy old men that I've been around or...the place that I've been or what they've asked me to do.'* Woman involved in on-street prostitution, quoted in 'Cycles of harm: problematic alcohol use amongst women involved in prostitution' (Laura Brown, 2013, for Eaves and Alcohol Research UK)