



Sex Work: Abuse or Choice?

The experiences of Framework's
women residents

A research report by Rachel Harding

Abstract

This research study provides evidence that homeless sex working women resident in Framework projects were very vulnerable, often having experienced extensive, traumatic abuse, and presenting with complex needs ranging from mental ill-health and drug use to suicide attempts and relationship problems. A link between domestic violence and sex work was established, and it was claimed that the women were often coerced into the sex industry by abusive and violent male partners.

The following diagram illustrates the recurrence of abuse experienced by some of the women:



Sex Work: Abuse or Choice?

The experiences of Framework's women residents

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Introduction

'Sex work: abuse or choice' was in response to the concern that sex working women were regarded only as anti-social behaviour problems. Anecdotally, Framework staff had said that the sex working women resident at projects had typically experienced significant and traumatic abuse, and were presenting at services with complex needs.

The study set out to test the hypothesis that the sex working women had indeed experienced abuse, and were presenting with complex needs. In particular, it sought to find out whether a woman's experience of abuse influenced her decision to sex work.

In devising the study and making recommendations following the findings, Framework¹ and POW² have worked together to raise awareness of the issues faced by sex workers, promote appropriate support and service provision, and seek to establish a safe house for sex working women in Nottingham.

The study found much disturbing information about the abuse and the complex needs of the women interviewed. The detailed findings of the report, and especially the statistics, can make shocking reading. However, what cannot be forgotten is that the findings each tell a story of the women interviewed, for whom life has been, in some cases, unbelievably difficult. It is hoped that this research report will be a means of understanding the problems some women have lived, and what effects these have had on them and their ability to cope now. It is therefore important to consider which appropriate response and at what appropriate pace is to be made to the enormous need presented by the women interviewed, some of which they spoke about for the first time.

¹ Framework Housing Association is Nottinghamshire's largest homeless charity, housing and supporting homeless people: www.frameworkha.org

² POW (Prostitute Outreach Workers) works with women, men and young people involved in the sex industry in Nottingham, offering peer support: www.pow-advice.co.uk

Summary of findings

Abuse and sex work

There did not appear to be any causal effect between a woman's experience of abuse and her decision to sex work: both women who had and women who had not sex worked had experienced abuse and complex needs; there was no clear difference about abuse experiences according to sex working.

Of the total 26 women interviewed,

- 35% had sex worked,
- including 8% who were currently sex working.

Of the sex working women,

- 33% had sex worked for more than 12 months,
- 67% had sex worked in Nottingham,
- 67% had sex worked several times a week.

Safe sex was practised by:

- all of the women who had sex worked,
- 82% of the women who had not sex worked.

A woman's reasons for sex working:

- often appeared linked to her relationship with an abusive partner,
- all women (100%) who had sex worked said they had needed the money,
- 88% said that they were making a free choice to sex work.

Experiences of abuse

- 81% of all the women had been verbally or emotionally abused;
- 69% had experienced domestic violence;
- 42% sexually abused;
- 35% had been raped.

Correlations of abuse experiences showed:

- 92% of the women who had been bullied had also experienced domestic violence;
- 82% of the women who had been sexually abused had also been physically abused;
- 78% of the women who had been raped had also been sexually abused.

Frequency of abuse findings showed that,

- all (100%) of the women who had experienced physical, financial, emotional abuse or were talked about in front of other as though they were not there said that this had happened to them more than once;
- 55% of women who had experienced sexual abuse said that this had happened to them more than once;
- 45% of women who had been raped said that this had happened to them more than once.

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Length of abuse experiences included:

- one case of sexual abuse for 25 years (and ongoing);
- one of physical abuse for 22 years (from baby to ongoing);
- one of domestic violence for 15 years (ongoing).

Sources of abuse (which could be more than one) were,

- the woman's partner (70%);
- the woman's family (58%).

There was a clear link between domestic violence and sex working:

- 79% of the women who had experienced domestic violence had also sex worked.

Experiences of need

Complex needs of all the women interviewed showed,

- 81% had relationship problems;
- 65% had attempted suicide;
- 58% had drug problems;
- 58% had mental health problems.

Complex needs that the women said had been as a direct result of abuse:

- all of those who had experienced mental health and employment problems;
- 87% of those who had self-harmed;
- 82% of those who had made suicide attempts;
- 75% of those who had problems being with other people (for example shyness, panic attacks, behaviour problems).

Regarding support,

- of the women who had sex worked, 65% said that they had not received support about their sex working;
- 68% of all women said that they had not received support about their experiences of abuse;
- 58% of all women said they had not received support about the effects of abuse.

Opinions about sex working included:

- more than 30% thought sex working was unsafe, a form of abuse and difficult to stop;
- there was divided opinion about whether sex working was a matter of choice.

Recommendations

Understanding sex working and abuse

- Awareness is to be raised among staff about the needs of sex workers, and working with residents who have or are sex working.
- Awareness is to be raised in Framework about the effects of abuse and associated needs; it is thought that this report is the first detailed survey of abuse and need at Framework.

Responding to the needs of sex workers and abused women

- Framework residents are to be given the opportunity to discuss their past and current needs appropriately, and that staff are given due support in this work. Many of the women interviewed did not feel able to discuss their abuse experiences or needs with project staff: one comment was made that project staff were, “only interested in housing and resettlement”.
- Framework staff are to work in closer partnership with POW Nottingham in raising awareness of the issues associated with sex working. The women who had sex worked also felt that staff did not understand the complexities of reasons for sex working, or of their experiences as sex workers.
- POW is to be approached to offer training about the needs of sex workers for Framework project staff.

How residents can also be helped

- There needs to be a greater awareness amongst Framework residents of what constitutes abuse, how to protect themselves from harm, what to do in the event of abuse and how to deal with past experiences.
- Awareness of the benefits offered by outside agencies, organisations and helplines is to be promoted for Framework residents. The women interviewed were offered copies of contact details for organisations giving support for women who had experiences of sex work and of abuse; all of the women interviewed took information of at least one such organisation.
- Support from project staff is to be complimented by liaising with outside agencies in the interests of residents.

Strategic recommendations

- To work in partnership with POW Nottingham to establish a safe house for women sex workers in an environment offering protection and support while addressing complex needs.

Literature review

What is sex work?

- "...the act of selling sex for money..." (Brewis and Linstead, 2000, p. 251).
- Various sex acts or sexual practices might be bought (O'Neill, 1997, p. 10): "Quite frequently sex work does not involve intercourse: in fact some women engage in regular sex work without ever offering or consenting to either vaginal or anal intercourse. The variety of sexual practices sought and satisfied within the industry, often but not always on the woman's terms, from quick 'hand jobs' and oral sex to the protracted fulfilment of elaborate fetishes calling for acting rather than explicitly sexual skills, defies easy summary." (Scambler, 1997, p. 107).
- Different types of sex markets have been identified: licensed saunas, illegal brothels, working premises (illegal if more than one woman working), escorts, women working from home, and street work (Sanders, 2005, p. 14).
- Reasons for sex work are fundamentally financial and to escape poverty (ECP, 1997): "...business executives working as escorts to pay increased mortgages, students supplementing grants, nurses and teachers tired of earning so little for the job they perform..." (O'Neill, 1991, p. 15). In this study, 'needed the money' was given as a reason by all sex working women.
- Sex workers often seek 'detachment' from what they do to preserve their identity through e.g. drug use to numb their senses (although this can increase vulnerability by affecting their control and concentration), and condom use to act as a psychological and physically protective barrier, while they might practise unprotected sex with their partners (POW! 1996; Brewis and Linstead, 2000 p. 212ff). In this study, it was found that all of the women who had sex worked practised safe sex; this is consistent with Kinnell (1989, in O'Neill, 1991, p. 5). Sex work is also described as deliberately non-emotional and unromantic; sex workers tend to save such genuine feelings of love and affection for their partners, and outside work (O'Neill, 1997, p. 5). Sanders (2005, p. 45f) found that sex workers considered emotional risk to be serious, and would develop strategies to minimise this harm (ibid, p. 142).
- Theoretical contexts of sex work include consumerist (that buying a commodity, including sexual activity, satisfies self-esteem), discursive (between the client's tension and release or satisfaction in orgasm, and that of the sex worker's in terms of the satisfaction of being paid (Brewis and Linstead, 2000, p. 200ff)), socioeconomic, cultural and political (in that legislative responses to street sex work, for example, can increase risk for the women involved by forcing them to work in more isolated locations or face fines (O'Neill, 1997, p. 15ff) and patriarchal (in that the inequality of men and women in gender and sexual roles is most stark in sex work, imposing a hierarchy by men demanding sex over women providing sexual activity (Scambler and Scambler, 1997, foreword xiii)). In this study, there was a context of abuse: that a woman's experience of abuse appeared key to her experience as a sex worker.
- Generalising about sex workers, their backgrounds, experiences and status is unhelpful. The term sex work (or prostitution etc.) has been homogenised within our culture and gathered a meaning over time associated with social exclusion, punitive law, immorality, disgust, pity and prescriptive measures. This report challenges such notions. Overall trends are described for the sake of presenting the findings in a meaningful way. However, detailed information is provided about individual women who have different lives, different experiences and separate identities.

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The aim has been, "...to describe these differences..." (Foucault, 1972, p. 171), not ignore them. It is hoped that in reading this report, it is possible to, "...untie those knots...patiently tied..." (ibid, p. 170) by society, politics, law and history, and face the complexities about sex work, women's homelessness and abuse.

- Legal frameworks are confusing: sex work is not illegal, though it can provoke moral outrage (O'Neill, 1997, p. 7); however, "...it is almost impossible for a woman to work as a prostitute without breaking the law," since it is illegal to live off the 'immoral earnings' from sex work (ECP, 1997, p. 84), and the use of ASBOS has arguably brought about the criminalisation of sex workers (Smith, 2005). Enforced displacement or moving sex workers out of one area in the interests of local residents can break up support networks and put individual sex workers at risk of their lives as they continue to work in unfamiliar locations (O'Neill, 1991, p. 5).
- Trafficking into, out of or within the UK of another for sex work is illegal in the UK; however, this is specifically for people with British citizenship only (New Sexual Offences Act 2003, sections 57 - 60); the trafficking of women who do not have British citizenship for sex work (e.g. from Eastern European, South American and Third World countries) is increasing, and the deliberate importing of trafficked women's children with her by British men is particularly disturbing (Dickson, 2003, p. 35). European Law emphasises, "...the gross violations of human rights that trafficking involves," and international law (UN agreements and conventions) stress the need for individual states to act effectively (Kelly and Regan, 2000, p. 11 - 14).

What is abuse?

- Abuse can take various forms, but all types can be said to include coercion (Glaser and Frosch, 1988, p. 6), and "...the misuse of power" (Bain and Sanders 1990, p. 25); in a study of childhood sexual abuse, adult authority was cited as the means by which the abuse happened in 78% of cases (Jehu et al, 1988, p. 12).
- Difficulties in identifying abuse can be because there are different definitions; this has resulted in variations in reported cases of abuse (Glaser and Frosch, 1988, p. 4 and 5; Giovannoni and Becerra, 1979; Zigler, 1980).
- Childhood abuse is particularly emotive; regarding abuse of children by adults, "...children are *structurally* dependent on adults..." (Glaser and Frosch, 1988, p. 7).
- The effects of abuse can be both, "...traumatic and pathogenic," especially if it occurs over time, includes the use of force by the abuser, was by more than one abuser and can result in, "...psychosocial problems in adult life," (Gazan and Klassen, 1988, p. 15 in looking at sexual abuse). In this study, we found that the length of abuse experiences and the resulting needs for some women were particularly disturbing.
- It is to be remembered that abuse can happen to adults as well as children (Brown, 2003). In this study, there was a shocking amount of abuse experienced by women as adults, whether they sex worked or not.

Links between abuse and sex work

- Experiences of abuse in childhood and adulthood can be 'built up' with the abuser 'grooming': financial abuse can be used as a way of controlling a person and removing their autonomy; emotional and verbal abuse can be a way of reducing confidence and self-esteem until it is more difficult to resist further exploitation. Thus patterns of abuse can be identified which require a wider appreciation of a complex and sophisticated abusive and coercive situation (NCPVA,

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2004, 3.1). This study has claimed that coercing a woman into sex work is another form of abuse.

- Studies have shown high rates of sexual abuse among sex workers (Jehu et al, 1988; Vitaliano et al, 1981). Examined in detail, the vulnerability of the women, caused by poverty and other factors, rather than the sexual abuse itself, which has left women open to exploitation as both children and adults; however, some women have made a direct link for themselves (Silbert and Pines, 1981, p. 410). Also, "...being used sexually at an early age in a way that produces guilt, shame and loss of self-esteem...would be likely to lessen...resistance to viewing oneself as a salable commodity," (James and Meyerding, 1977).
- It is acknowledged that there is a direct link between poverty, homelessness and unemployment and that a woman might feel she has no other choice than to sex work for herself and any children to survive (ECP, 1997, p. 98). Furthermore, a woman in such circumstances would be more vulnerable to exploitation and being coerced into sex working (Faugier and Sargeant, 1997, p. 124).
- The potential vulnerability of an abused woman cannot be stressed enough: the risk of exploitation including rape and sex work is considered to be increased significantly (Jehu et al, 1988).
- The risk of violence to sex working women is well documented (Sanders, 2005, p. 73). Violent sexual and physical attacks are often premeditated and always unpredictable (ibid, p. 74-75).

Homelessness and sex work

- As already said, it must be emphasised, that there is no one homogenous identity of sex workers, or that sex workers have a common experience. There is a stigmatisation of sex workers as, "...vulgar, without morality, and situated in a milieu characterised by drug use, violence, anomie and hopelessness...to do so is to provide yet another instance of the 'gender-prescribed passivity' over which many feminists have taken umbrage," (Scambler, 1997, p. 118).
- To date, a group of particularly vulnerable sex working women has been identified: "...women with no formal skills and training, or no confidence, self worth or self esteem...[with]...a history of abuse, homelessness, poverty and loneliness," (ibid, p. 13; also ECP, 1997, p. 98; Fraugier and Sargeant, 1997, p. 121). There is also a connection with substance misuse and a history of being looked after in local authority care (Sanders, 2005, p. 19). It is such a group that features in this study.

Abuse or choice?

- To reiterate, the image of a sex worker as an abused and vulnerable woman is not one that generalises the experiences or choices of all sex workers (Scambler, 1997, p. 106); the English Collective of Prostitutes sees sex work as, "...part of the women's movement for financial independence and control over our own bodies..." (ECP, 1997, p. 83).
- There is a debate about whether sex workers are effectively sex objects, whether sex work threatens morality and family life, whether making a 'rational choice' is acceptable when a 'free choice' is arguably unachievable and, "...whether there can ever be choice or consent to selling sex," (Sanders, 2005, p. 38). Fundamentally, these issues are to do with power and power inequality between men and women (ibid), which can lead to stigmatisation – and therefore further harm - of sex working women (Scambler, 1997, p. 105). This study found that 88% included 'made a free choice' as their reasons for first sex working.

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- However, it cannot be denied that the exploitation of a vulnerable woman by an abusive man diminishes choice, including her choice to sex work, whether the woman is able to perceive and acknowledge the coercion involved or not. Such coercion is, "...amongst the most ruthless practices of male power and sexual dominance...[that] crystallize misogyny in acts of male hatred of femaleness as rendered into a commodity..." (Barry 1995, in Faugier and Sargeant, 1997, p. 122). This study claims that the women interviewed were often coerced into sex working.
- "The sex industry...is male-dominated and degrades women..." (ECP, 1997, p. 83); sex workers are legally vulnerable and at an distinct disadvantage regarding workers rights (ibid). It is a dangerous and risky business: "...sex work...brings fear, violence, criminalization, stigmatization and reduced civil liberties and rights of human dignity, as well as the risk of disease and, for some, death," (O'Neill, 1997, p. 3).

Methodology

Aims and objectives; research questions

The purpose of the study was to test the hypothesis that there was a causal link between a woman's experience of abuse and her decision to sex work.

The following research questions were asked:

- what was a woman's experience of sex work?
- what were her reasons for sex working in the first place?
- what was her experience of abuse, particularly early childhood abuse?
- what needs had she experienced, and could these be considered as a direct result of the abuse?
- what was her opinion about sex working, sex workers, legislation and safety?
- what support, if any, had she received about these experiences?
- what differences, if any, were there between a woman who had and a woman who had not sex worked?

To this end, the following objectives were made:

1. whether a woman had sex worked
2. whether the woman was currently sex working at the time of the interview
3. length of time spent sex working
4. general geographical area sex worked
5. whether the woman had ever exchanged sex for favours
6. whether the woman practised safe sex
7. reasons for first sex working/beginning sex work
8. whether the woman had ever received support about her sex working
9. the woman's experience of abuse, whether this was an isolated event or not, the woman's age at the time of the abuse and whether the abuse was ongoing
10. whether the abuse was received from within a woman's family, relationship with her partner, sex work clients or pimp
11. whether the woman had ever received support for her experiences of abuse
12. the woman's needs (complex needs)
13. whether the woman considered that her needs were the direct result of abuse
14. whether the woman had ever received support about her needs as a direct result of abuse
15. the woman's opinions about sex working, sex workers, legislation and safety

Detailed, closed questions were asked about abuse and needs, including specific questions as to whether a woman considered that her needs were as a consequence of her experiences of abuse. A Likert-scale was applied for questions regarding a woman's opinion of sex working in the final section.

During the course of the interviews, there was room for interpretation and expansion, although the questions were closed: in answering, the women often volunteered additional information, explaining where necessary what it was that had happened to them as a way of answering, and in which case a mutual agreement was made about the most appropriate categorisation. The opportunity for further comments was also provided at the end of each section.

Feminist methodological literature has favoured qualitative approaches when women have interviewed women about their experiences, and reasons for this have been well documented (e.g. Oakley, 1981 in Finch, 1993); fundamentally, "...women's need to talk is apparent," (Finch, 1993, p. 169). It might be considered a departure, therefore, to use quantitative methods for women interviewing women. The reason for this choice of method was to do with the nature of the research problem: that it was important for Framework to find out if the hypothesis that sex working women have complex needs

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including experiences of abuse was in fact true. As a research task, a detailed structure was necessary to answer this question. However, it was also found that the quantitative methods were not alienating or implicitly damaging. Much of the success of the interviews depended on the manner of the interviewers, which was deliberately engaging, sensitive and at a steady pace. There was a feeling of 'being alongside' the women interviewees, and the interviewers were careful to sit next to and so share the questionnaire with the women residents, rather than be opposite and require responses from a distance. There also appeared to be a distinct advantage in the interviewer and interviewee focussing on the questionnaire together, rather than on each other as in a conversation typical of qualitative methods; this facilitated the interview and discussions, and avoided the inhibitions of observing or hiding physiognomic expression. Nevertheless, it cannot be claimed that the women interviewed were any more or any less protected from the potential danger to themselves in recalling painful experiences. The protection of the women interviewed was therefore given due ethical consideration (see below), and an assumption was made that this was the responsibility of the researcher and interviewers as much as that of the interviewees to look after the women interviewed by only discussing matters about which they were comfortable (ibid, p. 173).

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were considered in all aspects and for each stage of the research. Some of these have been discussed at other stages in this section, METHODOLOGY, and other mentions can be found in FINDINGS. In summary, it was paramount that due consideration was given to the sensitive nature of the questions. At the beginning and end of the whole schedule, each woman interviewed was urged to take care of herself by speaking with a member of staff with whom she felt comfortable, should she need to de-brief after completing the interview. A member of staff was made available at each project specifically for this purpose during and immediately following the interviews; however, the women were urged to speak with any member of staff should they be uncomfortable with discussing issues with the nominated member of staff. The research only included women; there was no inclusion of male sex workers, and no interviewing of men since it was female sex work that was under investigation. All of the interviewers were female and were provided with de-briefing opportunities themselves.

In addition, copies of the following information were made available for each woman interviewed, and offered with a brief description of the services (see appendices):

- POW Nottingham *No judgements...just the facts*
- POW Nottingham *Safety tips while working*
- POW Nottingham *Possibilities for you*
- NSPCC *Worried? Need to talk?*
- NHS information for patients and the public *Base 51*
- Typed memo giving contact details of *Sexual Abuse Project, Nottingham Counselling Service; HLG Mental Health Support Team*

Sampling

As will be seen from the findings, twenty-six women were interviewed during October and November 2004. All of the women were residents of Framework accommodation projects. The interviews took place at projects that were both women-only (Aidan House, Noelle House, Colville House) and mixed-sex (London Road, Park House, Community Houses and ASH). A pilot study of three women took place at POW Nottingham. All participants were offered a £5.00 voucher for their time.

It was decided that the sampling strategy was to be very open, given the nature of the questions. Thus all women residents were invited to take part, whether they had sex worked or not. This way, it was not be obvious to other residents or to staff if a woman who agreed to be interviewed that she had sex worked; otherwise, to request that only sex working women were to take part would immediately

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undermine the confidentiality and anonymity of the study as each participant would have identified herself as a sex worker by entering an interview room or even by expressing an interest in the study. To be as sensitive as possible and promote ethical considerations, information to project staff, residents groups and notices sent to projects in advance of the interviewing made it clear that all women were invited to take part, whatever their sex working experience. Furthermore, all women were given the chance of seeing a copy of the questionnaire (copies were sent to all project staff to discuss with their residents), so they were able to see that the questions asked about personal and sensitive issues regarding abuse, needs and sex work experience, safe sex practices, support and views about sex work. This way, the women were able to decide for themselves if they wanted to take part and answer questions of such a nature. The results have largely been divided into two categories of women who have and women who have not sex worked, and compared accordingly. The non-sex working women did not act as a control group in this study, and were not recruited for this purpose.

Additional information about specific aspects of the methodology are as follows:

Experiences of sex work

There was no definition given of what constituted a sex work occasion, and during the course of the interviews, there did not arise any need to agree on a definition. Regarding the question, *When you were last sex working, how often was this?* therefore, it would be reasonable to assume that this was asking about sex work - namely sexual activity which may or may not include sexual intercourse – and involving one or more clients.

Experiences of abuse

To facilitate the section and questions about experiences of abuse, the NSPCC leaflet, *'Worried? Need to talk?'* was used alongside the questionnaire. This was to help the women identify different abuse types, and the definitions used here by the NSPCC were applied.

All of the women interviewed were asked to identify from a given list any abuse they might have experienced. In addition, they were asked to say whether their experience of a particular type of abuse had happened once or more than once. They were also asked to say how old they were when a particular type of abuse began and how old they were when it stopped, or if it was ongoing; depending on the type of abuse, they were asked instead to say how old they were when the abuse first happened. Thus, for example, verbal abuse was measured in terms of how old a woman was when it first happened, and when it stopped or whether it was ongoing; being threatened was measured in terms of how old a woman was when she first experienced being threatened. This difference was necessary in order to help understand the extent of abuse, so that the questions made sense and that the time measurement was appropriate. Hence, to use the same examples, verbal abuse can be understood as being either as an isolated or an ongoing experience; being threatened can be understood either as an isolated or a repeated experience. The differentiation was more than grammatical, and aimed to recognise the difference in nature of distinctive abuse experiences.

During the interviews, the extent of the *different* types of abuse was apparent. For example, many of the women who had been bullied volunteered the information that the abusive experience had happened at school, but that their experience of domestic violence had happened later in their lives. Similarly, many of the women who had been raped volunteered the information that they had also been sexually abused at another time. Thus it was not necessarily the case that the same abusive experience was described in more than one way. However, the style of the interview was very much for each woman to describe her experiences of abuse by choosing the categories for herself, and she would have been under no obligation to discuss in detail her experiences (e.g. what type of domestic violence was experienced, whether this involved physical assault, social isolation, repeated humiliation, persistent insults etc.).

Experiences of complex needs

The women were asked to identify their needs from the given list. These have been referred to as complex needs, since any one person can have more than one (thus 'complex' as opposed to 'simple'). This is particularly so of residents of Framework accommodation projects. It was found that all of the suggested categories were self-explanatory except for the first, 'mental health problems'. A supplementary definition of 'mental distress' was also given so that the meaning was not confined to that of a mental health diagnosis under the Mental Health Act. It was interesting to note that 'sleeping disorders' was sometimes specified while 'mental health problems' was not, when sleeping disorders can indicate poor mental health. Similarly, sleeping disorders was specified by women who had drug or alcohol problems, as disturbed sleep can be a symptom of not using substances as experienced in recovery.

The women were also asked to indicate whether they considered any of the needs that they identified to be as a consequence of their experiences of abuse. It is difficult to say whether even a woman who considered her needs to have been caused by her experience of abuse is actually able to make such a claim; that her perception of which need has been caused by what experience could change over time, and according to subsequent life-experiences or need priorities. However, it was valuable to discover that asking the question was not considered unreasonable or absurd, and given the level of response, it can be claimed that some complex needs were caused by abuse.

Opinions about sex working

A Likert-scale (offering a choice of answers ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree') was devised to gauge opinion of all the women interviewed about sex working. This section proved to be the most difficult to carry out of the whole of the interview schedule. Some of the women were initially reluctant to indicate an opinion on any of the given statements. As an explanation of this, comments were made along the lines of, "I wouldn't like to speak for anyone else," and it was soon found that an invitation to give an opinion was a request to offer a view on behalf of all sex working women. Following a discussion by the interviewing team, it was decided to make a supplementary introduction of, "In your view..." which was then added to the text on the page. Even so, it was necessary to give further reassurance that only the opinion of the individual woman being interviewed was to count, and that this was not to be regarded as speaking for all sex working women. It was noted that women who had sex worked were consistent in expressing their reservations about this section. It was not thought that there was a problem with the use of a Likert scale as such, but that we had uncovered a possible cultural characteristic among sex working women of not speaking for anyone other than themselves. It has since been postulated that this characteristic is part of the sex working culture, in that a sex working woman would not speak for – recommend, advise or deter – a sex work client regarding the services provided by another sex worker.

Support

In addition to the ethical considerations regarding support for the women interviewed outlined above, each section of the questionnaire asked women if they had received support regarding the specific areas of need:

1. support about sex working
2. support about experiences of abuse
3. support about needs as a result of the effects of abuse

This was to find out how well the women were provided for in coping with difficult and distressing situations. It was also with a view to considering the impact of statutory and voluntary sector services in meeting need, and to gather evidence of what gaps there may be regarding such provision.

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It was often in asking the women interviewed about whether they had received any support and who had provided the support, and in giving out contact information regarding support groups and helpline telephone numbers that comments were made about disclosing traumatic experiences and discussing needs with staff. While such comments have not been included in the detailed findings, they did constitute a significant part of the project in terms of listening to women's experiences.

It was found that seeking support, having the opportunity to find support and even feeling it was possible to be supported for these needs was a complex issue in itself, and that the women:

- were more inclined to disclose and discuss their experiences of sex work and abuse the longer they had been resident in a project, or if the project was not their first experience of support from staff;
- often felt that they could not discuss their experiences of sex work with staff, and that staff were, "only interested in housing and resettlement";
- sometimes felt that now they were in a project and did not have the stress of having nowhere to stay, it was not important to disclose and discuss traumatic or difficult experiences.

Particular support for sex working women has been called for by POW Nottingham in the form of a safe house for women currently involved in the local sex working industry. This specialist support would:

- offer support that gives women time to explore issues of personal safety, particularly regarding coercion, exploitation and abuse;
- offer the opportunity for sex working women to address issues concerning past and current abuse and trauma, and current complex needs;
- give women a rest from sex working in a safe and supportive environment where she may discuss exiting strategies for leaving sex work.

In addition, the safety of sex working women was a major consideration for the women interviewed, with some of the comments not included at the expressed wish of the women interviewed to protect their anonymity. One way to address the major issue of personal safety, and so significantly reduce a woman's vulnerability, would be to establish a safe house for sex working women.

Findings

Demographic profile

The 26 women interviewed were aged between 17 and 55 years, with the average (mean) age as 25 years; a standard deviation of 8.694 indicates that there was not a wide dispersal of ages, and that most of the women were aged in their mid-twenties.

The women had been residents of Framework between 1 and 24 months, with the average (mean) residence as 6 months; a standard deviation of 5.235 months indicates that there was not a wide dispersal of residency length, and that most of the women had been resident for about half a year.

The questionnaire did not ask for the women interviewed to indicate or describe their ethnicity. This was a significant omission, particularly when one of the questions asked was regarding racial abuse. It is therefore not possible to comment about the ethnic mix of the women interviewed.

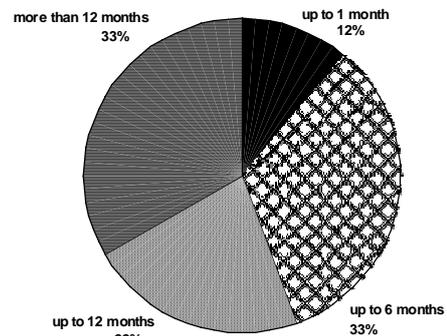
Experience of sex work

Out of the 26 women interviewed, 35% had sex worked at some time, while 65% had not. Furthermore, 8% of the total 26 were currently sex working.

Taking the 35% who had sex worked, the following five points were found about their sex working:

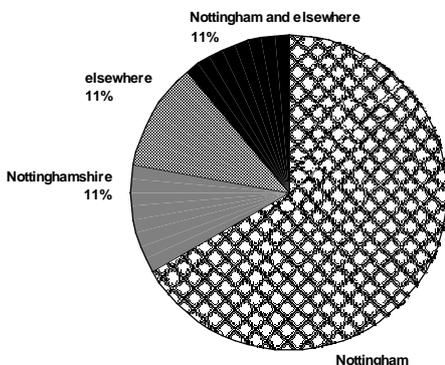
Firstly, regarding the length of time sex working, 33% had sex worked for more than 12 months, 22% for up to 12 months, a further 33% for up to 6 months and the remaining 12% for up to 1 month, as can be seen from the graph on the right. Those who had indicated more than 12 months were asked to specify for how long they had sex worked, and answers of four, five and seven years were given. The women who were currently sex working at the time of the interviews had done so for either up to 12 months or more than 12 months.

for how long have you sex-worked?*



(* of the 35% women who had sex-worked)

where have you sex-worked?*



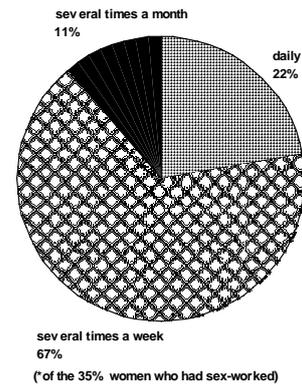
(* of the 35% women who had sex-worked)

Secondly, regarding where the women had sex worked, the majority (67%) had worked in Nottingham, as shown in the graph on the left. The rest had sex worked either in Nottinghamshire (11%), elsewhere i.e. neither Nottingham nor Nottinghamshire (11%), or Nottingham and elsewhere i.e. namely locations both within Nottingham and outside Nottingham and Nottinghamshire (11%). The other locations named were Leicester and Ripley. The women who were currently sex working at the time of the interviewing were doing so in Nottingham and 'elsewhere'.

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Thirdly, regarding how often the women had sex worked, 67% said they had done so several times a week, 22% daily and 11% several times a month. This indicates considerable frequency. The women who were currently sex working at the time of the interviews said they were doing so either several times a week or several times a month. None of the current sex working women were doing so on a daily basis; all the women who had been sex working daily were not working at the time of the interviews.

when you were last sex-working, how often was this?



Fourthly, 11% had exchanged sex for favours³, while 89% had not.

Fifthly, all of the women who had sex worked said that they practised safe sex. The 12% who said that they did not practise safe sex were all women who had never sex worked. The following reasons were given for not practising safe sex:

- "...condoms sometimes break/burst..."
- "Hurt once, not tried again,"
- "It depends,"
- "Been with partner for ages,"
- "Too much on mind..."

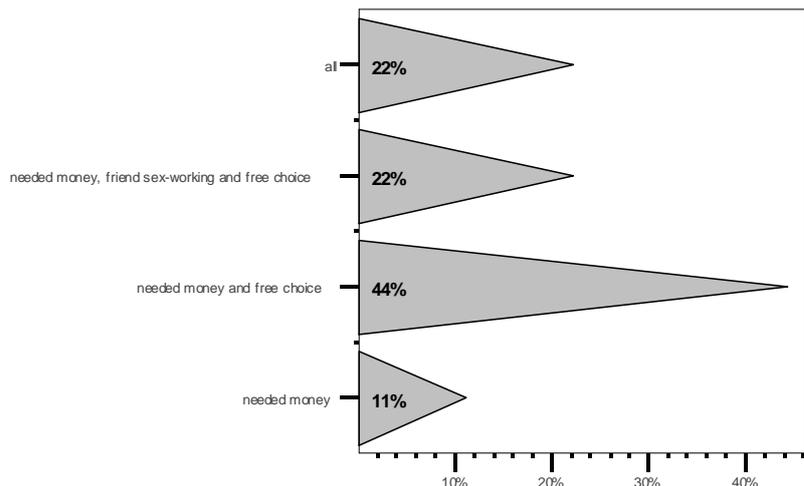
Conversely, one woman who practised safe sex said she only did so, "...in a relationship." This excluded when she had been raped.

These last findings suggest that sex working women are more likely to practise safe sex than non-sex working women.

Reasons for sex working

Of the women who had sex worked, 44% said that when first sex working, they had done so because they had needed the money, and that they had made a free choice. 22% said that there had been a combination of needing the money, had a friend who was also sex working at the time and that they had made a free choice, while a further 22% said that all the given reasons described their initial choice to sex work (needed the money, was forced into it by someone else, had a friend who was also sex working at the time and that they made a free choice to sex work).

when you first sex-worked, why was this



This particular combination appears contradictory, as it does not seem possible for someone to make a free choice and to be forced at the same time. However, during the interview, there did seem to have been a significant element of coercion; even if the women considered that they had chosen to sex work,

³ Payment in kind e.g. drugs, food etc. rather than money; a service provided for a reward.

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this decision was often forced by another, typically an abusive male partner. The remaining 11% said that they needed the money, and the following reasons were given:

- “To pay for rent otherwise I’d get kicked out of the crackhouse⁴
- (I was a runaway),”
- “The money was mainly for heroin, over Christmas so I didn’t have to rattle⁵, so I could use dole money for food, presents etc.”
- “Couldn’t manage on benefits,”
- “For drugs,”
- “Wanted the money, not needed it,”
- “Drugs,”
- “I owed a lot of rent at the time.”

Other reasons for sex working given were as follows:

- “Can’t steal from town. It [sex working] was a way of life,”
- “I was in Nottingham at the time I was feeling low and depressed,”

and additional comments about reasons for sex working were:

- “I have been [forced into sex working]...sometimes, yes, [I made a free choice to sex work],”
- “It seemed like it [that I was forced into sex working].”

From this evidence, it is claimed that some of the women were coerced into sex work.

Asked if they had ever received support about sex working, 44% of the women who had sex worked answered that they had, while 56% said that they had not. Asked who provided the support, the following answers were given:

- “Counsellor,”
- three women said, “POW⁶, Nottingham,”

The following additional comments were volunteered as to why support had not been received:

- Well I’ve been told to speak to POW by drugs counsellor and staff but not yet done so.”

Experiences of abuse

All of the women interviewed were asked about their experiences of abuse. This included identifying types of abuse, frequency and extent or length of the experience. The reasoning for the questions asked is fully discussed in METHODOLOGY.

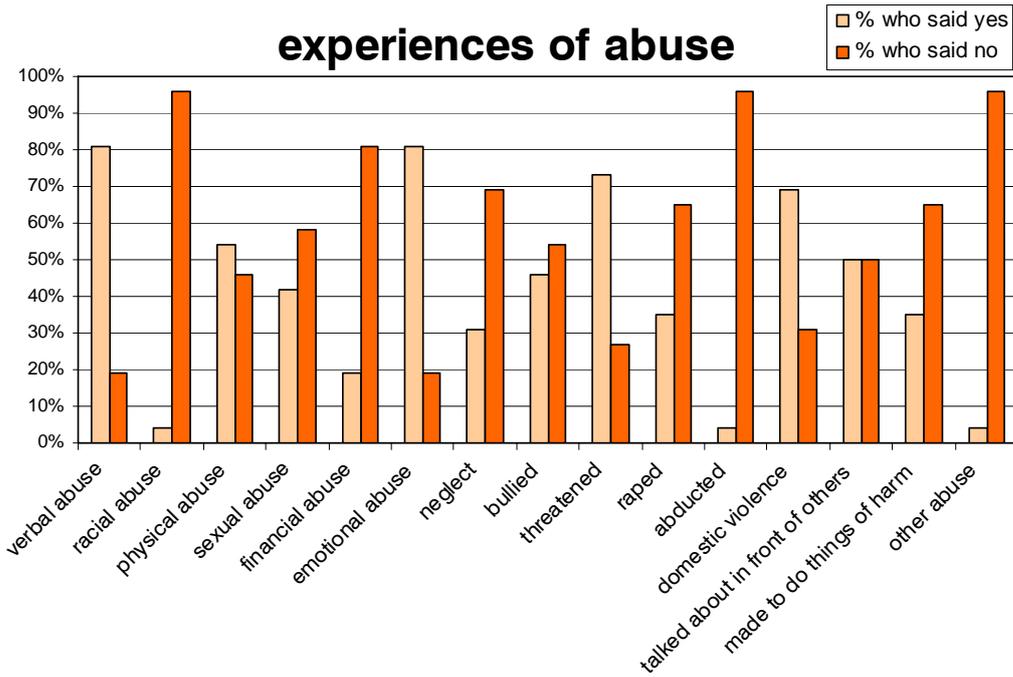
Their experiences have been compared, and are shown in the graph (next page). These figures do not add up to 100% as each woman could indicate more than one experience. As can be seen, verbal and emotional abuse featured as the most prevalent, with 81% of all the women identifying these experiences. 73% said they had been threatened, and 69% that they had experienced domestic violence. 54% said that they had experienced physical abuse, 50% that they had been talked about in front of others as though they were not there and 46% had been bullied. 42% that they had been sexually abused, and 35% said that they had been raped. Neglect was identified by 31%, 19% said that they had been financially abused, and 4% cited racial, abduction and ‘other’ abuse – namely harassment at school – respectively.

⁴ A house established/taken over for the purpose of selling crack (cocaine)

⁵ Undertake detoxification (usually without the assistance of other medication e.g. methadone)

⁶ Prostitute Outreach Workers

Sex Work: Abuse or Choice?



The table below presents the women’s experiences of abuse showing the most to the least prevalent. These figures do not add up to 100% as each woman could indicate more than one experience. The figure of 69% for domestic violence includes one woman who, as a child, had witnessed domestic violence against her mum, and lived with her mum in, “...a battered women’s home...”. It was therefore decided that since she had volunteered these details as a response to indicate the extent of her own experiences, that she should be counted as part of the statistics; that in witnessing her mum’s abuse she had an experience of domestic abuse herself.

Prevalence of abuse (In order of greatest to least)

type of abuse	yes	no
verbal abuse	81%	19%
emotional abuse	81%	19%
threatened	73%	27%
domestic violence	69%	31%
physical abuse	54%	46%
talked about in front of others	50%	50%
bullied	46%	54%
sexual abuse	42%	58%
made to do things of harm	35%	65%
raped	35%	65%
neglect	31%	69%
financial	19%	81%
racial abuse	4%	96%
abducted	4%	96%
other abuse	4%	96%

Sex Work: Abuse or Choice?

The table below shows the pattern of abuse experienced for each woman and as recorded in all interviews. As it is said, the shaded boxes indicate that an experience of abuse was experienced, and the heavily shaded columns indicate that the woman concerned had sex worked.

However, it was significant that there were very little differences in experiences of abuse between women who had and women who had not sex worked. This is the main reason why a causal link between a woman's abuse experience and her decision to sex work was not found. Differentiation between these two groups is therefore not discussed in detail.

Frequency of abusive experiences per woman interviewed*

* shaded boxes indicate an abusive experience; heavily shaded columns indicate women who have sex worked; statistical columns on the right compare frequencies of abuse for women who have and women who have not sex worked.

The figures in this table do not add up to 100% as each woman could indicate more than one experience.

		Frequency of abusive experiences																	No. of total women	As % of total women interviewed	Of those who have sex worked	As % of those who have sex worked	Variance									
heavily shaded columns indicate women who have sex-worked																			9	35%												
types of abuse	verbal abuse	[shaded]																	21	81%	9	100%	+ 19%									
	emotional abuse	[shaded]																	21	81%	8	89%	+ 8%									
	threatened	[shaded]																	19	73%	9	100%	+ 27%									
	domestic violence	[shaded]																	18	69%	7	78%	+ 9%									
	physical abuse	[shaded]																	14	54%	8	89%	+ 35%									
	talked about in front of others	[shaded]																	13	50%	3	33%	-17%									
	bullied	[shaded]																	12	46%	5	56%	+ 9%									
	sexual abuse	[shaded]																	11	42%	6	67%	+ 24%									
	raped	[shaded]																	9	35%	6	67%	+ 32%									
	made to do things of harm	[shaded]																	9	35%	4	44%	+ 10%									
	neglect	[shaded]																	8	31%	3	33%	+ 3%									
	financial abuse	[shaded]																	5	19%	1	11%	-8%									
	racial abuse	[shaded]																	1	4%	1	11%	+ 7%									
	abducted	[shaded]																	1	4%	1	11%	+ 7%									
	other abuse	[shaded]																	1	4%	0	0%	-4%									
No. of abuse types abuse selected		13	13	12	11	9	9	8	8	7	7	6	6	6	6	5	5	5	5	4	4	4	3	2	2	2	1					

Sex Work: Abuse or Choice?

From this table, the comparisons of different experiences of abuse can be observed. In particular:

- all of the women who had experienced financial abuse had also experienced emotional abuse,
- 92% of the women who had been bullied had also experienced domestic violence,
- 92% of the women who had been talked about in front of others as though they were not there had also experienced verbal abuse,
- 82% of the women who had been sexually abused had also been physically abused,
- 78% of the women who had been raped had also been sexually abused.

It was interesting that financial abuse proved the most difficult for some of the women to choose in describing their experiences. This was the category that required most clarification, with many women asking what it meant. When given a definition (for example, someone withholding money or benefits that were rightfully theirs, robbing or taking money from them under duress, exploiting them to put them at a deliberate financial disadvantage, including refusal of payment following sex work), some identified with financial abuse as a term for the first time. The comment, "Oh, I've never thought of it like that before," was common. It even appeared that some women considered an abusive situation as normal, acceptable, or expected; something that, "...just happens."

All of the women interviewed who said that they had experienced a particular type of abuse were also asked whether it had happened once or more than once. This was to gauge the extent of each abuse experience. Regarding the number of abuse occurrences, the following was found:

- all (100%) of the women who had experienced physical, financial, emotional abuse or were talked about in front of other as though they were not there said that this had happened to them more than once,
- 45% of women who had experienced sexual abuse said that this had happened to them once, while 55% said that it had happened to them more than once,
- 55% of women who had been raped said that this had happened to them once, while 45% said that it had happened more than once.

The women were asked how old they had been at the time of their abuse experiences. Specific questions were asked about their age when the abuse began, when it stopped or was ongoing, and depending on the type of abuse experience, how old they were when it first happened. This was to measure the length of an abuse experience. Overall,

- the youngest at the time abuse began was aged 4,
- the oldest at the time abuse began was aged 21,
- the youngest at the time abuse stopped was aged 10,
- the oldest at the time abuse stopped was aged 52.

It was found that for some women, abuse had been experienced when they were babies, or so young that they couldn't remember how old they were at the time.

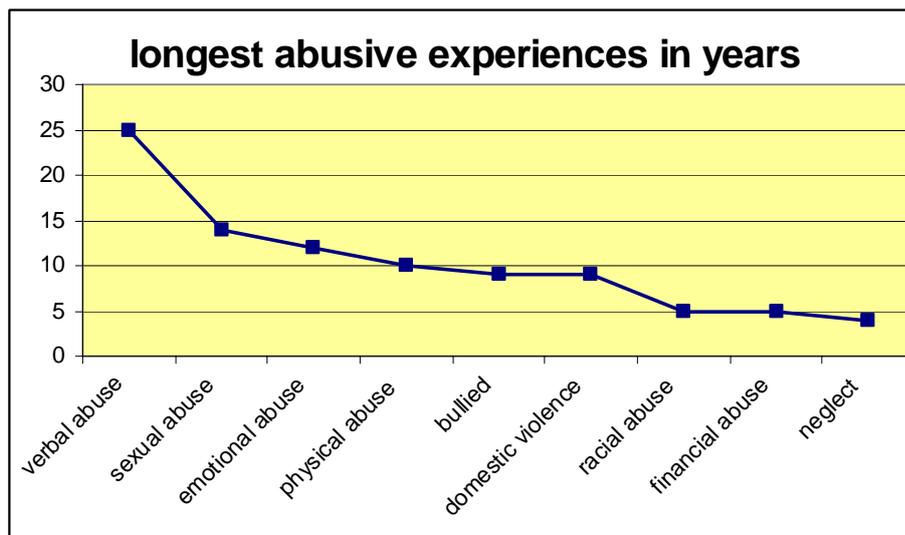
Calculating the length of time a woman had experienced abuse, the graph on the next page shows the most extensive for the given categories; other women would have had shorter experiences of the same types of abuse.

Some types of abuse (threatened, raped, abducted, 'talked about in front of others as though you were not there' and 'made to do things of harm that you didn't want to do') were measured differently ('how old were you when this first happened?'), given the nature of the abuse as discussed in Methodology; these categories were therefore not included in the graph on the next page.

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In addition, and regarding the longest time of an abusive experience, the following was also found for women who indicated that they couldn't remember their age when the abuse began, or that their experience was still ongoing:

- sexual abuse for 25 years: from aged 6 to ongoing for a 31-year-old woman,
- emotional abuse for 25 years: from aged 6 to ongoing for a 31-year-old woman,
- physical abuse for up to 22 years: from 'can't remember (baby)' to 'ongoing' for a 22-year-old woman,
- domestic violence for 15 years: from 12 to ongoing for a 27-year-old woman,
- being bullied for 11 years: from 6 to ongoing for a 17-year-old woman,
- neglect for 6 years: from 11 to ongoing for a 17-year-old woman.



Anecdotal evidence volunteered by the women was as follows:

- “(made to do things of harm that I didn't want to do) after a failed relationship, got into drugs...I was encouraged to go shoplifting,”
- “(bullying) at school and on the streets...”
- “school bullying really affected me confidence and self-esteem...[caused] isolation,”
- “(racial abuse) at school by white kids...[until] I learned to fight back [and got] a very bad reputation.”

Regarding the sources of abuse, the table below shows the answers in full: 70% had experienced abuse from their partner, 58% from within their own family, 15% from their sex work clients and 0% from their pimp, with all women, including all sex working women, saying that they had never had a pimp.

source of abuse	yes	no	n/a or declined to answer
from within own family?	58%	35%	7%
from partner?	70%	15%	15%
from sex work clients?	15%	15%	70%
from pimp?	0%	15%	85%

When asked if they had ever received support for their experiences of abuse, 38% said that they had, while 62% said they had not. The following sources were given by those who had received support:

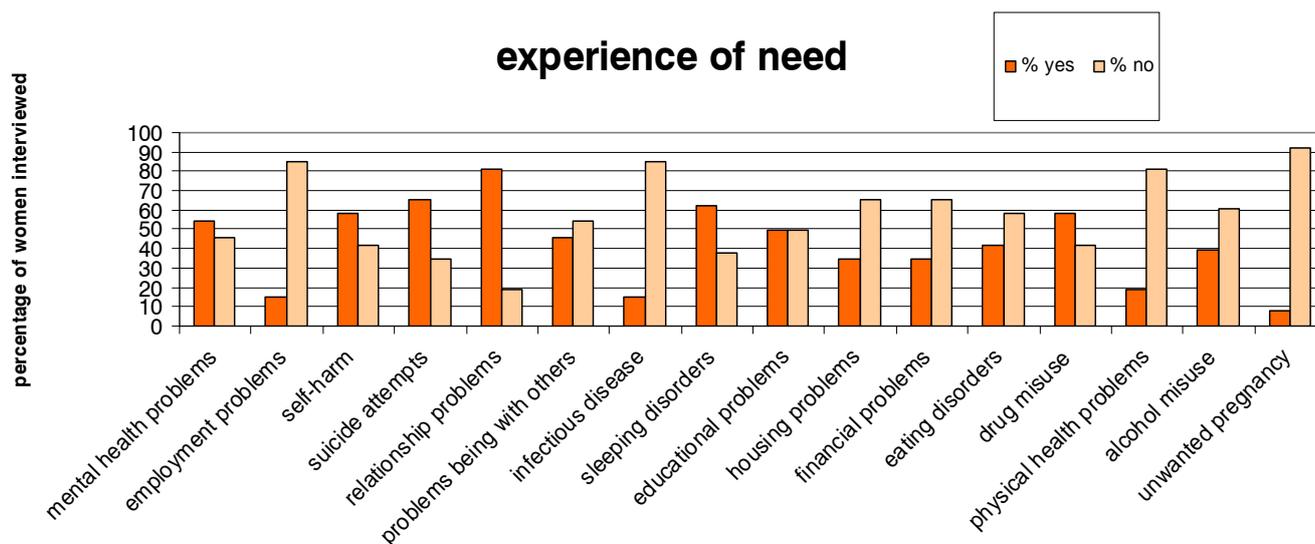
- NHS; woman police officer,
- counselling through social worker,
- women's refuge,
- counsellor,
- hospital psychiatric unit,

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- counsellor (HLG),⁷
- local health services (counselling, drugs worker, psychiatrist),
- mum, aunty, GP.

Experience of need

The graph below shows the different needs experienced by the women interviewed; how many indicated that they had (% yes) and how many that they hadn't (% no) experienced such needs. As with 'experience of abuse' no discernable difference between the needs of women who had and had not sex worked was found, and as such is not discussed.



Types of need	% yes	% no
Relationship problems	81	19
Suicide attempts	65	35
Sleeping disorders	62	38
Drug misuse	58	42
Self-harm	58	42
Mental health problems	54	46
Educational problems	50	50
Problems being with others	46	54
Eating disorders	42	58
Alcohol misuse	39	61
Housing problems	35	65
Financial problems	35	65
Physical health problems	19	81
Infectious disease	15	85
Employment problems	15	85
Unwanted pregnancy	8	92

The table on the left shows the same information with the most cited need listed first. These figures do not add up to 100% as each woman could indicate more than one experience. As can be seen, relationship problems featured for a large majority (81%), and these were defined in the given question further with the examples of problems in relationships with a partner, family, children or friends. Suicide attempts also featured for a majority of the women interviewed (65%), and sleeping disorders for 62%. Drug misuse and self-harm were indicated as needs experienced by 58% of women alike, and mental health problems were shown to be needs for 50%. It was interesting that only 35% said they had experienced housing problems, when all of the women interviewed were residents in Framework supported housing projects and as such were defined as homeless; it was possible that they considered themselves not to be homeless since they were not living on the streets, for example.

⁷ This can be assumed to refer to HLG (Hostel's Liaison Group)'s MHST (mental health support team), who offer support and advocacy for homeless people in Nottingham experiencing mental health problems, including those caused by abuse.

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All of the women interviewed were asked if they considered their complex needs to be as a direct result of the abuse they had experienced. It was not specified exactly which abuse experience had caused what need, but in considering each need individually, the women then said whether they thought there had been a direct causal link with abuse.

The table right, gives percentages of women who said that **as a direct result of abuse:**

- 100% had experienced mental health problems,
- 100% had experienced employment problems,
- 87% had self-harmed,
- 82% had made suicide attempts,
- 75% had problems being with other people (for example shyness, panic attacks, behaviour problems),
- 75% had experienced infectious diseases,
- 67% had experienced housing problems.

In addition to the figures provided here in the table, the following said that they did not know whether their needs had been as a direct result of their abuse experiences:

- financial problems - 11%
- problems being with others – 9%
- drug misuse – 7%

Types of need as a direct result of abuse	% yes	% no
Mental health problems	100	0
Employment problems	100	0
Self-harm	87	13
Suicide attempts	82	18
Relationship problems	81	19
Problems being with others	75	17
Infectious disease	75	25
Sleeping disorders	69	31
Educational problems	69	31
Housing problems	67	33
Financial problems	67	22
Eating disorders	64	36
Drug misuse	60	33
Physical health problems	60	40
Alcohol misuse	50	50
Unwanted pregnancy	50	50

The figures in the table do not add up to 100% as each woman could indicate more than one experience.

Given that the lowest findings were of at least half (50%) of the women who had identified a particular need (here, namely alcohol misuse and unwanted pregnancy), it is reasonable to say that the effects of abuse have been significant on the health and prospects of the women interviewed. Thus the cost of abuse to mental health and employment can be said to be of a significant risk, and in this study, unanimously so.

Regarding the correlation between their identification of abuse experiences and need, the following was found:

- of the women who said that their infectious diseases had been as a direct result of abuse, 50% said they had been both sexually abused and raped, while the other half (50%) had either been physically abused or experienced domestic violence;
- of the women who had experienced unwanted pregnancy, 100% had experienced domestic violence, 100% had been sexually abused, and 50% of these had also been raped;
- of the women who had experienced relationship problems, 81% had also experienced emotional abuse;
- of the women who had made suicide attempts, 88% had also experienced verbal abuse, 59% physical abuse and 76% emotional abuse;
- 100% of the women who had experienced physical health problems had also experienced domestic violence.

Specific, anecdotal evidence volunteered by the women was as follows:

- “(problems being with other people) meeting people and making and keeping friends,”
- “(problems being with other people) don’t like to be on my own,”
- “(mental health problems) depression as an adult and a child,”
- “(mental health problems) feel suicidal,”
- “(educational problems) because my mum not give any attention and I’m quite clumsy,”
- “(relationship problems) major problems dealing with my kids – I struggle – because of relationship with my mum,”

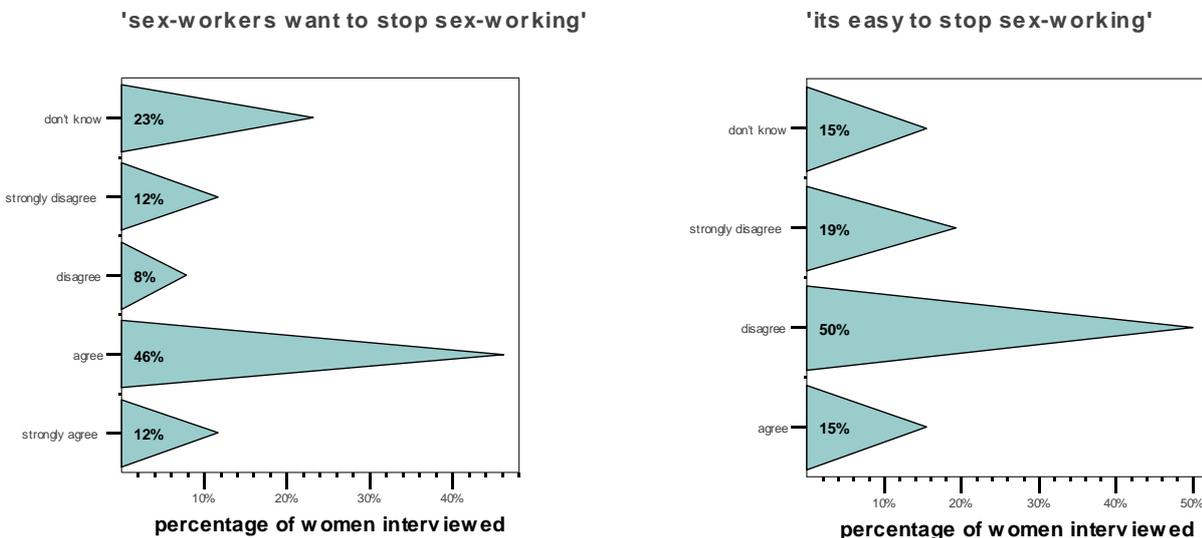
Sex Work: Abuse or Choice?

- “(housing problems) rent arrears – I had to move out because of my partner, police took me to a women’s refuge and now I have debt,”
- “(sleeping disorders) (I needed) sleeping tablets following experience of abuse,”

When asked if they had ever received support about their needs as a result of the effects of abuse, 58% said that they had not, while 42% said that they had, with the following given as to who provided the support:

- MHST,
- NHS psychotherapy,
- counselling,
- foster carers, staff at children’s home, social services, children’s rights services,
- Framework project,
- counselling (for three of the women),
- (Framework) key worker,
- hospital psychiatric unit,
- GP, mum, aunty.

‘What you think about sex working’

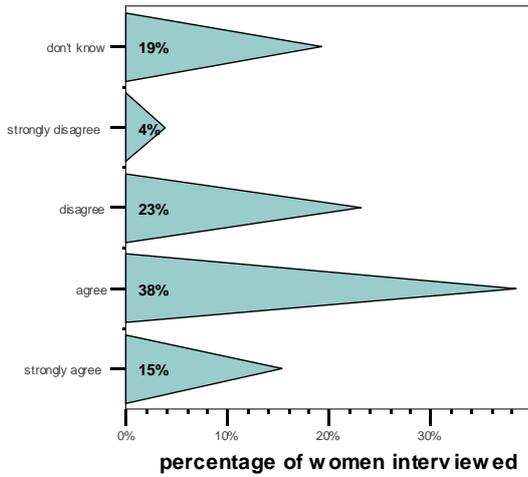


As can be seen from the two graphs above, most (58%) either agreed (46%) or strongly agreed (12%) with the statement, ‘sex workers want to stop sex working’. More women disagreed or strongly disagreed who had not sex worked than those who had, and the 23% who ‘did not know’ were all women who had not sex worked. Conversely, most (69%) either disagreed (50%) or strongly disagreed (19%) with the statement, ‘its easy to stop sex working’. Equal numbers of women (8% each) who had and who had not sex worked agreed with the statement, and again, the 16% who ‘did not know’ were all women who had not sex worked.

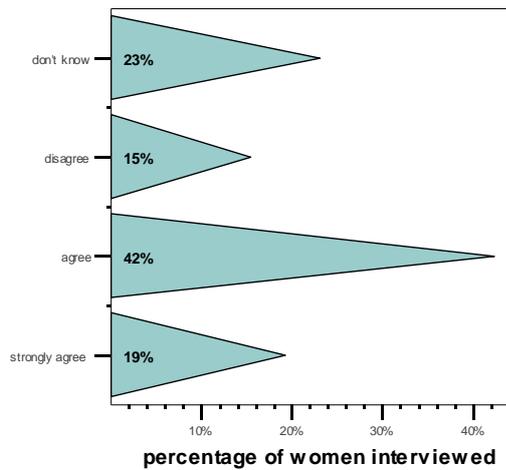
As can be seen from the two graphs on the next page, most (52%) either agreed (38%) or strongly agreed (15%) with the statement, ‘sex work is a form of abuse’. Both women who had and who had not sex worked formed the further 27% who either disagreed or strongly disagreed, and both women who had and had not sex worked formed the remaining 19% who ‘did not know’. Conversely, a majority (61%) either agreed (42%) or strongly agreed (19%) with the statement, ‘most sex workers have been abused themselves’. Of those who disagreed (15%), twice as many were women who had sex worked than those who had not. Those who ‘did not know’ were both women who had and those who had not sex worked.

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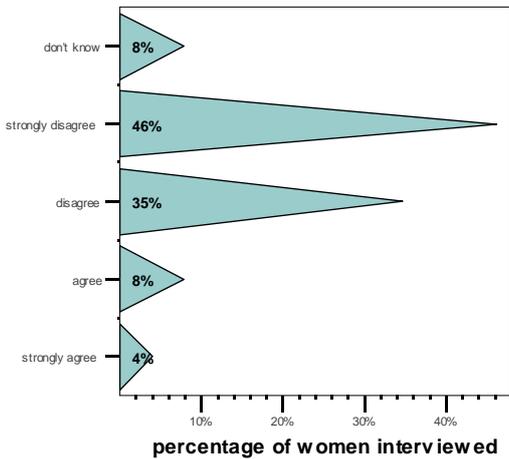
'sex-work is a form of abuse'



'most sex-workers have been abused themselves'



'sex-working is safe'

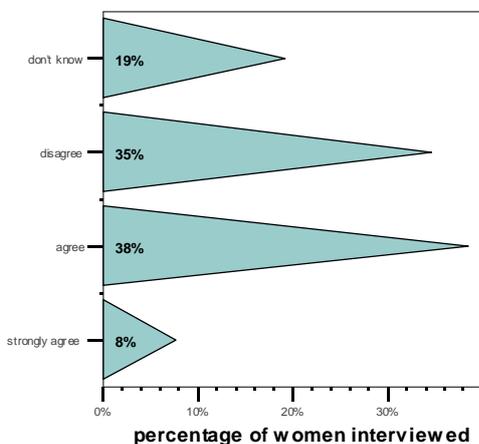


As can be seen from the graph on the left, there was a divided opinion regarding the statement, 'most sex workers choose to sex work': 38% agreed, while 36% disagreed. Equal numbers of women who had not sex worked said they either agreed or disagreed with the statement, while slightly more women who had sex worked agreed. The 8% who strongly agreed were all women who had not sex worked, and the 19% who 'did not know' comprised both women who had and women who had not sex worked.

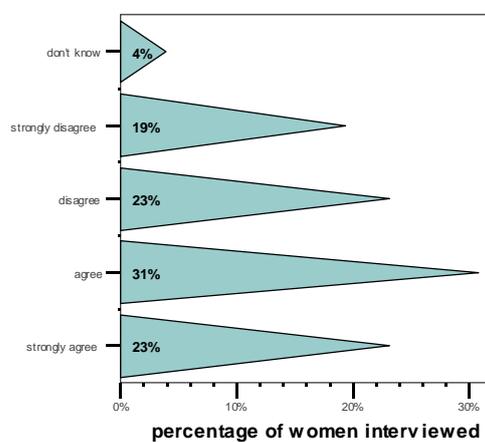
The graphs below show most (81%) either disagreed (35%) or strongly disagreed (46%) with the statement, 'sex working is safe'. The same numbers of women who had and who had not sex worked were represented equally in all of the categories, except the 4% who strongly agreed were women who had not sex worked. Most (54%) either

agreed (31%) or strongly agreed (23%) with the statement, 'sex work will be dangerous until it is legalised'. Slightly more women who had sex worked disagreed or strongly disagreed, commenting that it would always be dangerous; the 4% who 'did not know' had sex worked.

'most sex-workers choose to sex-work'



'sex-work will be dangerous until it is legalised'



Sex Work: Abuse or Choice?

Additional, anecdotal comments that were volunteered by the women interviewed were often quite extensive, and were as follows:

(from women who had sex worked)

- ('its easy to stop sex working') "...depends what you're doing it for, you can get addicted to it in a way, its easy money. A few [of my] friends have been sexually abused and find it easy to work,"
- ('sex work is a form of abuse') "...they are abusing themselves, but also they're not because of getting paid for it,"
- (sex working is safe') "On the street, no. In parlours, yes,"
- ('sex working will be dangerous until it is legalised') "Don't think it should be legalised. No-one should be out there doing it [sex work] because they don't know how much harm they're putting themselves in,"

(from women who had not sex worked)

- ('sex workers want to stop sex working') "Some doing it to feed their children, and some doing it for the mere pleasure of it,"
- "They want to keep going to feed their [drug] habits,"
- "Some do and some don't,"
- "They don't want to stop otherwise they would stop,"
- ('sex work is a form of abuse') "It's a form of abusing themselves,"
- "In a way it is, but I don't know,"
- "It is,"
- ('sex working will be dangerous until it is legalised') "It is legalised in some parts,"
- "Don't think it should be legalised,"
- ('most sex workers have been abused themselves') "Not always before [they start sex working] but often during,"
- ('most sex workers choose to sex work') "[They] do it because they have to; its not as if they want to get caught by the police,"
- "some do,"
- ('sex working is safe') "Its more about the person: I know girls who keep themselves safe and are just a bit more clued up about personal safety – a lot [of them] go to POW,"
- ('sex working will be dangerous until it is legalised') "Might even still be dangerous [even if its legalised],"

Anything else to say

The following are the additional, anecdotal comments made by the women interviewed in response to the invitation, 'please say anything else about abuse and sex work':

(women who had sex worked)

- "Massage parlours should be legalised. Street workers should be taken off the streets,"

(women who had not sex worked)

- "Its all about education. I'm a big fan of education. They should educate men. You have to change people's views. You have to work with proper issues...they take drugs for a reason but they block out the reason. Its all about self-respect. I've got too much respect for myself to do it [sex work]. Don't understand it, they [sex workers] can't have respect for their bodies. You have to be brave to stand out there. Its no good just arresting them [working girls] that's not achieving anything."
- "Always a reason for it [sex work] – wouldn't do it otherwise – they [sex workers] need the money, need to be secure. If they had family around them as well – some families just disown them. Not easy to stop sex working – a routine like you have to go to work – would be easy if they had a proper job and better off financially than sex working. Also, if they had

Sex Work: Abuse or Choice?

encouragement from their family. They have issues and if some people could help them out...they do it for a reason, but got to have issues and problems in the background. Should have a special hostel for sex workers because they don't have families; [a special hostel] so that they can get proper training,"

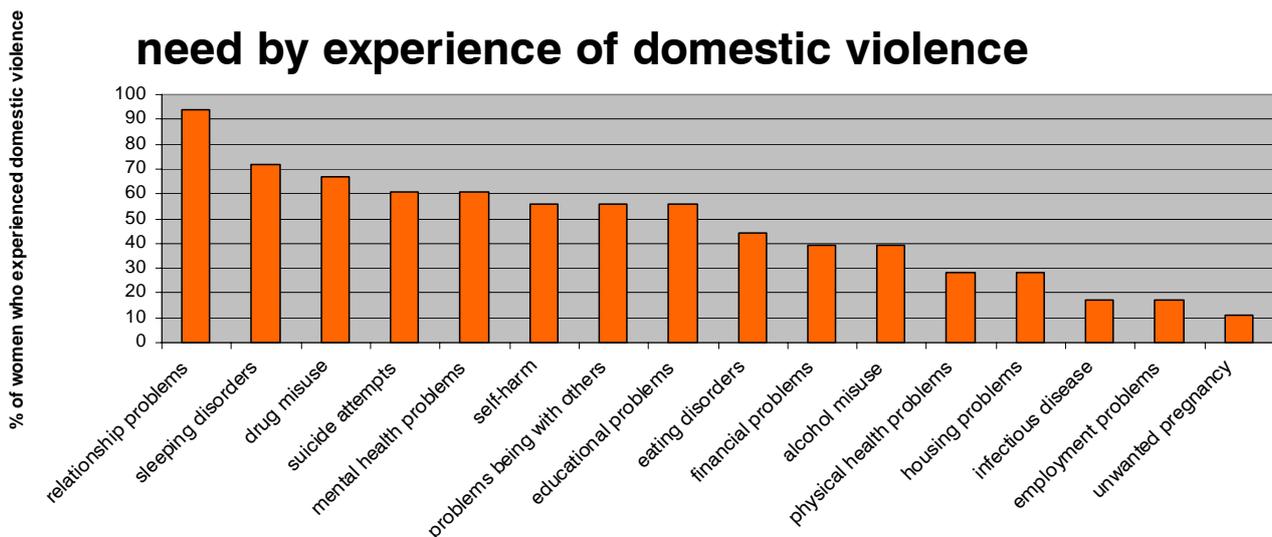
- "I hope this study gets somewhere. I think its disgusting these dirty people [sex working clients] standing on the street. You can't walk down the street in a skirt or boots without people thinking you're [sex-] working,"

Domestic violence

Following on from the study, 'Homeless Women and Homeless Women with Children' (Framework 2003), this final section of the findings looks at domestic violence. In the earlier study, it was found that 94% had cited either relationship problems with family, friends or partner (52%) or harassment/violence within the home (42%) as their reasons for homelessness. Given that domestic violence featured so significantly for this earlier sample, the following information was found in examining domestic violence as an abusive experience in the given sample for this study:

- 79% of the women who had experienced domestic violence had also sex worked

It therefore seems as though there was a correlation between an experience of domestic violence as abuse and sex working for the women interviewed.



As the graph above shows, those who experienced domestic violence also had high percentages of needs. These figures do not add up to 100% as each woman could indicate more than one experience. While it cannot be said that domestic violence caused these needs, it is important to point out the combination of need with this specific type of abuse, and that with any one of the women here, their experience of domestic violence and their personal needs as illustrated above makes them especially vulnerable. In particular, the women who had experienced domestic violence had needs concerning relationships with family, friends and others who might form a significant close, personal and emotional support group (94%), and sleeping disorders (72%), which, as mentioned above, can also be said to indicate poor mental health, or symptoms of reduction in substance misuse. Drug misuse featured for 67% of those who had experienced domestic violence, and suicide attempts (61%) and mental health problems (61%).

Conclusions and action

The risks posed to sex working women can be life-threatening:

It is necessary to establish a safe house



The women's awareness of what constitutes abuse was often poor:

It is vital to raise awareness of what constitutes abuse amongst residents



The women often did not know what support they could get regarding abuse:

It is vital that women know where to get support about abuse



Some of the women felt that they were not able to talk to staff about their sex work:

Framework staff are to be offered training from POW to raise awareness about sex work



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Abuse and Sex working

AN EVIDENCE-BASED STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EXPERIENCES OF ABUSE AND SEX WORKING AMONGST FEMALE RESIDENTS OF FRAMEWORK HA PROJECTS

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

The aim is to establish whether women who have sex worked have had experience of abuse and whether this influenced the reasons for becoming involved in sex working. Framework wants to know how to provide the best possible support to sex working women resident in its projects.

Please be assured that all your answers will be confidential between you and the interviewer with you – they will tell you if they follow anything up and why they are doing this.

You can also be assured that your answers will remain anonymous; it will **not** be possible to identify you from the final report.

The final report, based on all of the questionnaires completed with women residents of Framework HA projects will be sent out to all projects, placed on the Framework HA website and used by management to help outside agencies understand the importance of working with and providing support to women who have or who are currently sex working.

The questions in this study have been designed to be as sensitive as possible. If, however, you feel that difficult issues have been raised for you, please discuss this with a member of staff so that you are given the right support.

You do not have to answer all of the questions if you don't want to, you can stop the interview at any time and you can also add any other information that you think might be useful in addition to the answers to the questions you are asked.

On completing the questionnaire, please collect and sign for a £5.00 voucher.

NOTE: For the purposes of this study, sex working women sell sex for money; they have also been referred to as 'prostitutes' but the terms sex work, sex working, sex worked and sex workers are used here throughout.

A. YOUR EXPERIENCE OF SEX WORKING

1. Have you ever sex worked? *(please tick one)*

YES NO

If YES, please answer the following:

• for how long have you sex worked? *(please tick one)*

- up to 1 month
- up to 6 months
- up to 12 months
- more than 12 months please say how long

• Where have you sex worked? *(please tick all that apply)*

- Nottingham
- Nottinghamshire
- elsewhere please say where.....

• When you were last sex working, how often was this?
(please tick one)

- daily
- several times a week
- several times a month
- several times a year
- other please say how often

• Are you currently sex working? *(please tick one)*

YES NO

2. Have you ever exchanged sex for favours? *(please tick one)*

YES NO

3. Do you practice safe sex? *(please tick one)*

YES NO

If NO, can you say why?

.....

.....

B. YOUR REASONS FOR SEX WORKING

If you have not sex worked, please turn the page for the next section

4. When you **first** sex worked, why was this?
(please tick all that apply)

I needed the money

please say why you needed the money:.....

.....

.....

I was forced into it by someone else

My friend was sex working

I made a free choice to sex work

Other reasons

please say what these were:

.....

.....

.....

.....

5. Have you ever received support about your sex working

e.g. from Outreach Workers? YES NO

If YES, please say who provided this support

.....

.....

C. YOUR EXPERIENCE OF ABUSE

If you have not experienced abuse, please turn the page for the next section

6. Please say if you have experienced any of the following abuse, how old you were when it began and when it stopped, if its still ongoing, whether it happened once or more than once: *(please tick all that apply, leaving blank those not relevant)*

Verbal abuse Did this happen **once?** Or **more** than once?

How old were you when it began? When it stopped? Ongoing?

Racial abuse Did this happen **once?** Or **more** than once?

How old were you when it began? When it stopped? Ongoing?

Physical abuse Did this happen **once?** Or **more** than once?

How old were you when it began? When it stopped? Ongoing?

Sexual abuse Did this happen **once?** Or **more** than once?

How old were you when it began? When it stopped? Ongoing?

Financial abuse Did this happen **once?** Or **more** than once?

How old were you when it began? When it stopped? Ongoing?

Emotional abuse Did this happen **once?** Or **more** than once?

How old were you when it began? When it stopped? Ongoing?

Neglect Did this happen **once?** Or **more** than once?

How old were you when it began? When it stopped? Ongoing?

Bullying Did this happen **once?** Or **more** than once?

How old were you when it began? When it stopped? Ongoing?

Threatened

How old were you when this **first** happened?

Has this happened to you **once?** Or **more** than once?

Raped

How old were you when this **first** happened?

Has this happened to you **once?** Or **more** than once?

Abducted

How old were you when this **first** happened?

Has this happened to you **once?** Or **more** than once?

Domestic violence Did this happen **once?** Or **more** than once?

How old were you when it began? When it stopped? Ongoing?

Sex Work: Abuse or Choice?

Talked about in front of others as though you were not there

How old were you when this **first** happened?

Has this happened to you **once**? Or **more** than once?

Made to do things that harmed you and that you didn't want to do

How old were you when this **first** happened?

Has this happened to you **once**? Or **more** than once?

Other abuse please say what this was

.....
.....

How old were you when it began? When it stopped? Ongoing?

OR How old were you when this **first** happened?

Did this happen/ has this happened **once**? Or **more** than once?

7. Did you experience any of the abuse from within your own family?

YES NO

8. Did you experience any of this abuse from your partner?

YES NO

9. Did you experience any of this abuse from your sex work clients?

YES NO

10. Did you experience any of this abuse from your pimp?

YES NO

11. Have you ever received support about your **experience** of abuse

YES NO

If YES, please say who provided this support

.....
.....

D. YOUR NEEDS

12. Have you any of the following needs and would you say these were as a **direct result** of the abuse you have experienced?

(please tick all that apply, leaving blank those not relevant)

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Mental Health problems | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Would you say these were as a direct result of abuse? | | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Drug misuse | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Would you say this was as a direct result of abuse? | | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Alcohol misuse | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Would you say this was as a direct result of abuse? | | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Infectious disease | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Would you say this was as a direct result of abuse? | | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Self-harm | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Would you say this was as a direct result of abuse? | | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Suicide attempts | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Would you say these were as a direct result of abuse? | | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Eating disorders | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Would you say these were as a direct result of abuse? | | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Sleeping disorders | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Would you say these were as a direct result of abuse? | | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Physical Health problems | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Would you say these were as a direct result of abuse? | | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Unwanted pregnancy | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Would you say this was as a direct result of abuse? | | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Relationship problems | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| (e.g. with your partner, family, children, friends) | | |
| Would you say these were as a direct result of abuse? | | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Sex Work: Abuse or Choice?

Problems being with other people
(e.g. shyness, panic attacks, behaviour problems)

Would you say these were as a direct result of abuse?

Educational problems
(e.g. truancy, exclusion from school/ college)

Would you say these were as a direct result of abuse?

Employment problems
(e.g. difficulties holding down a job)

Would you say these were as a direct result of abuse?

Housing problems
(e.g. difficulties keeping a tenancy)

Would you say these were as a direct result of abuse?

Financial problems
Would you say these were as a direct result of abuse?

Other complex needs
please say what these have been.....

.....
.....
.....

Would you say these were as a direct result of abuse?

13. Have you ever received support about your needs as a result of the **effects** of abuse?

YES NO If YES, please say who provided this support:

.....
.....
.....

E. WHAT YOU THINK ABOUT SEX WORKING

14. Please look at the following statements and tick to say whether you agree with them or not.

In your view:

- Sex workers want to stop sex working

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE DON'T KNOW

- Its easy to stop sex working

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE DON'T KNOW

- Sex work is a form of abuse

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE DON'T KNOW

- Most sex workers have been abused themselves

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE DON'T KNOW

- Most sex workers choose to sex work

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE DON'T KNOW

- Sex working is safe

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE DON'T KNOW

- Sex work will be dangerous until it is legalised

STRONGLY AGREE AGREE DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE DON'T KNOW

F. YOUR AGE AND YOUR TIME IN FRAMEWORK

15. Please answer the following two questions about yourself:

How old are you (nearest year)?

How long have you been living in Framework accommodation (nearest month)?

.....

G. ANYTHING ELSE YOU WANT TO SAY

Please say anything else about abuse and sex work:

H. LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

If you feel that you need support about any of the issues raised by this questionnaire, please speak to a member of staff.

To all women residents of Framework Housing Association

We want to know what you think about sex
working

Research about sex working and experiences of
abuse will take place here, *project name*

Day, date, time from-to

- All your comments and answers will be confidential within Framework and no-one will be able to identify you from what you say
- Members of staff will be available and able to offer any support you might need

*You will receive a £5.00 gift voucher for taking
part!*



***HELP US TO UNDERSTAND THE
SUPPORT NEEDS OF SEX WORKERS***

Lisa Del Buono (Framework Women's Services Manager)

Other agencies that might be of use to women who have sex worked or experienced abuse:

Sexual Abuse Project

Nottingham Counselling Service, 32 Heathcoat Street, Nottingham NG1 3AA
0115 958 8859

- leave a message and they will send you details through the post

HLG Mental Health Support Team

21 Clarendon Street, Nottingham NG1 5HR

0115 956 5313

- they will work with homeless people in hostels who experience mental distress (complete an application form, which you can get from a project worker)

Base 51 [Age 12+]

51 Glasshouse Street, (Behind The Victoria Centre), Nottingham NG1 3LP

0115 952 5040

- Contact Janet Lewis. Base 51 is a safe place for young people to drop-in. Free and confidential advice service advice is offered concerning contraception, pregnancy and all other health matters. Things available: doctor, nurse (no appt), welfare rights advice, support, housing, counselling, young parents group, cheap healthy food, free showers, free laundry.

Base 51 - lesbian,gay,bisexual group (lbg)

(Address as above)

Contact Julie on the above number - 9.00am - 5.00pm

- Monday to Friday. A confidential and safe environment for young people up to 25yrs old, who are questioning their sexuality or wish to meet with other lesbian, gay or bisexual people.

Meetings every Wednesday 5.30pm - 8.00pm at base 51.

Source: <http://www.southernderbyshire.nhs.uk/ipp/default.asp>

Sex Work: Abuse or Choice?

for POW leaflets, please go to:

<http://www.pow-advice.co.uk>

for NSPCC information, please go to:

<http://www.worriedneed2talk.org.uk>

Framework is a leading provider of housing, support, training, care and resettlement services, opening doors to homeless and vulnerable people.

- Opening doors to young people and care leavers
- Opening doors to older homeless people
- Opening doors to vulnerable women
- Opening doors to people vulnerable to tenancy breakdown
- Opening doors to rough sleepers
- Opening doors to people with mental health difficulties
- Opening doors to substance misusers

For more information about our work please visit www.frameworkha.org

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