

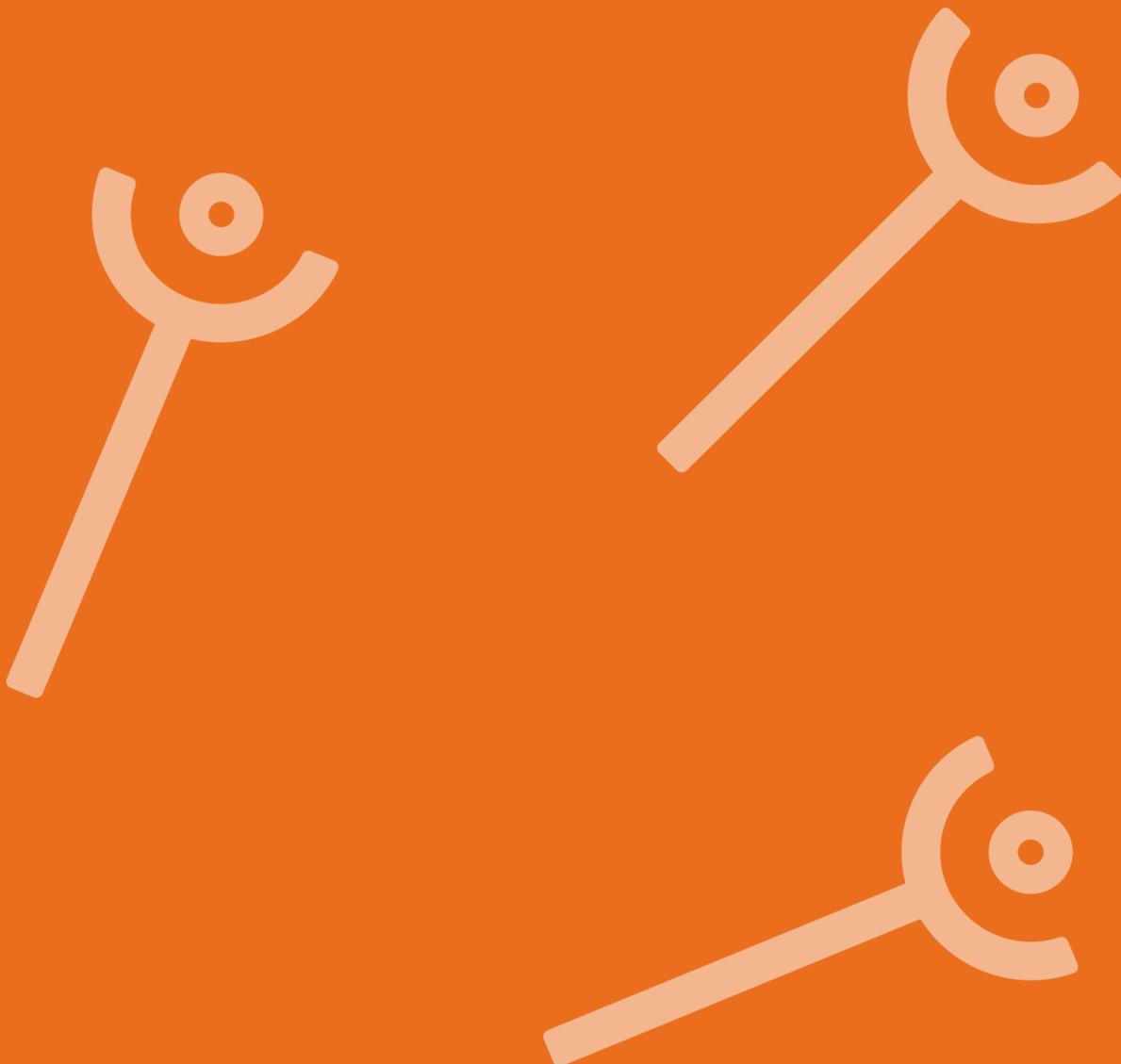
Barriers and Recommendations

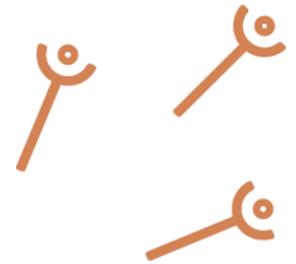
Women experiencing
multiple disadvantage and
involved in street-based sex
work

March 2022



**FULLFILLING
LIVES**
LAMBETH
SOUTHWARK
LEWISHAM





Fulfilling Lives Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham is funded by The National Lottery Community Fund and is part of the National Fulfilling Lives Programme. This is a £112 million investment over 8 years supporting people who are experiencing multiple disadvantage; the people we work with have a combination and interconnected needs of mental ill-health, are homeless/or at risk of homelessness, substance use and/or contact with the criminal justice system.

We acknowledge that the system doesn't work for everyone – particularly people who experience greater levels of disadvantage.

Certitude is the lead agency of the programme, delivering the programme in partnership with Thames Reach and strategic partners; South London and Maudsley NHS Trust and the three boroughs of Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham.

Our three core aims are:

- **Co-production:** Giving equal value to the voices of both the decision makers and the people we support, so that all opinions are heard and respected equally.
- **Service delivery:** Working alongside people and services learning and testing different interventions to change the lives of people experiencing multiple disadvantages for the better – now and in the future.
- **System change:** Making an impact on the way people are supported – by influencing policy and practice, locally and nationally.

Introduction

Fulfilling Lives Lambeth Southwark Lewisham (LSL) have experience working with women experiencing multiple disadvantage and who are involved in street-based sex work. This report shares experiences and insights of women with lived experience and of practitioners working alongside them and identifies the challenges and barriers they face to accessing services.

Since the programme started in 2013, we have worked with 32 women experiencing multiple disadvantage who are involved in street-based sex work.

This report is of interest to anyone working with people experiencing multiple disadvantage, particularly women and those involved in street-based sex work. While this report focuses specifically on the experiences of women experiencing multiple disadvantage and involved in street based sex work, the learning can be applied more widely. We believe that by making services work better for the most marginalised and at-risk groups, services work better for everyone.

The quotes presented throughout this report are from women with lived experience of multiple disadvantage and street-based sex work, who Fulfilling Lives LSL team have worked alongside or who have been consulted with by the Fulfilling Lives LSL team.

Methodology

The data presented in this report is from the following sources:

- Experiences of women supported by Fulfilling Lives LSL
- Consultations with women with current and former lived experience of sex work, but who are not supported directly by Fulfilling Lives LSL
- Interviews with Experts by Experience
- Experience of practitioners
- Learning captured through shared learning events with other local services supporting this group of women

Demographics

Fulfilling Lives LSL have worked alongside 32 women experiencing multiple disadvantage and involved in street-based sex work. This section explores the demographics of this group of women.

- Age: Most women (91%) are between the ages of 31 and 50 years old.
- Ethnicity: 31% are White British, 25% are Black/Black British Caribbean and 22% have Mixed White and Black Caribbean heritage.
- Disability: 13% are living with a disability.
- Sexuality: The majority (72%) are heterosexual. 13% are bisexual¹.
- Nationality: 78% are English, 3% (1 individual) is Jamaican, 3% (1 individual) is Polish, 3% (1 individual) is Swedish.
- Qualifications: 44% (12) have no qualifications, 16% (5) have A to C GCSEs, 9% (3) have D to G GCSEs, 3% (1) has A Levels
- Literacy: 22% have literacy problems

Interconnecting Needs

Women involved in street-based sex work experience a range of interconnecting needs. Of the 32 women that Fulfilling Lives LSL have worked with:

- All the women had a history of using drugs and alcohol
- 97% have a history of interactions with the criminal justice system
- 91% have experienced mental ill health
- 63% were at risk of homelessness when we started working with them
- 19% have experiences of the care system
- 19% have literacy difficulties
- 28% of the women we have worked with have an untreated serious health condition

¹ Where these percentages do not add up to 100%, we do not have data for the rest of the women as they may not have wished to disclose

A recent snapshot of data collected for 18 of the women² reflects the significant levels of sexual violence and abuse and other types of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) that these women have experienced.

- 44% women were identified to be a victim of violence in a relationship during the time working with Fulfilling Lives LSL. This does not include insights into historical experiences of VAWG.
- 33% were identified to be living in a housing situation that was linked to coercive control and/or domestic violence
- 22% have accessed emergency accommodation due to violence while working with Fulfilling Lives LSL
- 17% have accessed specialist domestic violence services while working with Fulfilling Lives LSL

System Barriers & Challenges

This group of women are some of the most marginalised groups, often invisible in society and experience high levels of risk of violence and sexual exploitation. Our data, as well as national research, shows that these women have been passed around the system, are repeatedly excluded from services and support pathways and they are often described as 'hard to reach' or 'non-engaging'. We recognise that services are working for some people; however, the specific needs of the women experiencing multiple disadvantages and involved in street-based sex work are not always met by the current provision.

Access to mental health services

Generally, this group of women experience poor mental health, but are not accessing mental health services or support. As reported, 91% of the women have experienced mental ill-health, with 67% having a mental diagnosis the majority of whom (61%) having more than one mental health diagnosis. Our data shows that a low proportion (17%) of women were engaged with mental health services when we started working with them.

"I can't believe I been in London 2 years and not been seen by any mental health since then, even though I got PTSD and emotionally unstable personality disorder" (Woman with lived experience)

"When you've come off drugs, you're no longer numbing the pain of the trauma" (Woman with lived experience)

² This smaller data sample is due to it being captured at a specific point about the women we were supporting at that time

The high prevalence of mental ill-health in this group of women, as well as the barriers and challenges faced for accessing support, is emphasised with wider research³. This highlights the interacting factors of exploitation, substance use, housing and contact with the criminal justice system with mental ill-health, as well as experiences of societal stigma, which in turn can further impact mental health.

Child removal

Removal of children into care is very common for this group of women, and for women experiencing multiple disadvantage in general. 66% (21) of the women we have worked with have had a total of 65 children removed from their care including one woman who has had 10 children removed.

Child removal has a huge impact on mental health; the trauma associated with having children removed is immense.

"Before it all, the courts and services took my children, they gave them to my old man, they told me I had to leave my home at 8am with nothing. Just two suitcases and a broken heart, I had nothing."

The fear of child removal is also identified in wider research to prevent women from accessing support and services.⁴

Housing

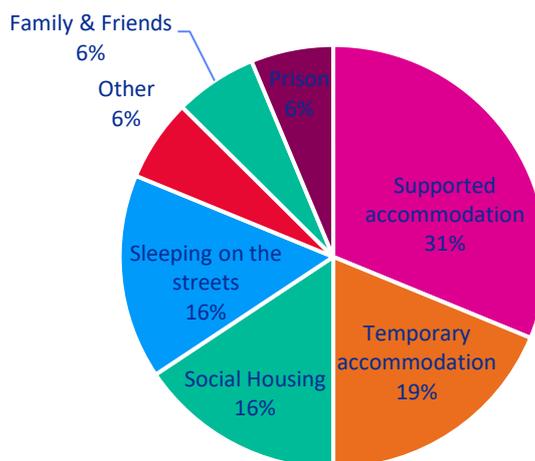
Across Fulfilling Lives LSL's evidence base it is repeatedly identified that the hostel environment is unsafe and/or unsuitable for some women. Some women do not want to go into a hostel, as *"you get lost"*.

It can be a challenge for women to live in shared accommodation due to the challenges of living with other residents; for example, women may be in hostels where others are using substances, which poses challenges if you are trying to stay abstinent.

³ Basis Yorkshire, (2018). Housing First Report. Accessed: [Basis-Housing-First-Final-Report-March-2018.pdf \(basisyorkshire.org.uk\)](#)

⁴ AVA (2019), Breaking down the Barriers. Accessed: [Breaking-down-the-Barriers-full-report-.pdf \(avaproject.org.uk\)](#)

Where were women living when we started working with them?



A significant body of evidence identifies the lack of housing options available for women involved in street-based sex work and highlights the unsuitability of hostel environments for this group of women; notably the research published by the Government in 2007⁵. The key findings from this research are reflected by women with lived experience as well as practitioners at Fulfilling Lives LSL.

Hostel pathways often become revolving doors for women involved in street-based sex work. For example, women may frequently move in and out of hostels while also spending periods of time in prison, staying with pimps/men who purchase sex/partners (who are often abusive), staying in crack houses, and spending periods of time facing various forms of homelessness including sleeping on the streets.

Also of note is the identified lack of options for those looking to move on from hostels and after detox or rehab, as well as the impact of coercive control on women's housing situations; many women experience unsafe living situations due to domestic abuse. As previously described, 33% of the women Fulfilling Lives LSL have worked with were identified to be living in a housing situation that was linked to coercive control and/or domestic violence, and 22% have accessed emergency accommodation due to violence while working with Fulfilling Lives LSL.

The lack of suitable housing options available is a barrier to women's safety. Some women choose to live with partners who may be abusive as preferable to hostels.

⁵ Mcnaughton, C. C. and Sanders, T. (2007) Housing and Transitions Phases Out of 'Disordered' Lives: The Case of Leaving Homelessness and Street Sex Work. *Housing Studies*, 22(6), pp 885-900, doi : 10.1080/02673030701608043. Accessed: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/effective-practice-in-responding-to-prostitution>

Drug and alcohol services

Substance use is also common for women experiencing multiple disadvantage and involved in sex work; all the women Fulfilling Lives LSL worked with used multiple substances. Women described getting involved in street-based sex work to fund drug use, and then needing to use more drugs to cope with the trauma associated with sexual assault.

Type of drug	% of women using
Heroin	78%
Crack	89%
Cocaine	11%
Cannabis	94%

"The more money I made the more I smoked – without being high I couldn't do it. I had to be high to do it" (Expert by Experience)

"By the end the only way I could cope was when I was numb and high" (Expert by Experience)

Despite this, some women reported barriers to accessing drug and alcohol treatment - in some boroughs more than others.

Learning from across the FLLSL programme and women we work alongside reflects the wider literature, pointing to the need for greater flexibility in how women engage with the service including outreach and appointment times, particularly when trying to get access to or maintain a methadone script. Lack of trust was also identified as a key issue, specifically in relation to barriers to accessing local drug and alcohol services.

One woman we work with felt she *"can't depend on them [the drug service]; so I'll just depend on myself"*.

Unaddressed sexual and physical health needs

Sexual health is a key issue for those involved in sex work, however our research shows that often sexual health services are not accessed. Our data show that 28% of the women we have worked with have an untreated serious health condition. Similarly, many women are left without support for wider physical health issues. This is evidenced in further research which highlights the extent to which such needs are left unaddressed, and women are left without support.⁶

⁶ Basis Yorkshire, *Vulnerable Populations Report*. Accessed: [Vulnerable-Populations-Report-FINAL.pdf \(basisyorkshire.org.uk\)](https://www.basisyorkshire.org.uk/Vulnerable-Populations-Report-FINAL.pdf); Baker, L. M., Dalla, R. L. and Williamson, C. (2010) Exiting prostitution: an integrated model. *Violence Against Women*, 16(5) pp. 579-600. doi : 10.1177/1077801210367643

Violence against women and girls (VAWG)

Women involved in street-based sex work often experience high levels of violence and sexual exploitation, as is evident in the data presented above in relation to the women supported by Fulfilling Lives LSL.

VAWG and coercive control has been repeatedly highlighted by FLLSL team members as a key barrier to accessing support. Our evidence points to the impact of domestic abuse and coercive and controlling relationships on drug and alcohol use, mental health, as well as housing as identified above.

Furthermore, the tactics used by those causing harm mean that women are left socially isolated, have limited social networks, and are prevented from accessing support.

Police, safeguarding and missing persons

Despite high levels of violence and exploitation experienced by women experiencing multiple disadvantage who are involved in street based sex work, women rarely report incidents to the police.

Women we spoke to highlighted their mistrust of police as a key barrier to reporting incidents; they felt that the police lacked compassion and were quick to blame and judge women, particularly as a result of their substance use. Women are at risk of being criminalised when seeking help and safety.

"If you smoke drugs and you call the police they just don't care/ treat you right" (Woman with lived experience)

"The thing is I couldn't report this [sexual assault] to the police, when I got raped in hotel in the city, I had reports and warrants out for me, I couldn't report this guy who had raped me, the fear – I would have ended up in a cell" (Expert by Experience)

Practitioners also identified barriers around reporting to police – specifically in relation to reporting safeguarding concerns and making Missing Persons reports. Practitioners identified that such reports are often not taken seriously and are dismissed as part of women's lifestyle choices.

Approaches to service delivery and responding to trauma

Many in this group of women have experienced extensive trauma during childhood, as well as in adulthood; as noted above, sexual abuse and violence can be frequent experiences for women involved in sex work.

Women's experiences of trauma need to be understood and accounted for when considering how women are able to access services. There is significant literature focusing on the importance of trauma and gender informed

environments, including insights shared in Fulfilling Lives LSL Literature Review published as part of our Research and Learning partnership⁷.

The importance of women-only spaces is emphasised by the insights shared by women with lived experience.

"Having male workers was really stressful, he was very pushy, he was creepy, he done a lot for me but he was a bit creepy" (Woman with lived experience)

"Sometimes you just need to get away from men...this is especially true for women who are involved in prostitution or who are with a guy who beats them up" (Woman with lived experience)

"When you go to a place like that [drugs service] its horrible anyway and then if you're a working girl you see people you really don't want to see when you're there...All services should have a women's only space" (Woman supported by Fulfilling Lives LSL)

Women also highlighted the importance of peer support, reporting that they valued of working with staff or volunteers with lived experience

"If you haven't lived it you don't understand" (Woman with lived experience)

Fulfilling Lives LSL evidence highlights that trauma, gender and culturally informed approaches are not systematically embedded or applied within services, with negative impact on this group of women.

Often women's experiences of services are negative, and interactions with services often leave women feeling judged or blamed. Across evidence collected, there was a feeling that women involved in street-based sex work are not listened to; women highlighted feeling that their voice is not heard, that they are not cared about, and feel invisible or left behind.

"Often it just doesn't matter what you said and what you need – you're not heard because they don't like it" (Woman with lived experience)

Practitioners also highlighted practical barriers to accessing support including the need to attend specifically timed and inflexible appointments, appointments at challenging times of day and women not having access to safe spaces. Again, this indicated a lack of informed approaches to service provision.

⁷ Fulfilling Lives LSL Research Partnership (2020) Understanding Models of Support for People Facing Multiple Disadvantage: A Literature Review . Access: <https://fulfillingliveslsl.london/understanding-models-of-support-for-people-facing-multiple-disadvantage-a-literature-review/>

Ensuring staff members have appropriate knowledge, skills, and support to deliver informed services is also key.

"My link worker helped me so much, took me from detox to rehab, took me to my flat etc...she even helped me get my diagnosis aside from substance misuse, she helped me so much" (Expert by Experience)

Siloed working and communication between services

Communication between services emerged as a key theme from practitioners; the lack of communication between services can be a barrier to providing effective support.

The challenges of poor communication across the system, and siloed approaches to service delivery, for this group of women is well documented. This theme is more widely explored, for example, in the Fulfilling Lives LSL systems map.

The key themes presented throughout this report demonstrate how interconnected and overlapping the key systems barriers are.⁸

Recommendations

Trauma, gender, and culturally informed service provision

Services must recognise the trauma that women have experienced, respond to the impact trauma can have and that interactions with the system can re-traumatise. Services must understand the gendered experiences of these women and respond accordingly and consider individual's specific experiences depending on their cultural context. Services must develop and embed informed approaches and practice.

More support including drug and alcohol treatment

It is essential that local areas provide support for women around the factors leading them to become involved in street-based sex work especially drug and alcohol use. Often, women experience barriers to accessing drug and alcohol services such as appointment times, male-dominated environments and the limited availability of detox and rehab places.

Co-produced solutions

It is essential that women with current and former lived experience of sex work are involved in the development of solutions for these solutions to be effective and to successfully meet the needs of women. To find out more

⁸ For more information relating to the interconnected systems barriers at play for people experiencing multiple disadvantage see: [A Systems Map : Thinking about the system as a whole | Fulfilling Lives \(fulfillingliveslsl.london\)](https://fulfillingliveslsl.london)

about co-production and its importance, please see other reports on our website: <https://fulfillingliveslsl.london/research-and-resources/>.

Access to safe routes for reporting incidents

Women do not feel safe in reporting violence and exploitation to the police and alternatives such as National Ugly Mugs should be promoted and made available and accessible to enable women to report incidences. Safe and alternative routes for reporting are important to ensure women's safety, while holding perpetrators to account.

Address siloed working

Many women involved in sex work and experiencing multiple disadvantage have mental ill health and are known to use substances. To prevent women from being passed around the system, responses to dual diagnosis should be strengthened through ensuring that national guidance on co-occurring mental ill-health and substance use is followed locally.

Local commissioners and service providers should ensure staff at all levels of the system are supported and challenged to ensure assessment and the provision of services for people with dual diagnosis. Services should include support specifically for women and those with children recognising the impact of those relationships in their treatment and recovery.

Housing Pathways

Commissioners should ensure greater choice in the housing which is available for women experiencing multiple disadvantages and involved in street-based sex work. This should adopt a model that prioritises securing safe and timely accommodation for individuals and that takes gender specific and trauma informed approach, such as the Housing First for Female Sex Workers pilot in Leeds⁹.

⁹ Housing First for Female Sex Workers in Leeds: <https://wy-fi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/mdocs/Housing%20First.pdf>