

HerSpace: Push and Pull Factors of Sexual Exploitation

This document is based on findings of the HerSpace Research Report into the Prevalence, Impacts, Context and Service Needs relating to Sexual Exploitation in Australia, HerSpace® Limited 2016.

Why does Sexual Exploitation (SE) occur in women's lives?

Women and girls do not choose to enter situations of sexual exploitation, but rather are made vulnerable to experiencing it due to a range of contextual factors. Some of the most commonly cited risk factors include, but are not limited to:

- **Poverty and homelessness:** On average, ⅓ of street sex-workers started engaging in CSE under the age of 18, often as a result of homelessness, in exchange for shelter, food or other basic needs.
- **Limited financial options:** for women and girls who are time-poor, such as single mothers or students, sex work offers the ability for them to earn large amounts of money in a short period of time, as well as flexible hours.
- **Domestic or family violence:** women have reported that they have entered the sex trade after experiencing abuse within their family environment, including being pimped out by a violent partner or family member.
- **Family breakdown:** associated with family violence, family breakdown can lead to situations of sexual exploitation as support networks are weakened, leading to increased vulnerability to coercion.
- **Trafficking:** women and girls are trafficked both domestically and internationally for the purposes of sexual exploitation. International trafficking often involves women from low socio-economic background seeking increased financial opportunities are misled about the type of work they will be doing, or the circumstances. Domestic trafficking also tends to involve women and girls from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and has been known to involve girls as young as 12 years old, indicating family breakdown, a lack of social support, and homelessness.
- **Drug and alcohol abuse:** drugs and alcohol are known as both a cause and result of sexual exploitation, with sex becoming a means to gain access to substances that can then be used as an emotional anesthesia.



Why don't women leave SE?

Leaving situations of sexual exploitation is difficult for women and girls, as they face many barriers and often lack the adequate support necessary.

- **Trauma:** sexual exploitation involves extensive physical, emotional and psychological abuse resulting in trauma. Such abuse can have deep psychological impacts, such as a loss of self-worth, lack of awareness of exploitation, a poor understanding of what constitutes a healthy relationship, and a sense of isolation. These psychological impacts can further entrench the sexual exploitation of women and girls as they are often in cycles of despair, drug abuse and dependency. This makes it difficult for women and girls to heal and find stable pathways out of exploitation and increases their likelihood of risk-taking activities.
- **Drug and alcohol abuse:** substance abuse makes it difficult for women and girls to leave sexual exploitation as they come to rely on providing sexual services to support their substance use.
- **Lack of employability:** low levels of education or work experience, a gap in their career history, or limited skill sets in other industries make it difficult for women to leave the sex industry. This is compounded by the misconceptions of and stigma attached to sex work, as well as criminal records for those who worked in the illegal sex trade.
- **Debt bondage:** women who are trafficked are often placed in debt-bondage, where traffickers demand the women repay 'loans' that were made to acquire visas, airfares and other official documents. These loans are often tens of thousands of dollars and subject to change at the traffickers will. The women are required to work off these loans by providing sexual services, though do not have a say in their working conditions.
- **Fear of authorities:** some women and girls are scared to contact authorities for help, as they fear facing criminal charges themselves.
- **Fear of traffickers/pimps:** many women who have been trafficked have reported that their traffickers threatened to physically hurt them and their families if they attempted to leave or escape, or contact authorities for help.
- **Poor support networks and social isolation:** as a result of sexual exploitation, women and girls often have low self-esteem, feel isolated from the main stream community, and do not have strong support networks. This makes it hard to leave as they do not have the support necessary to heal or leave.

Is legal sex work SE?

One of the many misconceptions of sexual exploitation is that it is limited to the illegal sex industry. It is, however, also commonly experienced in the legal sector. Within the legal sex industry, sexual exploitation can occur in the form of rape, sexual assault, physical and sexual violence, robbery or non-payment, forced removal of condoms, and refusal to wear a condom. While women in the legal industry are more likely to lodge reports than those in the illegal sector, some women working in legal brothels have reported that following incidents of sexual assault, the brothel owners actively discouraged them from filing a police report as they did not want the reputation of the brothel ruined. The legal industry is also poorly regulated, allowing for women to remain vulnerable to the coercion of both clients and employers. In 2008, a 17-year old girl died of a heroin overdose in a legal brothel in Canberra, which could have been prevented had local authorities conducted an evaluation as per the requirements, which includes the responsibility to ensure all workers are above the legal age (18), and that no drugs are kept on the premises. Finally, some women have described how they find sex work itself to be exploitative as they feel they have no other choice due to financial or time constraints.

Don't women choose to work in legal brothels and can't they leave at any time?

While some women choose to work in legal brothels and are able to leave, this is not the case for all sex workers. In a number of sex trafficking cases in Australia, legal brothels were used to harbour trafficked women. These women are kept in slave-like conditions, are unable to refuse any clients or sex acts, have their passports and phones confiscated, are forced to work regardless of their health, are in situations of debt-bondage, and are unable to leave the premises without a supervisor. As recently as December last year, a Chinese woman was found hidden in a wall-cavity during a police raid on a brothel in Seaford, Melbourne that was being monitored from trafficking. Even if women are not trafficked, however, they may have few other alternatives and feel they have to remain in legal brothels so as to maintain an income and provide for their, and any dependants, basic needs. Women first need to have a viable option before they can leave. A final reason is the psychological and emotional state women are in while working in brothels. Many have described it as a 'survival state' due to the constant stress and danger they live with. In this 'mode' it is very difficult, if not impossible to think and plan ahead for a different situation in their lives. The stress, danger and abuse often leads to posttraumatic stress disorder, a serious mental health condition, and the support needed to deal with this and move forward is not available without extensive private counselling cost, unrealistic for most.

Isn't Sexual Exploitation just trafficking, where women are forced and taken from overseas countries?

No. Sexual exploitation is defined by the UN as “any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another ((PSEA) (ST/SGB/200313))”. Sexual exploitation thus occurs not only through sex trafficking, but also forced and child marriages, forced sex work, legal sex work through brothels or escort agencies, street-sex work, and sex-for-exchange or survival sex - where sex is exchanged for shelter and other basic needs. It is also important to note that sex trafficking does not only affect international women and girls, but Australian citizens with girls as young as 12 being trafficked between states and cities for sexual services.

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