

SUPPORT NEEDS OF WOMEN INVOLVED IN THE UK SEX INDUSTRY: LEARNING FROM FRONTLINE SERVICES

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JANUARY 2022

BEYOND THE
STREETS



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INTRODUCTION

Background

Provision of support for those involved in the sex industry has often been described as a 'postcode lottery'. The 2017 Mapping the Maze report mapped services for women facing multiple disadvantage. In England and Wales only 19 areas out of 173 had services for women that addressed all of the following issues: substance misuse, mental health, homelessness, offending and complex needs. Furthermore, the report identified only 24 specialist projects in England and Wales providing support for women in prostitution (Holly, 2017). Whilst this mapping did not capture all specialist projects operating across England and Wales, there are vast areas of the UK lacking access to specialist support.

As well as regional inconsistencies, the growth of the online and off-street sex industry over the last decade has had an impact on support service design and access. Individuals exchanging sexual services off-street come from various social, economic, national and ethnic backgrounds. For some, the sex industry is their only source of income, for others they may also have employment outside the sex industry. Many will not identify as a 'sex worker' or 'person in prostitution', including if they see their engagement in the industry as rare or sporadic (Hester et al., 2019). This means that women involved in these contexts are often isolated and hidden from traditional outreach services.

Research carried out in February 2021 by National Ugly Mugs found that, amongst the 81 active sex workers they surveyed, knowledge of available support services was patchy and 'many respondents reported either severely restricted access to support services, or no access at all' as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Bowen et al., 2021, p.23). In addition, four participants who took part in a focus group, highlighted how 'their contact with support services is not directly linked to sex work per se and varies according to life circumstances at different times in life' (p.24).

This resource seeks to contribute to the development of support services for those involved in the sex industry. It draws on data from initial assessments completed with women accessing Beyond Support, a national support service run by Beyond the Streets. As such, the report provides a unique insight into the support needs identified by women selling or exchanging sexual services. It also serves to highlight the complexities women are navigating as they engage with the sex industry and their resiliency.

About Beyond the Streets

Beyond the Streets is a charity with over 20 years' experience of partnering with women in the sex industry on-street, indoors and online. Our vision is to see a world where people are free from sexual exploitation, and where those who sell sex have the option to pursue genuine alternatives, free from constraints such as poverty, drug dependency, and abuses of vulnerability.

We work directly with women selling sex to support them to make the changes in their lives that they wish to make, with a particular focus on enabling women to find routes out of the sex industry. We do

this through our Door of Hope outreach project, for women involved in selling sex on-street in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, and through Beyond Support, our national remote access support service open to women selling sex in the UK.

We also equip and support other projects across England and Wales to tackle the sexual exploitation that happens in every community. We host a network of over 40 affiliate projects, providing training, project development, good practice guidance and collaborative working. We deliver training on the sex industry to statutory services, police, and other third sector organisations, and we carry out research alongside women with lived experience to inform good practice and service development.

Our direct support services are built on a women-centred model and a trauma-informed approach. We seek to offer holistic, person-centred support that doesn't label or trade off the story of those involved. This means that, our support is:

- **Gender Informed** – We recognised the gendered nature of the sex industry and the fact that the majority of those selling are women and so we offer a protected women's space: virtual or face to face.
- **Safety focus** – We help to safety plan, we name/assess the harms around selling sex, and we recognise the impact of trauma and violence in addition to focusing on a woman's physical health and sexual health.
- **Empowerment bias** – We see her as the expert in her own life and not someone to be 'fixed' or rescued. We take a strengths-based approach, and we seek to learn from her.
- **Choice/client led** – We see beyond involvement in the sex industry as a 'choice' and avoid labels that limit her experience to one aspect of her life. We give choices wherever we can, for example in relation to the time/place to meet/content of meetings.
- **Collaborative** – We hold 'space for action' enabling women we support to set the pace, we ask informed questions and listen, and we prioritise working together with other agencies.
- **Trustworthy** – We do as we say we will, we don't break confidentiality, and we offer non-judgmental support.

For more information about our work, see <https://beyondthestreets.org.uk>

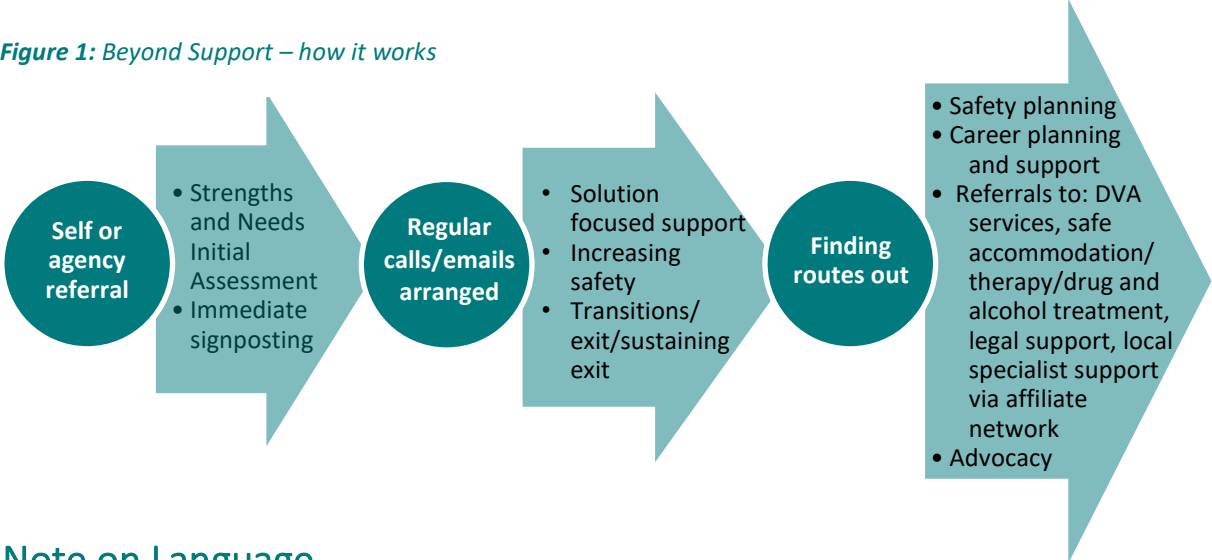
About Beyond Support

Beyond Support is a free and confidential call-back service that offers long-term support to women in the sex industry across the UK. We offer specialist, non-judgemental support for up to 18 months to women who are looking for a 'safe space' to talk and to explore their options for change. The service has been running for 7 years and was developed in consultation with women, including women who were currently selling sex on street, women operating from phones, women using Adultwork, women based in massage parlours and women who had exited prostitution. The consultation informed everything from the type of support offered and the times of day it is offered, to publicity and even the name of the service. Beyond Support was designed to overcome the geographical barriers to support that many women face and to allow women a relative degree of anonymity when accessing support.

Women can self-refer, which is the most common approach, or an agency can refer a woman to us. Once a woman has reached out, a member of the Beyond Support team will call back or email to arrange a support call. During that first call we carry out an initial assessment with the woman to identify key presenting issues along with an idea of the support she is looking for. She may want a one-off call and signposting to local services or may be looking for ongoing support. If she is looking for ongoing support, sessions are then agreed with each woman and goals co-created. She determines the frequency of support calls with this often starting on a weekly or fortnightly basis and tapering off as she requires less support.

During the support calls we initially focus on offering a space of trust to talk with trained non-judgmental listeners, to learn grounding and self-care techniques, as well as support with safety planning and goal setting. Once we have developed a relationship of trust and an enhanced sense of personal agency in cases where women feel they have limited options, we work to increase engagement with third party support to enable women to pursue their goals and access routes into employment and training. A formal referral agreement with trauma specialist counsellors enables us to support women to access pro bono counselling, if required. Reviews after every 2-3 months enable women to reflect on the journey travelled and provide an opportunity to provide informal feedback throughout the period of support.

Figure 1: Beyond Support – how it works



Note on Language

There are ongoing debates around the nature and impact of the sex industry, and there is weight attached to terms that are used to talk about it. In all of our work, we take into consideration the significance of language when talking about the sex industry and the role language plays in determining whose experience is counted. Throughout this report, we primarily use the phrase ‘selling or exchanging sexual services’ to reflect and respect the diverse experiences of those directly involved. However, this phrase is used with an acknowledgement of the imperfect nature of language within this context. When referencing existing literature, we have tended to use the language of the authors. Additionally, the focus is on women as Beyond Support is a women-only service. ‘Women’ is used within this report to refer to cis-gender women. Whilst transgender women may access Beyond Support identifying as a woman, and chose not to discuss their gender identity, our experience has been that it is almost exclusively cis-gender women accessing our support. Males within the sex industry who reach out to Beyond Support are signposted to other specialist services that cater for men who sell or exchange sexual services.

METHODS

We conducted analysis of 90 Initial Assessments (IAs) carried out with women who contacted Beyond Support up to August 2020. These IAs were anonymised by a member of the Beyond Support team and then shared with the Research Team. Information on town/city, as well as region, and age of each woman (where provided) was collated into a spreadsheet and then further columns were added for ethnicity and 'sex industry context'. As the IAs are designed to be woman-centred and trauma-informed, no specific question is asked about the context in which women are/were selling sex, however, all but five of the IAs included details on this and we used this information to code for sex industry context.

We read through each IA and coded each for any support needs mentioned by the woman. We used existing codes based on a literature review (initially we had 26 codes) but we also remained open to new codes based on our findings from the IAs. In the spreadsheet, each IA was then recorded against the codes and relevant qualitative information was included to allow for later comparisons and further refining of codes.

Once the coding of IAs was completed, the codes were then reviewed, and any overlapping codes were merged to produce a final list of 18 codes. Analysis was then carried out to compare the frequency of codes by region, with a particular focus on similarities and differences between the London sub-sample and the rest of the data.

In writing up the findings, quotes from the IAs are included. These are notes made by the Women's Support Workers whilst carrying out the Initial Assessment with women over the phone. In some instances, these are verbatim quotes from the women that have been jotted down; at other times they are summarised notes.

FINDINGS

Overview of Initial Assessments

The data collected from the Initial Assessments is representative of women who have actively sought support from Beyond Support or have been signposted from another agency. The majority of the IAs were from different women, however there were two women who had a second IA due to either being assigned a new Women’s Support Worker or returning for support. Therefore, all numbers provided in the analysis refer to IAs rather than individual women.

✦ Geographical Representation

As the IAs were done via phone call, they span across the UK. The vast majority of IAs relate to women in England, with the largest percentage coming from women based in London – these represent just under a third of all IAs (31%).

Table 1: Regional representation of IAs

Region	No. of IAs	Percentage
London	28	31%
South East England	16	18%
South West England	7	8%
East of England	7	8%
Scotland	6	7%
East Midlands	5	6%
West Midlands	5	6%
Yorkshire and the Humber	5	6%
North West England	5	6%
North East England	4	4%
Wales	1	1%
Unspecified	1	1%

Note: These percentages total 102% due to rounding up

✦ Age Range

The women’s ages within the IAs range from 18 to 64. Six IAs did not specify an age, and two were vague: one specified they were in their 40s, and another in their 50s but there was not enough detail given on the IA to assign an age bracket. These were included within the “unspecified” and are not included in the age comparisons. Table 2 below shows the ages and the amount of IAs within those ranges.

Table 2: Age range of IAs

Age Range	No. of IAs	No. of IAs (London sample)	No. of IAs (outside London)
18 - 24	19 (21%)	6 (21%)	13 (21%)
25 - 34	29 (32%)	8 (29%)	21 (34%)
35 - 44	21 (23%)	4 (14%)	17 (27%)
45 - 54	8 (9%)	2 (7%)	6 (10%)
55 - 64	5 (6%)	3 (11%)	2 (3%)
Unspecified	8 (9%)	5 (18%)	3 (5%)

✧ Ethnicity

The majority of IAs (58%) were from women describing their ethnicity as White British, however there were many other ethnicities mentioned. These were split into 11 categories, including one for “not given” for when an ethnicity was not specified. Table 3 shows how many IAs there were for each ethnicity.

Table 3: Ethnicity given in IAs

Ethnicity	No. of IAs	No. of IAs (London sample)	No. of IAs (outside London)
White British	52 (58%)	12 (43%)	40 (65%)
White Eastern European	6 (7%)	2 (7%)	4 (6%)
Black African	4 (4%)	0 (0%)	4 (6%)
White European	3 (3%)	2 (7%)	1(2%)
Multiple Ethnic Background/Mixed Other	3 (3%)	1 (4%)	2 (3%)
White Other	2 (2%)	2 (7%)	0 (0%)
Black British	2 (2%)	2 (7%)	0 (0%)
Black Caribbean	2 (2%)	2 (7%)	0 (0%)
Asian or Asian British: Indian	2 (2%)	2 (7%)	0 (0%)
Other Ethnic Group	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	1 (2%)
Not Given	13 (14%)	3 (11%)	10 (16%)

Due to the small numbers of women belonging to ethnic groups other than White British, data comparisons will be divided into two categories: White British (n=52) and All Other Ethnicities (n=25). From the two women who had two IAs, one was White British, and the other was Black African.

✧ Sex Industry Context

As the IAs are designed to be woman-centred and trauma-informed, they do not require women to provide specific details about the sex industry context they were/are engaged in. However, many women do provide information on this within their IA. This can vary from mentioning involvement in

escorting to explaining they escorted via specific websites such as AdultWork or via an agency. In total, only five IAs (6%) provided no information on sex industry context, two of which were from the London sub-sample. Over half of the IAs include reference to experience in multiple contexts (n=57, 63%) and within the London sub-sample it is 68% (n=19). The following table presents the sex industry contexts mentioned across all the IAs.

Table 4: Sex industry contexts mentioned in IAs

Sex Industry Context	No. of IAs	No. of IAs (London sample)	No. of IAs (outside London)
Escorting	74 (82%)	22 (79%)	52 (80%)
Online	21 (23%)	9 (32%)	12 (19%)
Sexual Exploitation	20 (22%)	5 (19%)	15 (23%)
Brothel/Parlour	15 (17%)	2 (7%)	13 (21%)
Agency	10 (11%)	3 (11%)	7 (11%)
Street-Based	7 (8%)	3 (11%)	4 (6%)
Stripper	6 (7%)	2 (7%)	4 (6%)
Dominatrix	3 (3%)	2 (7%)	1 (2%)
Sex Texting	2 (2%)	1 (4%)	1 (2%)
Glamour Model	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	1 (2%)
Sugar Daddy Relationship	1 (1%)	1 (4%)	0 (0%)
Unspecified	5 (6%)	2 (7%)	3 (5%)

Note: These percentages do not total 100% as IAs mentioned multiple contexts

The most frequently mentioned sex industry context was escorting with 82% of IAs (n=74) mentioning this, and 79% (n=22) within the London sample of IAs. Amongst the IAs that stated involvement in escorting, 74% referenced additional contexts (n=55). This percentage was comparable when examining just the London sample (n=17, 77%).

The majority of IAs that mention multiple contexts refer to escorting (96%), however there are a small number that did not. The two IAs that mentioned working online but not escorting (2%) included mentions of one woman who webcammed and one who began a Sugar Daddy relationship online.

Due to the traumatic nature of sexual exploitation, women were not expected to detail their experience within their IAs – this is explored over the course of the support relationship as trust is established. Therefore, the term “sexual exploitation” has been used when women themselves mentioned terms such as “pimp”, “trafficked”, “coerced”, and “forced” in their IA. Of the 20 IAs that mentioned ‘sexual exploitation’, two specified involvement on the street; four mentioned brothel/parlours, and one explained they had been trafficked by an agency. Thirteen understandably did not specify the context of their “sexual exploitation”.

✧ Observations

The data shows that looking at regional differences between the London sub-sample and all other regions, there was a 14-percentage point difference in relation to mentions of brothels and parlours,

with this being more likely to be mentioned in IAs outside of London. Furthermore, looking at differences between age groups, IAs for 18–24 year olds were more likely to mention online contexts than the other age groups. Within the overall sample, 23% mentioned online (n=21), whilst within the 18–24 sample, 47% mentioned online (n=9). Additionally, there was a percentage point difference of 17 showing that White British women were more likely to mention online compared to All Other Ethnicities.

The data appears to show a pattern in relation to age and sexual exploitation. The IAs within the three older categories were more likely to mention experiencing sexual exploitation. With 33% of IAs between 35–44 (n=7), 25% of 45–54 (n=2), and 40% of 55–64 (n=2) mentioning sexual exploitation, compared to the 16% of 18–24, and 17% of 25–34 year olds. It is worth noting that the oldest two age brackets have a small sample size. The data available does not enable us to draw conclusions as to why women aged 35 and above mentioned experiencing sexual exploitation more frequently. There is also a percentage point difference of 13, identifying that All Other Ethnicities are more likely to mention sexual exploitation than White British IAs.

Support Need Themes

Overview of Support Need Themes

There were 18 themes that were pinpointed through analysing the 90 IAs. These themes highlighted the main areas in which the women may need support that were noted within their IA. All IAs mentioned more than one theme they needed support with, with the highest number of themes mentioned in an IA being 12, occurring within 4 IAs (4%). The mean number of themes mentioned within the IAs is 7.5 and the median is 8. This underscores the multiple support needs women present. The 18 themes are listed below, along with the amount of IAs they appeared in.

Table 5: Support Themes identified in IAs

Theme	No. of IAs	No. of IAs (London sample)	No. of IAs (outside London)
Mental Health	70 (78%)	22 (79%)	48 (77%)
Family, Friends & Relationships	64 (71%)	17 (61%)	47 (76%)
Support Service Access	59 (66%)	22 (79%)	37 (60%)
Employment & Education	57 (63%)	20 (72%)	37 (60%)
Processing Feelings	46 (51%)	14 (50%)	32 (52%)
Support to Exit	43 (48%)	13 (46%)	30 (48%)
Finances	43 (48%)	13 (46%)	30 (48%)
Abuse & Trauma	43 (48%)	10 (36%)	33 (53%)
Housing	41 (46%)	12 (43%)	29 (47%)
Violence, Harassment & Safety Concerns	39 (43%)	11 (39%)	28 (45%)
Substance Misuse	38 (42%)	13 (46%)	25 (40%)

Coercion & Exploitation	34 (38%)	9 (32%)	25 (40%)
Police & Criminal Justice	27 (30%)	10 (36%)	17 (27%)
Being Outed & Social Stigma	24 (27%)	5 (18%)	19 (31%)
Physical & Sexual Health	21 (23%)	6 (21%)	15 (24%)
Support to Sustain Exit	13 (14%)	3 (11%)	10 (16%)
Clients/Punters	7 (8%)	3 (11%)	4 (6%)
Immigration	6 (7%)	1 (4%)	5 (8%)

✧ Mental Health

Within the 18 themes, the most frequently recurring theme overall was Mental Health, having been mentioned as something that is an issue for women in 70 of the IAs (78%), and 22 within the London sample of 28 (79%). This includes mention of mental illnesses, such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, OCD, BPD, bipolar, anorexia, body dysmorphia, as well as mentions of being on anti-depressants, having suicidal thoughts, or feeling down, tearful, or struggling mentally or emotionally.

Many of the other themes appear to play a factor in mental health, for example 51 of the IAs (73%) that mention Mental Health concerns have highlighted issues of needing support with Family, Friends, & Relationships. Some IAs state that they don't have many friends, or that they had family members who have put them down or abused them. One woman says that her father does not support her. In a few IAs women state their family does not know about their involvement in the sex industry. This could affect their mental health due to feeling isolated. 31



out of those 51 (61%) have suggested needing support with Processing Feelings, which includes feelings of loneliness and low self-esteem. In one IA a woman states she feels alone, another woman talks about feeling isolated, these can be factors contributing to poor mental health.

In addition to this, 49 IAs out of the 51 (96%), have mentioned concerns with Support Service Access, suggesting that there is not enough support for the mental health needs of women selling or exchanging sexual services. Looking at the London sub-sample of 18 that have mentioned both Mental Health and Support Service Access there is mention of long waiting lists for mental health support, as well as unhelpful or bad experiences with support services and helplines that don't specialise in supporting those in the sex industry.

There is a small difference between the number of younger women and older women within the IAs that have mental health concerns. 100% of women aged 55–60, and 80% of women aged 45–54 mentioned this as an area for support, compared to 63% of women aged 18–24. However, the samples of women within the 45–54 and 55–60 age brackets are much smaller than the others.

There is also an association between Abuse & Trauma and Mental Health, with Abuse & Trauma having come up in 34 out of 70 (49%) IAs mentioning Mental Health, which will be further explained in the Abuse & Trauma section.

✧ Family, Friends & Relationships

The theme of Family, Friends & Relationships was made up of three combined themes of Family & Children, Social Network, and Relational Difficulties. 64 IAs (71%) mentioned one or more of these areas as something they needed support with, and 17 within the London IAs (61%).

The issues mentioned within this theme include complex relationships with exes, negative circles of friends, children in care, and abusive parents or other family members. Within this theme, several women mentioned growing up in an unhealthy home, such as being groomed by a stepfather, or having violent parents. The connection between this category and Abuse & Trauma shows women have experienced trauma within their own families.



Some women mention strained relationships with their family due either to their families not knowing about their sex industry context or reacting badly to it. For example, in one IA within the London sub-sample the woman states she is close to her mum, but “she doesn’t know about the abuse.” This is presented in the connection between Family, Friends, & Relationships, and Being Outed & Social Stigma, with 21 IAs (23%) having mentioned both, and 5 within the London sub-sample (18%). Within the London sub-sample, in one IA a woman explains her parents do not know what she does, and that she has a bad relationship with her mother. Another states that her son calls her names because he does not like what she does for a living.

✧ Support Service Access

Whilst many of the women did have support elsewhere, they felt their needs were not being met. 59 (66%) IAs stated they had struggled or had concerns with Support Service Access, and 17 (61%) within London. A recurring comment was that they were not aware of any services targeted towards those in the sex industry available to them in their area. In fact, the IAs within London mentioned issues with Support Service Access more frequently than IAs from outside of London suggesting a lack of knowledge of, and/or a lack of specialist support services for women selling or exchanging sexual services within London. One woman from an IA within London states that it is “hard to know who to talk to about sex industry stuff.” Another says that there only seems to be support for street workers; this suggests that the specialist support available within London does not apply to all women selling or exchanging sexual services.

Although there were a few IAs that mentioned getting support at sexual health clinics, within the IAs it seemed apparent that beyond these clinics women did not appear to be aware of or have accessed any support specifically available to those involved in the sex industry prior to contacting Beyond Support. One IA stated that despite receiving therapy, medical professionals “don’t understand the world of prostitution”.

One woman explains she is aware of online services aimed at sex workers such as SAAFE and Ugly Mugs, but not any local to her. In many other IAs women stated that they did not know of local services or could not find any in the area. One woman states she finds her therapy triggering, which could be due to lack of specialist support. Whilst another says she receives no support from her church, and other services have let her down.

Additionally, when it comes to being victims of crimes, the IAs suggest that many women selling or exchanging sexual services don't know where to go due to not trusting the police. This will be further explored in the Police & Criminal Justice section. The number of IAs that mentioned issues relating to Police & Criminal Justice as well as Support Service Access was 18, and 9 within the London sample. Within these, one IA explains that she "won't go to the police, but needs other support" after being stalked by her ex-pimp, whilst another states that police told her to stay with an abusive man and just directed her to the Domestic Violence helpline instead of addressing the abuse with her.

✧ Employment & Education

Employment & Education was another theme that was repeatedly mentioned throughout the IAs. It occurred in 57 (63%) of the IAs, and 20 (71%) of the London-based ones. This theme included issues pertaining to women trying to get back into employment or education, such as wanting to find a new job, or go back to university. Many of the other themes contributed to these concerns. Some stated that they struggled to get work due to their mental health. One woman stated that she has been out of work for a while due to her bipolar disorder. There were 46 IAs that mentioned both Mental Health and Employment & Education as themes they needed support with, and 16 within London.



From the data, Employment & Education appeared to be a bigger concern amongst White British women compared to women from All Other Ethnicities, with a 17 percentage point difference. Whilst over a half (56%) of women from All Other Ethnicities voiced this an area they need support with, this rose to 73% of White British women. Other factors that play a role in employability include immigration status. The theme of Immigration came up along with Employment & Education in three of the IAs, and one within the London sample. One woman stated that she is "unable to work due to immigration status", and another said that she can't read or write English, and thus may struggle as a result of that to find work.

Another contributor to challenges around Employment & Education was having a criminal record. A woman in one IA mentioned that repeatedly having DBS checks was affecting her employability. Even Housing appears to have played a role in women's employability. For example, one woman stated she lost her job due to not having a fixed address. 29 of the 57 (51%) IAs that highlighted they needed Employment & Education support, also needed support with their housing.

An issue within Employment & Education that is repeatedly mentioned by women in their IAs is having gaps in their CVs or not having much experience in other areas. This seems to be a big issue in preventing women from leaving the sex industry when they want to. One woman within London states that she just "doesn't know how to stop and find other work". This will be further explored in the Support to Exit section.

✧ Processing Feelings

The category Processing Feelings is made up of 3 subcategories: Loneliness, Self-esteem, and Feelings/Identity. These themes were mentioned once or more within 46 (51%) IAs and within 14 (50%) of the London sample. It had a strong association with Mental Health, as mentioned previously.

Processing Feelings also correlated with Support Service Access, with 32 (36%) IAs having mentioned both themes as something they had concerns with, and 12 (43%) within the London sample. The issues flagged within both themes include women needing specialist support to help process their feelings and experiences but not knowing where to go. One woman states she sees a therapist but requires more specialist support. Another woman explains that she struggles with shame, and needs help processing it; a different woman says she would like specialist counselling, as it is not something she would want to talk to her regular counsellor about. This once again, highlights the lack of specialist support available.

36 out of the 46 (78%) IAs that mention Processing Feelings, also state needing support with Family, Friends & Relationships. This suggests that having low self-esteem or feeling guilt or shame can affect close relationships. In one IA a woman states that she always felt bad in romantic relationships because of her experience in the sex industry. Another says her relationship ended due to lack of trust, and she feels ashamed about her past, and living a double life.

There also seems to be an apparent loneliness for many of the women seeking emotional support. Comments that they have “no one to talk to” or that they feel “isolated”, appeared numerous times within the IAs, particularly amongst women with children. Several of the women have children to support through selling or exchanging sexual services, and as a result do not have many friends outside of the sex industry and caring for their children. One woman says she has no friends at all as she only works and spends time with her daughter.

✧ Support to Exit

As these IAs are from women who have reached out for support in making a change in relation to their involvement in the sex industry, it is not surprising that many of them were looking to move on from selling or exchanging sexual services. 43 of the IAs (48%) mentioned needing Support to Exit, 13 (46%) within the London sample. Of the 43, 31 (72%) mentioned Employment & Education as an area they also needed support in thus highlighting the previously mentioned link between leaving the sex industry and finding alternative employment. One woman explains she “wants to exit and find other work”, in another IA a woman says she “would like to stop, but needs alternatives”.



35 (81%) of the 43 IAs mentioning Support to Exit, also stated needing support with Mental Health issues. For example, one IA states she needed to quit the sex industry for the sake of her mental health. From the comments on the IAs it seems apparent that several women would like to move on but are struggling with it emotionally. One IA mentions struggling to move on from the sex industry, another says she has concerns about “life after sex work.” Similarly, there is a link between Support to Exit and Processing Emotions, with 23 out of 43 (53%) mentioning both.

26 IAs mentioned Support to Exit, Employment & Education, and Mental Health as areas they needed support with. One woman stated she has lost her way and would like help getting different work. This suggests that leaving the sex industry is not quite as simple as just getting a new job; multiple factors contribute to this experience, such as processing the emotions and feelings related to the sex industry.

✧ Finances

43 of the IAs (48%) mentioned their finances being an issue, and 13 (46%) within London. This included being on benefits, not being able to afford payments for rent, mortgage or bills, general money concerns, debts, and County Court Judgments, as well as needing financial support to pay for courses and education. 35 out of 43 (81%) also flagged needing support with their Employment & Education, which suggests that many women are struggling with money as they cannot find work. Finance issues were more frequently mentioned by White British women; over half of White British IAs (52%) mentioned this compared to 32% of IAs from All Other Ethnicities.



Another association is between Mental Health and Finances, with 35 out of 43 (81%) IAs having Mental Health concerns. There appears to be a link between Mental Health and owing money, as several of the women with poor mental health state they are in debt or owe someone money.

Several IAs mention women being involved in selling or exchanging sexual services due to money issues; one woman says she does sex work to pay her bills and is £32k in debts. Another IA mentions she “started escorting full time after bankruptcy” and describes having no money as the “ultimate humiliation.” One woman states she needs money so she “puts self at risk” which implies she would not be in the sex industry if it was not for financial concerns.

It seems apparent that financial reasons act as a preventative barrier for women who want to move on from selling or exchanging sexual services. This is further highlighted in the relationship with Support to Exit, with 58% of IAs mentioning Finances, also stating they need additional support to exit. One woman says she “wants to quit but can’t afford to”. Furthermore, 21 of the 43 (49%) who highlighted Finances as an area they need support with, also mentioned both Employment & Education and Support to Exit, as areas of concern. For example, one woman explains she “wants to find other ways to earn money.” Another says she does not want to “sell sex anymore” but has “no way of getting a job”. This demonstrates how these three themes interlink and affect the lives of women selling or exchanging sexual services.

✧ Abuse & Trauma

This category combined four themes together: sexual abuse, domestic abuse, emotional abuse, and trauma. It is worth noting there is some crossover with the theme Coercion & Exploitation, which sought to capture coercive experiences and relationships specific to women’s involvement in the sex industry. The theme Abuse & Trauma sought to capture specific incidents or patterns of abuse women identified across an array of relationships and where they voiced experiencing trauma.

There are 43 IAs (48%) that mention Abuse & Trauma as an area they need support with, and 9 (32%) within the London sample, with an 18 percentage point difference showing more women outside London mentioned this as an area for support. Many voiced that they needed support processing the trauma, some not quite understanding it yet, but needing specialist therapy to help them to do so. For example, within one IA, a woman explains that she feels scammed by men who said they would pay her for sex, but she never got the money. Despite this experience being a definition of rape (sex under false pretence), she does not state that she sees it as sexual abuse, but rather an abuse of her trust.

She does refer to it as a traumatic experience though, one that she struggles to process and is therefore holding her back from moving on.

Similarly, several other IAs mention needing help “processing” or “dealing” with trauma. Some explicitly stated they had experienced PTSD or triggering dreams or flashbacks because of their experiences. There is a clear relationship between Abuse & Trauma and Mental Health, with trauma sometimes being a cause of mental health issues, such as PTSD. This is reflected in the number of IAs that mentioned both themes. 79% of IAs that mentioned Abuse & Trauma being an area they needed support with, also mentioned Mental Health.

The experiences of abuse were diverse: some had bad experiences growing up, such as abusive family members, or child sexual abuse, others had violent partners, or experienced a huge abuse of trust. However, 17 out of 20 IAs (85%) that mentioned experiencing sexual exploitation also stated they had experiences of Abuse & Trauma. For example, one woman states that she needs help processing trauma from being forced to sell sex by her husband. There are also examples of women being abused by the people that exploited them: one woman speaks of how she was raped by the man who trafficked her, another explains how she was raped by the pimp who controlled her.

It is evident though that there was a lack of known support services for women who had these kinds of experiences and a connection to the sex industry. 32 (74%) of the IAs that mentioned Abuse & Trauma also mentioned concerns with Support Service Access, one woman commented that she wants to talk to someone who believes her and knows what it’s like as people often try to minimise her experience. Another woman explains she had therapy after her rape, but they did not “understand the world of prostitution”.

Interestingly, the data shows a clear pattern in relation to women mentioning some form of abuse or trauma in their IA and their age. Whilst only 21% of the IAs of women aged 18-24 mentioned some form of abuse or trauma, this rose to 48% of those aged 25-34, 52% of those aged 35-44, 75% of those aged 44-45 and 80% of those aged 55-64. In addition, there appeared to be more mention of Abuse & Trauma amongst All Other Ethnicities compared to White British, with a percentage point difference of 14.

✧ Housing

Within the IAs, Housing was mentioned as something women needed support with in 41 (46%) of them, and 12 within London-based IAs (43%). This included issues such as homelessness or unstable accommodation, such as living in a car, living in temporary accommodation, staying with a friend or family, or in a refuge. But it also included circumstances where their housing situation was stable but they wanted to move on due to factors such as safety concerns or wanting more freedom from family.



Whilst housing concerns are frequently associated with women selling or exchanging sex on street, 35 of the 41 (85%) of IAs referencing housing concerns were from women who did not mention involvement in selling sex on-street. Reviewing the IAs, there seem to be multiple factors contributing to their support needs around housing. For example, 28 out of the 41 (68%) voiced needing support with their relationships, filtered by the ‘friends, family & relationships’ category. This highlighted how

relationship issues that women were having impacted upon their living arrangements, including parents kicking them out, and strained relationship with partners.

Other factors that played a role in their living arrangements included finances; 22 IAs mentioned that Finances were an issue along with Housing, and 5 from the London sample. In one IA within London the woman states that she is “behind on rent”, another must find somewhere cheaper as she has broken up with her Sugar Daddy who paid her rent.

✧ Violence, Harassment & Safety Concerns

The category of Violence, Harassment & Safety Concerns was made up of three separate themes of the same names from the IAs. These themes were mentioned once or more within 39 of the IAs (43%), 11 within London (39%). These included acts of violence from partners, pimps, and clients; being stalked; being harassed online; as well as women not feeling safe, due to either working from home, or dangerous people knowing where they live. Over half of the women within the All Other Ethnicities sample (52%) mentioned Violence, Harassment, & Safety Concerns as a theme they needed support with compared to 35% of the White British sample: a 17-percentage point difference.



The IAs highlight some of the safety concerns of being involved in the sex industry, such as the risks of meeting anonymous men off sites like Craigslist, especially in their own home; one IA states she has “experienced violence” through meeting men off Craigslist. There are also the evident dangers of being involved with pimps. One IA says that her pimp is “ringing her constantly”, a different one mentions that she is “stalked by ex-pimp”, another that she was “assaulted by pimp”.

Also mentioned are the risks the women perceive themselves to be to others and themselves, this is present within the 33 out of 39 IAs (85%) that also mention Mental Health to be an issue. One IA mentions how she has spent so long on the streets she does not think like a “normal” person and worries she may be a risk to others. A different woman explains that she is apprehensive about therapy as she is worried that she will “uncover too much” and resort to drink, drugs, or self-harm to cope. A third woman who states she is suicidal mentions that her safety concerns are making her mental health worse. Whilst another woman who says she’s being stalked and “lives in fear” discloses that she “mentally can’t cope.”

30 of the 39 IAs that mention Violence Harassment, & Safety Concerns (77%) also mentioned concerns with Family, Friends and Relationships. These include violent relationships with partners, and family members, as well as having safety concerns about ex-partners finding them, or what will happen if they report the crimes against them or their family. For example, one IA discloses that her father molested her but she has concerns for her safety if she testifies against him.

✧ Substance Misuse

38 IAs (42%) mentioned some form of substance misuse, 13 (46%) within London. This could include cannabis, alcohol, or other drugs such as cocaine. 35 of those 38 (92%) also mentioned needing Mental Health support, and 11 out of the 13 (85%) London sample. Whilst not everyone experiencing mental health issues within the IAs was misusing drugs or alcohol, it is apparent that most of the women who

were struggling with addiction were dealing with mental health concerns. For example, one woman who is living with bipolar disorder states she is currently receiving support through AA. Another who has depression and anxiety describes “struggling with drinking”. Whilst a third woman explains in her IA that she has CPTSD, BPD, and social anxiety, and that she uses cocaine and drinks whilst escorting.

There is also a connection with Support Service Access, with 26 out of the 38 (68%) Substance Misuse IAs mentioning both. Within these IAs it was highlighted that many women experiencing substance misuse issues were not receiving the support they needed. One woman who used to use drugs with her Sugar Daddy, says she tried to get support but that it is “hard to know who to talk to about sex industry stuff”. Whilst women in several other IAs who have experienced substance misuse state that they just don’t know where to go for support.



Substance Misuse also appeared to be mentioned more frequently by White British women (46%), compared to All Other Ethnicities (32%), a percentage point difference of 14.

✧ Coercion & Exploitation

The category Coercion & Exploitation combines the original themes of Trafficking, Pimps, Controlling Relationships, and Coercion. 34 IAs (38%) mentioned one or more of these themes, and 9 (32%) within London. This includes the 20 IAs that mention Sexual Exploitation, as well as 14 others that consisted of controlling relationships and environments. For example, in one IA the woman states that the woman who owns the parlour where she works is very controlling, telling them what to wear and how much to charge. Others mention being involved in controlling relationships or having controlling family members.

The term “pimp” was used by women within the IAs to describe the person forcing them into selling sexual services within the IAs. In addition, there were several IAs that read as though they were in a pimp relationship, but if “pimp” was not explicitly mentioned, we did not code it as such. The IAs showed that not all coercive relationships were that of partners or “pimps” that are involved in organised crime, some experienced coercion from family members to sell or exchange sexual services, or brothels/parlours and agencies coercing them to take jobs they were not comfortable with. One woman discloses that she was forced by her father to sell sex, a different woman says her mother “pimped” her at 15. Several women state their husbands or partners, or children’s father forced them to sell or exchange sex. It came up multiple times that some women would start working in massage parlours, but then would be encouraged to do extras, meaning perform sexual acts, which they experienced as coercion.

23 IAs out of the 34 (68%) also mentioned needing support with Violence, Harassment & Safety Concerns. One woman states that her parlour is controlling, and she has no say in what clients she sees, which could put her at risk. It is evident that those experiencing Coercion & Exploitation are at a greater risk of violence than those that are not. There also seems to be a significant number of women who have experienced either assault or stalking amongst those that have mentioned Coercion & Exploitation as an area they need support with.

There is also an association with Support Service Access, with 24 out of 34 IAs (71%) mentioning both as areas they needed support with. This once again stresses the need for specialist counselling; one

woman who was trafficked says she has a therapist, but needs “more specialist support”, another woman who was “forced into prostitution” says she has been on the Mental Health waiting list for a year.

29 of the 34 IAs (85%) mentioning Coercion & Exploitation, also flagged needing support with Family, Friends & Relationships, highlighting that many acts of coercion & exploitation come from people closest to these women or that they experience strained relationships as a result. One woman who was forced to sell sex in a brothel explains that she struggled in a new relationship as it triggered stuff from her past experience of being sexually exploited. Another woman suggests she needs “specialist help” for how she is in relationships, after her father abused her and forced her into prostitution and following that, the abuse she experienced from her husband.

✧ Police & Criminal Justice

27 of the IAs (30%) mentioned needing support with areas related to the police or criminal justice, 10 (36%) within London. These IAs consisted of women being victims of crime, having committed crimes, being falsely accused, and wanting legal support. Many of the IAs mentioned a lack of trust with the police or bad experiences with law enforcement due to being involved within the sex industry.



Within the London sub-sample, one IA states that she called the police due to a controlling relationship but they were “no help”. Another woman says that police “made matters worse” after she reported her ex-pimp for stalking. A different IA explains she does not trust the police as in the past they have taken money from pimps and ignored the problem. One of the London IAs mentions pressing charges against the man that trafficked and raped her, but it didn’t go to court due to witnesses falling through, and as a result has safety concerns that he will find her.

18 out of these 27 IAs (67%) also voiced having concerns with Violence, Harassment & Safety Concerns. There were clear links between relationships with the police and the violence experienced/risks faced. A key factor appears to be a lack of trust in the police which hinders women from reporting crimes, which puts women at further risk as perpetrators of violence take advantage of the situation. For the women that do report crimes, there’s often a lack of action taken when they do report. For example, one woman says she is trying to get a non-molestation order against her ex-partner but that the police have so far failed to take her statement. She states she “has evidence against ex, but nothing has happened with the case.” As a result, she explains that she lives in fear of being stalked and harassed. In another IA, the woman explains that she does not want to report her assault to the police.

It appears that police are not fully equipped to appropriately address the crimes women in the sex industry fall victim to, nor know who to signpost to. 19 of those 27 IAs mentioning Police & Criminal Justice (74%), mentioned concerns with Support Service Access stating things such as being “fobbed off by other services”. One IA states “won’t go to police, but needs other support” in relation to being stalked by an ex-pimp.

✧ Being Outed & Social Stigma

Being Outed & Social Stigma combines two themes: Being outed/discovered, and stigma. 24 IAs (27%) mentioned either or both as areas the woman needed support with, 5 (18%) within the London sample. This theme appeared to occur more frequently amongst IAs from outside of London, with a 13-percentage point difference. Included within this theme are women who cannot share things with their friends and family, or who feel ashamed, as well as women being blackmailed or harassed for their involvement in the sex industry.

There is a strong connection with Family, Friends & Relationships, 21 out of the 24 (88%) mentioning Being Outed & Social Stigma, also mention relationship issues, due to the relationships making outing concerns worse. For example, one woman stated her brother became angry when he found out, and further outed her to her neighbours; another IA says her ex-boyfriend threatened to tell her family about her experience in the sex industry; and another has a “volatile” relationship with her son, who calls her names because she’s a sex worker.

There is an undeniable issue with stigma within the sex industry, which can have a huge impact on the women involved in selling or exchanging sexual services. Some women feel they cannot be themselves and experience shame and guilt. As made apparent by the IAs, some women will live double lives to protect themselves from judgment. One woman states she has “created a new identity” that she “feels trapped in.” There is a notable link between Being Outed & Social Stigma and Processing Feelings, 18 out of 24 (75%) mentioned both as areas they needed support with. One woman says she does not tell others about her involvement in the sex industry out of fear of being judged, but as a result feels isolated. A different woman explains she does not want to be judged but has no one to talk to about it.

✧ Physical & Sexual Health

There were 21 mentions (23%) of Physical & Sexual health within the IAs, and 6 (21%) within the London sample. These included mentions of things such as partial paralysis after a road traffic accident, scoliosis, cysts, as well as less detailed mentions of physical disabilities. There were also a few mentions of physical conditions related to stress such as high blood pressure, and hives, as well as issues relating to substance misuse, such as damage to the liver.

This is further highlighted in the association between Physical & Sexual Health and Substance Misuse, which showed that 38% of those experiencing issues with Physical & Sexual Health, also mentioned needing support with Substance Misuse.

Similarly, there is a link between Mental and Physical Health, 17 (81%) of those mentioning needing support with Physical & Sexual Health also mentioned issues with Mental Health. One woman explains that she is 5 stone overweight, and this is affecting her mental health. Another woman states she was in intensive care because of an overdose due to her poor mental health.

Only one IA explicitly mentions having had sexual health concerns. She also mentioned needing specialist support having been forced into the sex industry, showing the connection with both Support Service Access and Coercion & Exploitation.



✧ Support to Sustain Exit

The category Support to Sustain Exit was flagged for when women had already left the sex industry but needed support to sustain this transition. For example, one woman mentioned still being pursued by pimps despite not wanting anything to do with that life. In another IA, a woman stated she was no longer involved in the sex industry but had an issue with drinking that she needed support with as she was afraid she would lose her current job. 13 IAs (14%) mentioned needing Support to Sustain Exit, and 3 (11%) within London.

It is evident that many of the other factors play a role in women returning to the sex industry when they do not want to, such as Finances, Substance Misuse, Mental Health, Employment & Education. All 13 IAs mentioning needing Support to Sustain Exit also mentioned Mental Health concerns. Most of these IAs mention anxiety, depression, or PTSD. Many of them referred to needing specialist counselling or support to process their experiences. 8 of the 13 IAs also stated that they needed support pertaining to Abuse & Trauma. One IA explains that she needs support “processing trauma” relating to her involvement in the sex industry. Another woman who was pimped says she wants mental health support and support “moving on from past.”

Additionally, 10 of the 13 IAs mentioned Employment & Education as a support need, with many of them stating they needed help to find work due to either gaps in their CV, having not worked in some time, having not finished school, and/or lacking skills. One woman mentions that she had to lie to get a job and would like help to “come clean”. Another woman stresses her need for employment support, stating that she’s “at risk of returning to sex work.”



There is also a big link between Support to Sustain Exit and Support Services that suggests that some women struggle to move on from their involvement in the sex industry because they do not have the support. 10 out of the 13 mentioned both themes, with one IA stating, “there is nothing else online about help leaving escorting.” Whilst another says, “other services have been unhelpful”.

✧ Clients/Punters

Client or Punters were mentioned in 7 IAs (8%), and 3 of the London sub-sample (11%). The concerns flagged were in relation to violent clients and wanting to stay safe, and negative experiences with clients, such as stalking. If the IA did not use the terminology “client” or “punter”, it was not put into this category. For example, if an IA states she was made to have sex with men for money, these were not considered an issue with Clients/Punters, but categorised as Coercion & Exploitation.

6 of the 7 (86%) that mention Clients/Punters, also voice needing support with Processing Emotions. The same 6 IAs also state having issues with Support Service Access; one woman says that her relationship with a client is not helping her mental health; a different woman who states she wants to “stay safe from dodgy clients” also mentions needing counselling/processing; in another IA a woman discloses that she’s had “violent experiences” with clients and says she “struggles emotionally”. These IAs suggest there is a lack of support for women to discuss their emotions of relating to negative experiences with clients. Three of the IAs that mention violent experiences/dodgy clients also state that they have trouble coping, either morally or financially, or want counselling to help process their experiences.

✧ Immigration

6 of the IAs (7%) mentioned needing Immigration support, with 1 (1%) from the London sub-sample. Unsurprisingly, Immigration was mentioned as an area for support only in non-British IAs, with 24% of All Other Ethnicities mentioning this. One IA states that she has been here 20 years yet still has issues with her residency. Another IA explains she cannot read or write English, which therefore affects her ability to work. Furthermore 3 out of 6 (50%) mentioned needing support with Employment or Education, with another IA stating that she cannot work due to her “immigration status.”



6 out of 6 (100%) of the IAs needing support with Immigration, had experienced some form of Coercion & Exploitation; two of those explicitly mention being trafficked, whilst another states she was “brought over from Romania to work”. One woman was forced to sell sex by her husband, the other two women state that they have been taken advantage of by other people in their lives and coerced in some way, such as “men using” one woman, and another woman being “coerced to work” by the man who pays her bills.

3 out of 6 (50%) mentioned needing support with Police & Criminal Justice. The same woman who spoke of being brought over from Romania explains she needs “legal support with HMRC” as a result of her pimp taking her money and sending it back to Romania.

If women are brought from another country against their will, this may isolate them. 4 out of 6 of the women said they had problems with Processing Feelings; two mentioned feeling lonely or alone; another mentions she feels low; and the fourth woman “struggles emotionally”.

DISCUSSION

The Initial Assessments help to shed light on the nature of women's engagement with the sex industry as well as on the support needs identified by women selling or exchanging sexual services. Almost two-thirds of IAs (63%) referenced experience in multiple contexts, whilst the vast majority (82%) mentioned escorting. This mirrors the findings of a 2019 study carried out for the Home Office by a team at Bristol University on the nature and prevalence of prostitution and sex work in England and Wales which found that it is common for individuals to move between settings and services within the sex industry (Matolcsi et al., 2020; Hester et al., 2019). Furthermore, just under a quarter of IAs (22%) mentioned experiencing sexual exploitation and it was clear this was taking place across a range of contexts; street, brothels/parlours and escort agencies. In terms of specialist support provision, services therefore need to be equipped and resourced to support women in a range of sex industry contexts, recognising that fluidity between contexts is common. Where support services have restricted remits, this may serve as a barrier to women accessing support. Additionally, there is a need to recognise that women may be experiencing sexual exploitation and to create a safe space for women to disclose exploitation whilst not assuming that this is the case. Services will benefit from adopting trauma-informed approaches and ensuring that they are fostering an empowerment bias. This is particularly important as past negative experiences of accessing support services are likely to affect if, when, and how women disclose experiences of exploitation. Anecdotal evidence from the Beyond Support team suggests that the numbers of women disclosing sexual exploitation increases over the course of support as women build trust with their Women's Support Worker and feel confident to disclose experiences that they perhaps did not feel comfortable voicing during their Initial Assessment.

The 18 different support themes identified and the fact that the mean number of themes mentioned in the IAs was 7.5 demonstrate the multiple support needs presented by women who are/have been involved in selling or exchanging sexual services. The discussion of each theme also highlighted the interconnected nature of the different themes. It is clear that no one support service can be a specialist in all these areas. Equally, it highlights the challenge facing women in accessing the range of services they may benefit from when seeking to address multiple and intersecting needs. Specialist support services can therefore serve an important role in simplifying access to, and advocating for access to, a range of support services for women involved in selling or exchanging sexual services. However, this is only effective if specialist support services implement effective multi-agency working; have clear signposting and referral pathways to the range of support services women may require access to; and have strong confidentiality and information sharing policies in place to ensure that the trust build up with a woman is upheld by third party support services.

The most frequently mentioned support theme was Mental Health. The challenge for those selling or exchanging sexual services in accessing appropriate and non-judgmental mental health support is one that has been highlighted in recent research (Bowen et al., 2021). Ensuring women can access appropriate psychotherapy and counselling therefore needs to be a fundamental part of support provision. In addition, given the occurrence of the theme Processing Feelings in 50% of the IAs, it is

CLOSING REMARKS

Beyond the Streets is proud of the women we have had the experience of journeying alongside through Beyond Support. Their strength and resilience serve as a constant inspiration to us. As we re-evaluate our work in the light of Covid-19, sharing learning from our own experience of delivering services and collaborating with women with lived experience to inform, carry out research, and influence service delivery will play an increasing role in our work going forward. We are committed to working to ensure that those involved in the sex industry can access specialist trauma-informed support services regardless of geography and that their voices and experiences are included in decision-making around service development.

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