

# SEEN AND HEARD: THE CASE FOR A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO TACKLING ADULT SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

This policy paper is based on learning from the STAGE project, supported by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) Tampon Tax Fund. The STAGE project brings together charities specialised in adult sexual exploitation - Changing Lives, A Way Out, GROW, Together Women, Basis and WomenCentre (Kirklees and Calderdale) - to provide trauma-informed support for women who have been groomed for sexual exploitation across the North East and Yorkshire.

Adult sexual exploitation is poorly understood and rarely recognised in policy and practice. There is currently no statutory definition, no specific statutory responsibilities, no national strategy, and a general lack of understanding about how exploitation occurs and the resulting impact across all aspects of victims/survivors' lives.

### Defining adult sexual exploitation

Sexual exploitation of adults is a form of sexual abuse where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a person into sexual activity. Perpetrators exploit or create vulnerabilities in order to subject their victim to sexual abuse, often involving appalling violence, for the perpetrator's own advantage, whether that's financial advantage, increased status, exerting power or sexual gratification.

This may be in exchange for something the victim needs or wants (e.g. drugs, a place to sleep). In many cases, it can result from grooming over a period of time, where the perpetrator makes the victim dependent on them emotionally, physically and/or financially.

**Whereas there is a statutory definition of child sexual exploitation<sup>1</sup>, there is currently no statutory definition of adult sexual exploitation.** However this

form of exploitation does not end when a person turns 18 and can indeed be initiated during adulthood. A key difference rests on the fact that children under 16 by definition cannot consent to sexual activity, whereas most adult women are presumed to have capacity to consent to sexual activity. However the impact of grooming and exploitation of perceived or actual vulnerabilities and unmet needs can mean sexual activity that appears consensual or non-violent is anything but.

What this means in practice is that women are not being fully protected by the laws and systems that we have in place, and are dismissed as "prostitutes" or "making poor choices". Only certain elements of adult sexual exploitation are commonly recognised, such as trafficking and modern day slavery, whereas other cases are missed, particularly where grooming occurs.

### Case Study

Mia was referred to STAGE by adult social care. She was labelled as a "prostitute" in the referral, as she was having sex with men in exchange for food or accommodation. The caseworker followed up the referral with a phone call and was able to help the social worker to see that this woman was, at the bare minimum assessment of risk, engaging in survival sex. Upon further exploration, it was found the woman was being exploited by multiple men in exchange for the promise of status within her community. Through this process the caseworker was able to work with adult social care to safeguard Mia.

<sup>1</sup> "Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology." Department for Education (2017) [Child sexual exploitation – Definition and a guide for practitioners, local leaders and decision makers working to protect children from child sexual exploitation](#)

Women supported by STAGE tell us of crimes involving appalling violence, including gang rape, torture and use of weapons, but whilst most people would acknowledge the inherent wrongness of violent rape, they often miss the fact that leading up to this point many women have experienced grooming and manipulation, which adds to the trauma. These women also deserve to have their experiences recognised as exploitation, just as children do.

### **Who is affected?**

There is no one 'type' of person who has experienced sexual exploitation. STAGE has supported women and girls with varying ethnicities, religions, ages, socio-economic classes, from both urban and rural areas, and both women who have been in care and those who have not. To be clear, this policy paper is based on evidence from STAGE which is a gender specific service supporting women and girls, therefore it tends to refer specifically to women, but we fully acknowledge that sexual exploitation can affect men, women and non-binary individuals.

Ignoring the potential for sexual exploitation to take place outside of certain stereotypes is dangerous and could result in opportunities being missed to safeguard people and prevent abuse from taking place.

Perpetrators target their victims based on both real and perceived vulnerability, particularly those who they think are unlikely to be deemed credible witnesses by police or believed in a court of law. Some will exploit pre-existing vulnerabilities, whilst others will coerce people, primarily women and girls, into a position of vulnerability. Whilst domestic abuse has gone up during the pandemic, we have also seen an increase in perpetrators targeting places where there are groups of women with perceived vulnerabilities, such as specialist supported accommodation for women.

Socioeconomic status and poverty are linked to vulnerability to exploitation – indeed one of the best ways to reduce exploitation would be to reduce poverty. One vulnerability that we often see exploited is homelessness. Our full research briefing on the link between homelessness and sexual exploitation can be found [here](#). Housing is the most common initial presenting need of the women supported through the STAGE project. Rough sleeping and other forms of homelessness, such as sofa surfing, are common, and we see examples of women being completely reliant on perpetrators for their housing. Women will often find themselves in a vicious cycle where homelessness increases their vulnerability to exploitation, yet they face multiple barriers to accessing appropriate housing especially when services are not trauma-informed and referral pathways lack flexibility.

### **Where is this taking place?**

This is not isolated to one or two locations and is happening in both urban and rural locations. The STAGE project works in Bradford, Huddersfield, Leeds, Newcastle, Rotherham, Sheffield, Stockton and Sunderland. We expect that sexual exploitation of adults occurs in every area of the UK, but that many areas are not equipped to identify, prevent and respond to concerns, as knowledge and provision related to sexual exploitation tends to be limited to children.

### **How can perpetrators be brought to justice?**

The sad reality from STAGE's experience is that most perpetrators are not brought to justice. The reasons for this are complex and multiple, several of which are covered in our full research briefing on justice which can be found [here](#).

Legislation includes a patchwork of offences which cover aspects of sexually exploitative behaviour but often do not capture it in its entirety. The lack of a statutory definition of adult sexual exploitation means that understanding of this issue is poor and exploitative behaviour is not recognised as such. It is beyond the scope of this project to fully review the available laws and why they are not being used effectively to protect women and bring perpetrators to justice. What we can say with confidence is that perpetrators are not being brought to justice.

Regardless of which offence a perpetrator may be charged with, one of the major barriers to justice that women experiencing sexual exploitation face is that they are not perceived as reliable witnesses. In STAGE's experience, women are scrutinised over their substance dependence, homelessness, mental illness (or assumed mental illness), relationships, child safeguarding, criminal activity, and previous reports of sexual violence. The very things that are often the result of being sexually exploited are commonly used to undermine their credibility. Both survivors and perpetrators are aware of this scrutiny, meaning survivors are often less likely to report or be willing to give evidence, and perpetrators target women who are unlikely to be deemed credible witnesses.

There is public support for ensuring that legal protection through the justice system is given to adult victims of sexual exploitation as well as children. In a recent poll conducted by Deltapoll, the majority (72%) believed that the legal system, police and social services have a responsibility to help all people who have been victims of grooming, regardless of their age<sup>2</sup>. What we have found is that just isn't happening.

### What support is available?

Currently there is no statutory obligation to provide specialist or gender-specific support to adults who have been sexually exploited, yet standard victim support services are unlikely to understand, recognise or know how to effectively respond to sexual exploitation of adults.

Much support ends when a person turns 18 and responsibility transitions from children's into adult safeguarding services. Our full research briefing on transitions can be found [here](#). While the Department for Education has overall responsibility for supporting the transition of young people leaving care into adulthood, this does not capture the full range of young people who might experience sexual exploitation. Many of the women supported by STAGE report being exploited by their fathers, or other adult relatives, and continue to live in the family setting, unknown to children's safeguarding services. Where they have come to the attention of services, we have found wide variation in transition pathways between local authorities.

People who have experienced sexual exploitation will often need support not just to deal with the trauma of what has been done to them, but may also need additional support in areas such as housing and accessing healthcare. Our research briefing on healthcare, found [here](#), highlights various barriers to healthcare faced by women who have experienced sexual exploitation, many of which could be overcome by better trauma-informed care from healthcare practitioners who have been trained to recognise and respond to exploitation.

### Recommendations

The Home Office's Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy was a prime opportunity for addressing many of the recommendations above but, despite representations from leading charities, sexual exploitation of adult women is barely addressed.

The STAGE partnership recommends that:

- A **statutory definition of adult sexual exploitation** is established, that includes recognition that sexual exploitation of children may continue into or begin in adulthood.
- The Home Office lead on the development of a **national strategy for tackling adult sexual exploitation** and supporting survivors, working with experts including the voluntary sector to ensure that understanding of exploitation and its wider impacts are embedded in strategic thinking across relevant government departments. We would like this strategy to include at minimum:

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<sup>2</sup> Deltapoll interviewed 1,500 adults in Britain online between 4<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> June 2021. The data have been weighted to be representative of the British adult population as a whole. Deltapoll is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.

- A review of the criminal justice response to adult sexual exploitation, including an assessment of whether the current set of available offences are fit for purpose.
- Reform of the guidance provided on the handling of complex sexual exploitation cases, as well as the tests used to determine the reliability and credibility of witnesses who report sexual exploitation.
- A plan to embed trauma-informed training, policies and practices in housing, healthcare and the justice system. This should include, but not be limited to, identification of sexual exploitation, understanding of grooming and its impact, how to respond to people who have experienced trauma, and how to remove barriers to justice, housing and healthcare for people experiencing multiple disadvantage.
- A plan to ensure adequate provision of appropriate accommodation options for women experiencing sexual exploitation, including gender-specific provision.
- A revised approach to adult safeguarding that recognises transition from childhood to adulthood as a journey rather than an event, and ensures adult safeguarding services recognise and know how to respond to sexual exploitation.
- **Specific changes are made to the law** that extends protections for people experiencing domestic abuse, as introduced in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, to people experiencing sexual exploitation:
  - A statutory duty for specialist support services to be provided to victims/survivors of sexual abuse, including adult victims of sexual exploitation.
  - Victims/survivors of sexual exploitation to be given automatic priority need for housing, including access to women-only accommodation, and/or the Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities to be updated to include guidance on people leaving accommodation due to exploitation.
  - All victims and witnesses of sexual exploitation to be automatically deemed vulnerable or intimidated, by nature of the alleged offence, and therefore eligible for special measures, including caseworkers and support agencies.