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STREET SEX WORK –

How women sleep rough



Introduction

This article first appeared in 2001. It raised two ground-breaking issues the systematic sexual exploitation of vulnerable children and the links between childhood abuse, multiple and complex needs and homelessness. High profile child sexual exploitation court cases and the mass murder of women in Ipswich have raised public awareness. We have republished it as we believe it remains relevant to the debate. We will not end rough sleeping until we recognise that street sex work *is* how women sleep rough and we need to provide services that reflect this.

We remain indebted to Jo Moss and Suzie King who led our women's work and contributed so much.

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In January 2001, the North Staffordshire Health Action Zone provided funding for Potteries Housing Association (now Brighter Futures) to establish the Women's Project, which was to develop a holistic outreach and advocacy service for women involved in, or at risk of entering, prostitution. The Women's Project in partnership with Staffordshire Police conducted a major survey that realised some startling new facts - most importantly that prostitution is the experience of homeless women. Work with rough sleepers showed that sleeping on the streets was what homeless men did. There are numerous female 'rough sleepers' who are roofless, with neither belongings nor a stake in society. They are so socially excluded that even those accustomed to working with rough sleepers bedded down in blankets on the streets are not always able to find them.

Although these women are homeless they generally do not stay in hostels for two main reasons. Firstly they feel vulnerable and fear harassment by other service users and secondly 93% of these women are working as sex workers to fund either their own or their partner's drug use. In Stoke-On-Trent only two hostels accept women and only one of these will accept active drug users. The route into prostitution for many of these women is directly connected to their homelessness and drug use.

'Involved in prostitution before their sixteenth birthday'

39% of street sex workers who participated in the survey left Local Authority Care at the age of 16 and it was these women who were most likely to enter prostitution at a young age. For other women homelessness was the trigger factor to their initiation. In total, 26% of survey respondents became involved in prostitution before their sixteenth birthday. Such statistics replicated nationally demonstrates organised child abuse at a horrendous level. Many of the 16 and 17 year olds who were not accommodated by the Local Authority left home at a young age. 73% of respondents disclosed sexual, physical or emotional abuse at home.

These women live transient lives and very often do not access welfare benefits. 62% claimed to have left school before they were 16, with 24% being formally excluded. 33% were bullied and consequently self excluded. Employment prospects are thus very low.

'Branded a nuisance tenant'

Sleeping on different 'friend's' sofas quickly becomes a way of life that means that these homeless women disappear, fall outside mainstream support systems and move further

away from 'normal' lifestyle choices of healthy young women. Inevitably they are surrounded by inappropriate role models, are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation and do not have the luxury of personal safety. Thus it becomes necessary to have a male 'companion' as a harm minimisation strategy against repeated sexual and physical violence from strangers. Low self-esteem coupled with poor experiences of family life means that these women have a tendency to form relationships that are characterised by violence and abuse.

The women who secure tenancies can find that their homes are 'taken over' by one or many men, who may then sell drugs or allow the property to become an 'open house.' If the woman flees from the tenancy she will rarely feel safe enough to report the reality to the housing provider. This means that rent arrears accrue due to non-payment of housing benefit and the woman is either excluded from the council and registered social landlords for this, or because she has been branded a 'nuisance' tenant.

Many women who engage in prostitution have criminal convictions, often for thefts and car crimes. Short custodial sentences are common, entrenching these women in a cycle of custody and drug dependant homelessness. The accommodation they find themselves in is often squats or 'crack houses' that are multiply occupied with up to 12 inhabitants.

The perceived advantage of prostitution is that it does not carry a custodial sentence and therefore drug users are not compelled to endure the dreaded 'cold turkey.' A woman can work to fund her and her partner's drug habits in return for his 'protection' on the streets. Pimping is not new. It provides a way of sustaining a drug habit without losing your liberty. Consequently, women in mixed-sex hostels often find themselves the target of male attention because of their earning potential.

Most women involved in street prostitution have no personal belongings except for a change of clothes. Their lifestyle is by necessity nocturnal and they will usually work every night earning up to £200 that is subsequently given to pimps and drug dealers in exchange for drugs. By dawn they are penniless again.

'Hospitalised with septicaemia and thrombosis'

Accessibility to services becomes even more difficult when chronic drug use and nocturnal living is added to the equation. Without a regular supply of drugs they are unable to function. They are unable to make police statements if they have been the victims of crime or wait for several hours at A & E departments for medical treatment. This can result in rapists repeat offending and women being hospitalised with septicaemia and thrombosis. Such difficulties are further compounded by the attitudes of professionals to drug users, and for women compelled to wear the clothes they worked in the previous night they have added fear of the stigma associated with prostitution, believing that their occupation is apparent at first sight.

'Not a career choice'

Street sex workers unanimously hate what they do and not a single street sex worker in Stoke-On-Trent believes that they have made a positive career choice. Life on the streets is not the fantasy portrayed in Hollywood movies such as 'Pretty Woman.' 70% of women surveyed had experienced violence at work including knifepoint rapes and attempted strangulations. One woman has been murdered this year.

Before the Women's Project was established women rarely reported violent crimes to the police, fearing that they would not be taken seriously and would be kept in police stations and hospitals for hours withdrawing from drugs. With the support of the Women's Project the police have developed a more sensitive approach to this issue and consequently women are now reporting attacks, rapes and robberies. Since January 2001, 11 rapes have been formally reported, resulting in nine arrests. There are currently three men awaiting sentencing and all have been warned that they face the possibility of life imprisonment. Access to justice is a fundamental human right, one that is no longer denied to these women.

'Hidden homeless'

The exclusion and isolation of these women is unmatched. They are the 'hidden' homeless. They are rough sleepers but they are not to be found in a cardboard box on the streets at night because they are working as sex workers. When they do sleep, it is during the day at squats, crack houses and occasionally at their punter's homes. Street counts will fail to uncover them. Their exclusion is such that even those working with homeless people rarely notice them or comprehend the twilight world in which they live, and sadly at a very early age die.

'Exploitation, vulnerability and abuse are endemic'

Questions need to be asked and answered about prostitution, and the notion that it is solely about sex needs to be challenged. Exploitation, vulnerability and abuse are endemic. Street sex workers are victims, not perpetrators. The perpetrator label of sex workers preying on innocent men serves only to justify a sordid reality and maintain the status quo.

'Sexually abused girls grow up to be abused women'

Any intervention that is not holistic in its approach is unrealistic and will undoubtedly fail.* In Stoke-On-Trent there are currently eight girls under the age of 18 regularly working as sex workers on the streets. Home Office guidelines state that these are children procured by men to be abused by men yet this issue is not even addressed in the local media. These sexually abused girls grow up to be abused women and this is happening in many cities nationwide, night after night. It is child abuse at scandalous levels, yet it is accepted. By developing appropriate services for homeless and vulnerably housed women it is possible to begin to tackle this extremity of social exclusion.

* See 'Simple Solutions for Complex Needs' Brighter Futures report.

Joanne Moss and Suzie King

Brighter Futures Women's Project: March 2001

Second edition: Gill Brown, Chief Executive, Brighter Futures, June 2012