

A Research Report into the Prevalence, Impacts, Context and Service Needs relating to Sexual Exploitation in Australia: An Executive Summary

This research report is produced by HerSpace® Limited 2016.

Who are we?

HerSpace is an Australian not-for-profit organisation that provides therapeutic support for girls and women affected by sexual exploitation.

Our holistic approach includes prevention, pathways out of exploitation, healing, and **recovery**. We aim to empower girls and women, and inspire them to create change within their own lives and choose their own direction.

What is sexual exploitation?

Any situation where a girl or woman is left with limited options or no other choice but to exchange her body for her own physical, economic, social, religious and/ or political safety and survival. It can also include situations where women enter sex work willingly and end up being subject to exploitation.

What are the causes?

There are various push and pull factors that enable sexual exploitation to occur, with experiences subject to a range of contextual factors. Though not every case is characterised by these features, there are risk factors that are often interrelated with experiences of sexual exploitation:

- Poverty
- Debt bondage
- Drug addiction
- Emotional, physical, and sexual abuse
- Lack of alternative skills
- Low level of educational attainment
- Sense of obligation
- Homelessness
- Coercion by partner/family members
- Intergenerational cycles of and exposure to commercial sexual exploitation



Sexual exploitation: who is affected?

Around 69,219 women and girls experience sexual exploitation each year in Australia.

Living in their family homes, state care, boarding houses, brothels, or experiencing homelessness, they have no choice but to exchange their bodies for safety and survival. Women and girls of all ages, across all nationalities are affected.

- In Victoria there are around 100 licensed brothels and 1,700 registered brothel workers. For every licensed brothel there are four unlicensed premises operating, equalling an estimated 6,800 illegal brothels
- Victoria Police estimates the numbers to be similar for each state in Australia bringing the total number of brothel-based workers nationally to 59,500
- Up to 1000 women working in Australia in the sex industry are doing so as a result of human trafficking
- 30-40 children identified by police in Victoria have been domestically trafficked for sexual exploitation
- Street sex workers are more likely to experience exploitation and constitute about 10% of the sex industry
- 2,519 underage girls experience sexual exploitation across Australia
- 250 cases reported of forced or prospective forced and child marriages reported in 2013 to service providers

Sexual exploitation: what are the impacts?

High levels of violence, physical and sexual assault, and emotional abuse are experienced by women and girls affected by sexual exploitation. Some common experiences and consequences include:

- Physical violence; 85% of street-based workers and 48% of brothel-based and escort workers have reported work-related violence
- Rape and sexual assault; 48% of street-based workers have reported rape or sexual assault
- Emotional and psychological abuse, including threats against the woman and her family members
- Robbery and non-payment
- Forced removal of or refusal to wear condoms

- Social isolation
- Exposure to drugs and development of addictions, including coerced and forced substance abuse
- Forced or unwanted pregnancies
- Forced or unwanted abortions
- Removal from or inability to complete education
- Depression, anxiety, and stress; 43% of street sex workers met the DSM-IV criteria for a life-time diagnosis of PTSD
- Suicidal ideation; women and girls who experience forced marriage have reported high levels of suicidal ideations

Support services for sexual exploitation

Support services are fragmented and difficult to access. Women and girls often reported their encounters with services as judgemental, uncoordinated, and unreliable or not available when they are most needed. Some reasons preventing women and girls from seeking assistance include:

- Fear/discouragement due to psychological and emotional abuse
- Threats of deportation to their home country by perpetrators
- Fear and distrust of authority figures due to abuse of trust by perpetrators
- Language barriers, unfamiliarity with their legal rights or available support services
- Few support or protection services available for trafficked women, leaving them with little incentive of identifying themselves to police.
- A sense of social isolation, feelings of shame, fear of retaliation or experiences of PTSD
- Distrust of police, due to perceived police corruption or stigma associated with working in the sex industry
- The belief that exploitation and assault is 'part of the job'
- Unwillingness to submit themselves to the lengthy, intrusive and isolating criminal justice system
- Restrictive and punitive support services
- Support services may lack the adequate knowledge and training on the issue and how to respond to it
- Judgemental or unempathetic assistance
- In cases where parental abuse is involved, children may wish to maintain the family structure and do not want their parents to go to jail



How does HerSpace help?

HerSpace is a therapeutic centre offering long-term support and specialised trauma counselling to survivors of exploitation. HerSpace provides women and girls affected by sexual exploitation with integrated, holistic, and specialised therapeutic care. HerSpace works to:

- Address the emotional, physical and psychological trauma of women and girls affected by sexual exploitation.
- Decrease social isolation and develop empowerment, confidence and self-esteem.
- Build strong partnerships with other organisations working with vulnerable women to establish referral pathways to ensure that women and girls are able to access the specialised care that they need.
- Share information between partnership organisations to help stop women and girls falling through the cracks.

HerSpace actively promotes the voices of women and girls affected by sexual exploitation for advocacy, awareness, and research purposes. This also allows for the improvement of the services that HerSpace and others deliver. Such an approach:

- Recognises that women and girls are the expert on their lives.
- Allows HerSpace to identify what is working and what can be changed or improved.
- Empowers women and girls by using their feedback to shape the direction and future of HerSpace.
- Enables HerSpace to learn and further develop expertise in this area, which can then be shared with other organisations.

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