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WORKING GIRLS: ABUSE OR CHOICE IN STREET-LEVEL SEX WORK? A STUDY OF HOMELESS WOMEN IN NOTTINGHAM

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6 **HOMELESS WOMEN IN NOTTINGHAM**
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15 **Abstract**
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22 This paper aims to explore how abused homeless women understand their choice to sex work. In
23 particular, there is a discussion of the motivations given by women as to why they sex worked, and
24 it is suggested that abused homeless women can experience coercion from abusive partners in
25 deciding to sex work. There is a challenge to the notion of 'victim' within the government's
26 'Prostitution Strategy' (Home Office, 2006) in specifying responses to the complex needs of sex
27 working women. Recommendations are also made for practice in the context of the 'Strategy' when
28 working with abused and coerced homeless women who choose to sex work. Twenty-six homeless
29 women were interviewed - nine of whom had sex worked – and a structured, qualitative
30 questionnaire was used in a case study design from which information was gathered about the
31 relationship between a woman's experience of abuse and her decision to sex work.
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Victimisation and coercion: introducing misunderstood women

Victimisation is a powerful and pervasive concept in the field of 'sex work' research, but it is only recently that a paradigm shift has emerged whereby men purchasing sex are now seen as facilitators of sex working women's continued coercion, oppression and abuse, rather than 'victims' of deviant females (Brooks-Gordon, 2006). The view that sex working women feature in public discourse as victims of abuse and coercion originated with child protection work. First raised by children's charities, particularly the Children's Society and Barnardo's (Brooks-Gordon, 2006, referring to Newman, 1989; Rees, 1993; Stein et al, 1994; Lee and O'Brien, 1995; Melrose, Barrett and Brodie, 1999), there was a dramatic shift in the perception of someone paying for sex from a child. The police then acted against those who abused such children as pimps or clients, rather than against the children themselves (Home Office, 1998, in Brooks-Gordon, 2006). Research continues to show that vulnerable children and young people can be at risk of experiencing sexual exploitation that includes sex work (Pearce et al, 2003), and it is now widely accepted that children involved in sex work are to be regarded as victims of abuse (Arye and Barrett, 2000).

Based on considerable evidence that coercion and abuse are all too often present in the process of becoming involved in sex work (particularly street-level), the notion of 'working girls as innocent victims' has since been extended to adult women. Accordingly, it is argued that victimisation can result in working girls suffering from a significant loss of 'agency' in their daily lives (Home Office, 2004). Writing about homeless women who sleep rough and sex work nightly in Stoke on Trent, Moss and King (2001, p.3) state, "Street prostitutes are victims, not perpetrators". Similarly, Dickson (2003) maps the extent of the trafficking of women for sexual exploitation in London and describes

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3 the organised crime that entraps women, particularly migrant women. Although it can be argued
4 that trafficked women are victims because they are coerced and controlled purposely through
5 sophisticated criminal networks, seeing all working girls as victims is in many ways a logical step,
6 whether there is a clear background of abuse or not. In one sense, the victimisation of working girls
7 is inherent in the nature of their work and its circumstances. For example, working girls are at risk of
8 the highly unpredictable yet premeditated sexual and physical violence (Sanders, 2005; O'Neill,
9 1991). This violence is deemed to exacerbate the stressful situation of selling sex, often managed
10 by the use of drugs and alcohol to numb the senses, condoms to act as a physical and
11 psychological barrier, and a deliberate lack of intimacy to distinguish between work and personal
12 relationships (Sanders, 2005; Brewis and Linstead, 2000; O'Neill, 1991; Kinnell in O'Neill, 1991;
13 POW! 1996). Distinguishing between different sex markets, the danger to on-street working girls
14 sex working women is well documented, particularly vulnerable, homeless women (O'Neill, 1997),
15 and the death of these women in the course of their work is not uncommon (O' Neill, 1997; Moss
16 and King, 2001; Dickson, 2003; Romero-Daza et al, 2003; Sanders, 2005).

38 39 **If not a victim, then what?**

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44 However, there are also ways of understanding female sex work outside of a 'victim' perspective,
45 particularly if one considers the complex psychological and sociological factors associated with
46 'buying' and 'selling' sex. For instance, Brewis and Linstead (2000) write of the consumerist element
47 to sex work in that sexual activity is bought to satisfy self-esteem, as with any other commodity.
48 Scambler and Scambler (1997 p. xiv) place sex work within the setting of how men can see women,
49 arguing that it is part of the broader "objectification' of women". Moreover, there are moral,
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3 ideological and epistemological implications for positing sex work wholly within a victim-led
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5 discourse. Externally imposing victimhood on others is not empowering for those being researched.
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7 Neither is the suggestion from a number of socialist feminist academics that working girls suffer
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9 from 'false consciousness' (see for example, Mackinnon, 1989; Harding, 1991) if researchers
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11 should always attempt to 'see through the eyes of the people being studied' (Bryman, 2004). While
12
13 violent episodes should be exposed for the cruel acts that they are, at some point there needs to be
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15 an acceptance of the subjective meanings individuals allocate to their own experiences.
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23 Yet it is difficult to avoid the concept of victimisation altogether when discussing female sex work;
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25 violence, coercion and oppression are common experiences for street-level working girls (Campbell
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27 and O'Neill, 2006). Drawing on the work of Habermas, Scambler and Scambler (1997) outline a
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29 feminist opposition that has its' roots in a patriarchal context, whereby attention to the inequality of
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31 men and women in gender and sexual roles is most explicit in sex work and contains the potential
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33 for the victimising of women.
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40 **The problem of drugs**

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44 In Great Britain, the co-existence of problem drug use (primarily crack-cocaine and heroin, but also
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46 amphetamines, cannabis and increasingly in London markets 'crystal meths') and street sex work is
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48 well documented (see McCullagh et al, 1998; May et al, 1999; Ward et al, 2000; Church et al, 2001;
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50 MacDonald et al, 2003; Pitcher & Aris; 2003; Home Office, 2004; May & Hunter, 2006). Amongst
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52 the many explanations for the interdependence between drug and street sex markets, two of the
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54 most popular are that drugs help to temporarily mitigate the psychological damage intrinsic to the
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3 'job' and that once addicted, sex work is financially lucrative enough to enable drugs to be bought
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5 on a regular basis (Hester and Westmarland, 2004).
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11 That problematic drug use is a catalyst for sex work rather than sex work preceding drug use is not
12 entirely clear (Bean, 2004). Young girls and women are arguably just as likely to enter prostitution
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14 'clean' from addictive drug habits (Graham and Wish, 1994; Inciardi et al., 1991; May, Edmunds and
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16 Hough, 1999; Green et al., 2000; Cusick, 2002 & 2004), as they are compelled to enter street level
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18 prostitution as a means to fund chronic drug addictions (Hester & Westmarland, 2004; Cusik et al,
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20 2004 in Campbell and O'Neill, 2006; Pearce et al, 2003; Church et al, 2001; Melrose, 1999), even
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22 those of an addicted partner (Cusick 1998; Stewart, 2000; Hester and Westmarland, 2004).
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24 Regardless of the direction of causality, May and Hunter (2006) have argued that drugs (in
25
26 particular, crack-cocaine) have replaced violence as the 'new pimp' (Thompson, 2004). Addiction-
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28 motivated working girls are more likely to offer the direct exchange of sex for crack (Green et al.,
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30 2000; Sterk and Elifson, 1990) and the presence of crack cocaine has also been related to the
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32 falling price for sexual services and an increased danger on the streets (Faugier and Sargeant,
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34 1997). Maher (1996) argues that crack-cocaine has altered the culture and context of street-level
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36 prostitution, such that 'the tricks have become cheaper, the violence more pronounced and street-
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38 workers increasingly viewed as morally contaminated' (p.144). Moreover, sex and drug markets
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40 share a number of interconnected 'entry' commonalities ranging from sexual and physical abuse in
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42 childhood, and the resulting low self-esteem, poor confidence and limited life-skills (Faugier and
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44 Cranfield, 1994; O'Neill, 1997; Shaw and Butler, 1998; Phoenix, 1999; Cusick, Martin and May,
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46 2004; Hester and Westmarland, 2004; May and Hunter, 2006). Based on the OED (2006) definition
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3 of coercion as 'constraint, restraint, compulsion; the application of force to control the action of a
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6 voluntary agent', all of the entry dynamics outlined above could arguably fit this criteria.
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10 **Sex workers, prostitutes, or working girls? Why language matters**

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16 The research presented here uses the term 'sex work' for the following reasons: firstly, it describes
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18 the fundamental purpose of selling sex for money (O'Neill, 1997; Scambler, 1997); secondly it
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20 includes notions of consumerism that convey the context of a wider sex market (Brewis and
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22 Linstead, 2000); thirdly, it is nearer to the term 'working girls' used by the women themselves.
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24 'Prostitution' on the other hand, while virtually synonymous, does suggest an unhelpful emphasis on
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26 women 'selling themselves' in much the same way as the Victorians regarded prostitutes as
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28 immoral creatures preying on moral gentlemen (Brooks-Gordon, 2006); that demand is fuelled by
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30 the women's behaviour. 'Prostitution' is also perhaps more traditional, even classical, conjuring up
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32 exclusive images of street-based sex work, and therefore limiting the full complexity and range of
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34 sex for sale from escort work to off-street parlours, for example (Sanders, 2005).
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42 Throughout the research process, women typically referred to themselves as 'working girl(s)'
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44 (occasionally 'sex workers', but never 'prostitutes') and it seemed appropriate to adopt the linguistic
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46 construction that respondents felt to be the least value-laden and stigmatized when referring to the
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48 women themselves. 'Working girl' arguably avoids the pejorative connotations so explicit in
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50 'prostitute' and although this term may at first seem to only favour the voluntary non-coerced
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52 aspects of (street) prostitution (via 'working'), closer inspection reveals implicit assumptions of
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54 coercion. *Adult* females describing themselves as '*girl(s)*' implies a vulnerability that
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3 counterbalances the 'working' prefix of this self-determined label. There is also an implicit sense of
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counterbalances the 'working' prefix of this self-determined label. There is also an implicit sense of ironic empowerment that comes from speaking with the working girls. Linguistically, 'working girl' is not only a self-determined label, but it would also appear to incorporate aspects of both voluntarism and coercion that help create the space for any ideological debate to migrate away from simplistic bifurcation towards a continuum of understanding.

Anti-social or support need? Why the research was carried out.

The research presented here was in response to a concern that working girls were regarded primarily as anti-social behaviour problems. It was considered that if evidence could show homeless women's sex working in the context of damaging life-experiences, then their sex working activity could be seen instead as a support need. In particular, this study was hoped to further the discussion about homeless working girls in regards to the local 'respect' agenda. The aim of the research was therefore to explore the relationship between a woman's experience of abuse, particularly sexual abuse in childhood, and her decision to sex work.

How the women took part

The research was commissioned by a charity for homeless people in Nottingham. The charity houses and supports homeless single women and women with children in both mixed and single-sex shared accommodation projects. Although sex workers can be male, transgender or transsexual (Leichtentritt and Davidson-Arad, 2005), children and young people (Arye and Barrett,

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3 2000) or trafficked women (Dickson, 2003), the focus of the study was homeless adult women in
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5 order to address the concerns raised by support workers about the perception of working girls by
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7 policy makers.
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12 A convenience sampling strategy was used, given the small numbers involved and the difficulty of
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14 finding vulnerable women willing to be interviewed and discuss their experiences of abuse and sex
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16 work. All women housed in the charity's accommodation projects were given the chance to see the
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18 interview structure in advance and so choose whether to take part. Both assistants were trained by
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20 the lead researcher to conduct the interviews professionally, and told not to target working girls.
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22 This was to preserve confidentiality and anonymity, preventing working girls self-identifying
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24 themselves to staff or other residents by participating in the research. While this was not an attempt
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26 to have a control group of homeless women who had not sex worked, it soon became clear that
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28 histories of abuse did not automatically result in a woman sex working, given that all of the
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30 homeless women interviewed had experienced some form of abuse but not all of them had sex
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32 worked. The women were all given a £5.00 shopping voucher as a nominal acknowledgement of
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34 their time as standard practice within the charity, and as an accepted way of increasing participation
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36 amongst hard to reach social groups (Cloke et al, 2005; Fountain et al, 2003).
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46 **Women alongside women: doing the interviews**

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51 Feminist methodological literature has favoured unstructured or semi-structured qualitative methods
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53 when women have interviewed women about their experiences (Oakley, 1981; Finch, 1993). It
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55 might be considered something of a departure, therefore, to use a structured schedule for women
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3 interviewing women. However, the structured interview schedule enabled the relationship between
4 a woman's experience of abuse and her decision to sex work to be examined in considerable detail,
5 and even though the questions were almost exclusively 'closed', extensive discussions took place.
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7 The women often volunteered additional information, and permission was always sought to include
8 these comments. Furthermore, much of the success of the interviews depended on the manner of
9 the interviewers, which was deliberately engaging, sensitive and at a steady pace. There was a
10 feeling of 'being alongside' the women interviewed, and the interviewers were careful to sit next to
11 and so share the schedule with the women, rather than be opposite and require responses from a
12 distance. This facilitated the interviews for homeless women who had limited education and in
13 particular, limited literacy. Sitting alongside, an interviewer would read through the questions with
14 the woman, whatever her literacy ability, thus immediately including both those who could read and
15 those who could not. There appeared to be a distinct advantage in the interviewer and interviewee
16 focussing on the questionnaire together, rather than on each other as in a conversation typical of
17 qualitative methods. This facilitated the interview and discussions, and avoided the inhibitions of
18 observing or hiding physiognomic expression. Nevertheless, it cannot be claimed that the homeless
19 women interviewed were any more or any less protected from the potential danger to themselves in
20 recalling painful or upsetting experiences.
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45 **Being sensitive and offering support**

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50 Ethics were considered in all aspects and for each stage of the research to minimise harm (SRA,
51 2003; Bolton, 2003). At the beginning and end of an interview, each homeless woman was urged to
52 take care of herself by speaking with a member of staff with whom she felt comfortable, should she
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3 need to de-brief. All interviews were introduced to the women by being given an explanation for the
4 research, and told that while confidentiality was assured, in the event of the disclosure of risk to
5 themselves or another, this would need to be passed on to project staff. In the case where women
6 said they were continuing to experience abuse, this was passed on to staff, who, it turned out,
7 already knew about the current risk and were working to protect the women. Any signs of distress or
8 upset during the interviews stopped the proceedings, and the interview would then proceed only at
9 the woman's direction. In addition, the women were provided with copies of information and advice,
10 contact details and opening hours of a range of local and national support services including
11 literature from the local Prostitute Outreach Service included safety tips for sex workers, and the
12 NSPCC booklet, 'Worried? Need to talk?'.
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29 **Being sensitive and wanting to be sympathetic**

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34 An ethical dilemma was in the conflict of positions held as both researcher and employee. Although
35 not directly involved in delivering a service to the women as a support worker, there was
36 considerable relief in discovering results that helped arguments about abuse and need and against
37 seeing working girls as anti-social problems. As Coy writes, referring to O'Neill's (2001) feminist
38 participatory action research, "The woman's welfare was the paramount concern both
39 epistemologically and practically" (2006, p. 420). Yet this consideration was tested in the sometimes
40 limited awareness the women had of their abuse experiences. As it was at times difficult to listen to
41 what the women said, professional support networks were established to minimise harm to the
42 interviewers in dealing with the emotional cost of the research work, and specific support was
43 available for women experiencing ongoing abuse (Coy, 2006, referring to Melrose, 2002). However,
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3 whereas criticism has been made about researchers “pimping off women” (Coy 2006, p. 428,
4 referring to ECP, 1997), and the general ease of eliciting information from vulnerable people
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6 (Stavenhagen, 1993), within weeks of the research report being written, changes to services and
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8 practice were in place to respond to the women’s needs.
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12 13 14 15 **What the research doesn’t show** 16

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20 The research presented here was limited in two ways. Firstly, the constraints of time and resources
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22 had a limiting impact on the length and scale of the fieldwork. Expanding a study to other support
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24 providers, and including women who have been resettled into their own tenancies from
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26 accommodation for homeless people with a tenancy support worker (Seal, 2005), for example,
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28 would capture a wider population. Secondly, confining the sample pool to homeless women in one
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30 charity reduced the numbers of women who could be interviewed. Inevitably, access is difficult in
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32 researching a social group as particular as homeless working girls. However, further investigation
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34 into the link between domestic violence and homeless working girls would provide more material on
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36 the subject of male coercion, and the question of how far women in abusive relationships choose to
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38 sex work. Finally, an evaluation of the government’s prostitution strategy in two of three year’s time
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40 by independent researchers would help focus the direction of policy and make intervention more
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42 effective in the lives of vulnerable sex workers.
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Findings: what the women had to say...

...about why they worked

The women were asked to think about the time when they had first sex worked, and to indicate their reasons for doing so. They were given a list of possible reasons, and asked to indicate as many as were relevant to their experience at the time. The possibilities were that they needed the money, were forced into it by someone else, had a friend that was sex working, that they made a free choice to sex work or that there was another reason. The responses to this question give rise to the particular claim of coercion of the women interviewed. All but one of the women who had sex worked had been involved in on-street sex work; the exception had worked in parlours.

All of the nine women who had sex worked or were currently sex working at the time of the interview said that they had done so because they had needed the money, either to pay for drugs, rent to keep a tenancy or simply poverty. One woman said that she, *“Couldn’t manage on benefits”*, and another explained that the money she earned from sex working helped her to budget for various demands at once:

“The money was mainly for heroin, over Christmas so I didn’t have to rattle, so I could use dole money for food, presents etc.”

Several women indicated more than one reason as to why they had first sex worked. Combinations of reasons were given by four women that they had both needed the money and had made a free

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3 choice to sex work. A further two said that they had needed the money, had a friend who was sex
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5 working at the time and had made a free choice.
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10 Another two women indicated all of the possible reasons suggested on the questionnaire. While
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12 'needed the money' and 'my friend was sex working' do not contradict each other as responses,
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14 saying 'I made a free choice to sex work' and 'I was forced into it by some one else' is a problematic
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16 combination to describe the same decision. It does not seem possible for someone to make a free
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18 choice and to be forced at the same time. During the course of the interviews, it did appear that the
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20 women had been forced into making a choice to sex work, even though they ultimately believed that
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22 they made that decision for themselves. One woman said,
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29 *"I have been [forced into sex working] ...sometimes, yes [made a free choice to*
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31 *sex work]."*
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36 suggesting that different sex work episodes had different reasons. Another, agreeing that she had
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38 been forced into sex working by someone else, added, *"It seemed like it"*, before also going on to
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40 indicate that she had made a free choice to sex work.
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44 45 46 **...about their abuse experiences** 47

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50 The women were asked to say what type of abuse they had experienced, when it began and
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52 finished or was ongoing and whether it had happened once or more than once. A list of different
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54 abuse types were shown to the women in answering these questions, and there was much
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3 discussion about their experiences, as some women had not considered that what they had lived
4 was in fact abuse, particularly in the case of financial abuse. Additional information volunteered
5 about the abuse was included with the women's permission, as many described their experiences
6 as well as categorising them.
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14 All of the women had experienced at least one form of abuse, whether they had sex worked or not.
15 Some women had extensive and chronic abuse histories which started when they were a baby or
16 that they were so young they could not remember exactly at what age the abuse had begun. Others
17 said that their experiences of abuse were ongoing. As can be seen from Figure 1, there was a
18 whole range of abuse experienced, from verbal abuse through to physical abuse, sexual abuse, and
19 rape. It was found that amongst the women who had sex worked or were currently sex working at
20 the time of the interviews, all had experienced verbal abuse and been threatened, eight out of nine
21 emotional and physical abuse, and seven out of nine domestic violence.
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36 The women were asked as to the sources of their abuse experiences; whether their family, partner,
37 sex work clients or pimp had abused them. Given that the women could identify more than one, 18
38 of the 26 women said that they had experienced the abuse from their partners, 15 said their families
39 and 4 their sex work clients. None of the women said they had experienced abuse from their pimp,
40 indeed all of the sex working women denied ever having a pimp. This could well be because of the
41 illegality of benefiting from immoral earnings; to admit to having a pimp would be to confess clearly
42 defined criminal activity (Brooks-Gordon, 2006; Home Office, 2006).
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Understanding what the women said: why some abused women sex work and others do not

Exploring the relationship between a woman's experience of abuse and her decision to sex work raises the question of what is different in the experience of an abused woman who does sex work (Vanwesenbeeck, 2001). Childhood sexual abuse in particular has been seen as a precursor to sex work (Campbell et al, 2003; Jehu et al, 1998; Farley et al, 1998; Vitaliano et al, 1981; James and Meyerding, 1977), with some working girls making a direct link between their experiences of sexual abuse in childhood and sex working as adults (Silbert and Pines, 1981), even that sex working was a way of controlling men's use of their bodies (Campbell et al, 2003). However, sex work cannot be said to have a single cause (Bullough and Bullough, 1996). Jehu et al (1988) suggest that rather than the sexual abuse itself leading automatically into sex work, it is the vulnerability of the women, caused by poverty, amongst other factors, which leaves them open to exploitation as both children and adults. Thus sex work is not just another sexual abuse experience, but can be a different result of an exploitive environment or environments within which a woman has grown and lived. The difference which causes some abused women to sex work and others not, it is argued here, is the coercion by individuals significant to the women concerned. The women interviewed volunteered the information that they had been coerced into sex work by their partners – typically, abusive and violent men. The women were not prepared to have their comments recorded, and so there are no quotes presented either here or in the research report. Nevertheless, one of the most significant findings mentioned above is that seven out of the nine women who had sex worked had also experienced domestic violence. Although within a small convenience sample, this figure of 78% is

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3 striking when compared with that of one in four, or 26% across the whole of the female population in
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5 the UK (Walby and Allen, 2004; Home Office, 2006; Women's Aid, 2005).
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10 In interpreting the statistics presented in the findings above, it is necessary to consider the effects of
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12 abuse, particularly verbal and emotional abuse and domestic violence. For example, experiences of
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14 abuse in childhood and adulthood can have a cumulative effect. An abuser can prepare or 'groom' a
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16 person until they are vulnerable enough for abuse to take place, whether through flattery, threats or
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18 deception (Dillane et al, 2005). The Nottinghamshire Committee for the Protection of Vulnerable
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20 Adults (NCPVA) focuses on financial abuse to show the manipulation of a person by controlling
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22 their money and systematically removing their financial autonomy (NCPVA, 2004). Some of the
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24 women interviewed for this research were initially confused by the term 'financial abuse' and only
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26 following a discussion did they realise that they had experienced this abuse and could call it such.
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28 Similarly, verbal abuse, emotional abuse and issuing threats can be a way of reducing personal
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30 confidence and self-esteem until it is increasingly difficult to resist further exploitation (Collins,
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32 2003).
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41 Domestic violence in all its various forms including reducing autonomy, altering self-perception,
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43 threats and abuse (Walby and Allen, 2004; Home Office, 2006; Women's Aid, 2006), is particularly
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45 relevant here. The women interviewed had experienced domestic violence in terms of the control of
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47 women by men (Johnson and Ferraro, 2000), the vulnerability of women because of their own
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49 childhood experiences of abuse in their adult and intimate relationships (Flink, Paavilainen and
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51 Åstedt-Kurki, 2005) and low socio-economic status (Gibson-Davis et al, 2005; Kaukinen, 2004).
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3 domestic violence for women. More specifically, El-Bassel et al (2001) and Campbell et al (2003)
4 found that women sex workers also experienced high levels of domestic violence, while Scott,
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6 London and Myers (2002) write of how women experiencing domestic violence are vulnerable to
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8 entering sex work.
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11 12 13 14 15 **Can abused women make a choice about sex working?** 16 17

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20 There are many sex workers who assert their independence and autonomy. The English Collective
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22 of Prostitutes (ECP) see sex work as “part of the women’s movement for financial independence
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24 and control over our own bodies” (1997, p. 83). In particular, women who have made a choice to
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26 sex work and do so happily, resent being perceived as having had an abusive childhood, suffering
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28 mental ill-health and being drug-dependent (ECP, 1997; Scambler, 1997). There is also a specific
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30 distancing by non-vulnerable working girls of the government’s portrayal that all sex workers are
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32 victims. Writing in the British Medical Journal in reaction to the government’s strategy, ‘Juliet’ states,
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34 “I *love* my job. I work for myself, at a wage I set, and I get to make people happy — very happy —
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36 for a living,” (2006, p. 245). One comment made by a non-sex working woman interviewed for this
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38 research was that she was fed up with feeling unable to walk out of the accommodation project
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40 without men looking at her as though she was a sex worker; here, the view of all sex workers being
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42 vulnerable, homeless women (Scambler, 1997, p. 105) stigmatized homeless women themselves.
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51 However, the ECP and ‘Juliet’ both acknowledge that victimization, abuse and coercion are part of
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53 the reality of sex work for women who are vulnerable, and include as such the women who are the
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55 subject of this research, namely homeless women. ‘Juliet’ (2006) remarks, “the problem is
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3 coercion...lack of choices, not prostitution itself" (p. 245). In so far as sex work is hierarchically
4 organized (Scambler, 1997), with different types of sex markets from escort and sauna work to
5 brothels and women working from home, (Sanders, 2005), on-street sex work is undoubtedly seen
6 as the most dangerous, undertaken by some of the most vulnerable women (O'Neill, 1991; Faugier
7 and Sargeant, 1997; Sanders, 2005). However, the difficulty of supporting working girls while
8 adhering to the government's Prostitution Strategy is furthered by there being a separation of who is
9 regarded as a victim and who is considered a criminal, namely those who wish to stop sex working
10 and those who choose to continue; criticism is made that the approach to these complex issues is a
11 simplistic one (Phoenix and Oerton, 2005).
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27 **What to do and how (not) to do it: social work practice and services**

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32 This paper has a number of implications for social work service provision and practice. Firstly,
33 engaging with abused homeless working girls requires listening to them in a way that takes note of
34 their own terms of reference without imposing unhelpful jargon. It is important that the women's
35 language of choice is acknowledged when seeking her trust, and that 'victim' labels are avoided,
36 however informative the wider debate about victimisation might be. Secondly, this research has
37 highlighted not only the extent of abuse and abuse types that homeless women are exposed to, but
38 also the detrimental outcomes of these maltreatments. Furthermore, the levels of coercion and
39 domestic violence indicate that street-level working girls have powerful influences over their
40 choices. Working with these women is thus a highly specialised and difficult task that, if not handled
41 in the right way, might increase rather than alleviate their risk. Training, experience and supervision
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3 in providing a service that incorporates dealing with women's homelessness, abuse and domestic
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5 violence will be much more enlightened if it takes account of this support needs context.
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10 Thirdly, and crucially, empowering homeless and abused working girls will necessitate a challenge
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12 to the oppression from the women's own personal attachment to coercive partners, and
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14 undoubtedly, from the dangers associated with her sex work activity. The women interviewed who
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16 had stopped sex working had benefited from interventions that focused on providing alternative and
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18 appropriate support networks. Social work interventions such as referring homeless working girls
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20 into safe supported housing would allow the women to seek more positive and nurturing
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22 experiences away from continuing abuse and coercion. Ultimately, any successful mediation has to
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24 be individually tailored and authenticated by an engagement with women on their own linguistic
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26 terms (as emphasised throughout this paper and at the first point above). Social work practice that
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28 can enable homeless working girls to consider a source of income other than sex working is a step
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30 in the right direction. The 'Prostitution Strategy's' silence about the implications of sex-work-as-
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32 income, particularly the immediate impact of *not* working is profoundly unhelpful (Brooks-Gordon,
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34 2006). However, delivering services that empower homeless working girls to take incremental steps
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36 away from abuse and towards positive choices are achievable and quite possibly permanent.
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48 **Conclusions: the implications of labelling 'working girls' as victims**

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53 While it would be unsound to speculate on the possible process of coercion, even the women who
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55 felt forced into sex work by someone else clearly owned their decision to sex work and wanted to
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3 say that they had made a free choice. However, it could also be argued that the problem of coercion
4 is to convince the person being persuaded against their will that they are deciding to act as such for
5 themselves. Herein lies the complexity of a victim refusing to acknowledge that they have been
6 victimised, and the difficulty of then persuading them against this that they need help because of
7 their experience of victimisation. That abused and vulnerable homeless women should *choose* to
8 sex work has not been discussed at length. This is a much needed debate: government policy will
9 remain ineffectual unless it is understood that the rhetoric of victim is largely ignored by the women
10 it seeks to assist.
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24 **...and the recommendation not to push change**

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29 Recognising the complexity of coercion and appreciating individual abuse histories is vital when
30 working with homeless working girls. Similarly, respecting a woman's decision to sex work, however
31 diminished her ability to choose for herself might be, is crucial in demonstrating a non-judgemental
32 attitude towards vulnerable women. Ultimately, it is the construction of a professional relationship of
33 trust between a support worker and a homeless woman (who used to or continues to sex work) that
34 is key to beginning the work of housing and support to minimise risk. Specific training where
35 necessary is advisable to raise awareness of the issues and implications of sex work,
36 homelessness, abuse, substance use, health and mental health and to equip support workers in
37 their role. Above all, the strategy's aim to help women exit sex work is not one that can be rushed
38 for the sake of meeting statistical and arbitrary political targets; it is unrealistic to suppose that all
39 abused and homeless working girls will cease to sex work while receiving support. There is also a
40 personal perspective to consider, whereby a woman is required to transform her life, including, for
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3 example, her income source, drug use, support network with other working girls and relationship
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5 with an abusive partner. Demanding too much change in too many areas at once is unfair and
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7 would arguably result in support failing those women who need it most. Finally, support workers
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9 should attempt to use the 'strategy' and political climate to serve the purpose of meeting the
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11 complex needs of abused and homeless working girls. This must take priority over the government
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13 using the professional relationship between support workers and vulnerable women to meet political
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Fig 1: Frequency of abusive experiences per woman interviewed*

Note: The figures in this table do not add up to 100% as each woman could indicate more than one abusive 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	21	81%	9	100%	+ 19%																						
	emotional abuse	21	81%	8	89%	+ 8%																						
	threatened	19	73%	9	100%	+ 27%																						
	domestic violence	18	69%	7	78%	+ 9%																						
	physical abuse	14	54%	8	89%	+ 35%																						
	talked about in front of others	13	50%	3	33%	-17%																						
	bullied	12	46%	5	56%	+ 9%																						
	sexual abuse	11	42%	6	67%	+ 24%																						
	raped	9	35%	6	67%	+ 32%																						
	made to do things of harm	9	35%	4	44%	+ 10%																						
	neglect	8	31%	3	33%	+ 3%																						
	financial abuse	5	19%	1	11%	-8%																						
	racial abuse	1	4%	1	11%	+ 7%																						
	abducted	1	4%	1	11%	+ 7%																						
other abuse	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	4	3	2	2	2	1

* 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.