



WOMEN & SEX WORK IN GREATER MANCHESTER: 2022 RESEARCH BRIEFING

In 2021, an independent research team undertook a small-scale research project looking at women and sex work in Greater Manchester. This included a review of existing academic and policy research, a survey and/or interviews with 151 women who sex work, and a survey of 56 professional stakeholders.

PREVALENCE

There are at least 3,000 sex workers in Greater Manchester (GM) and a reasonable estimate is 4,500. Women who sex work are resident and working in every GM borough. Most work in more than one location, and two thirds work in the city centre, travelling in from other parts of Manchester or GM boroughs. It is hard to get accurate figures about sex work because it is so often hidden and taboo. There are likely to be more people involved than we know.

CONTEXT

Everyone has a wide set of life experiences, including strengths, things that make us happy, things we are proud of, hopes and dreams. These positive aspects of women's lives should not be overlooked, although of course agencies must focus on needs to meet their statutory or commissioned responsibilities, and to support or reduce harm.

Past research has focused almost exclusively on the problems and risks of sex work – i.e. “What’s wrong, not what’s strong”. We reviewed 46 sources, but found only one paragraph in a small-scale study (20 women) about

sex workers’ hopes and happiness, and another about sex work providing transferable skills. This study found that children and ‘normal things’ made sex workers most happy, and exiting sex work for employment or education was what they most hoped for.

ASKING WOMEN WHO SEX WORK ABOUT POSITIVE ASPECTS OF THEIR LIVES

Our survey asked women who sex work in Greater Manchester some questions about positive aspects of their lives:

- What makes you happy and what do you enjoy?
- What are you most proud of?
- If you had three wishes for the future, what would they be?

Relatively few women answered these questions (35/151 or 23%). This is not surprising, because many women who sex work are focused on more urgent needs, such as surviving, earning enough to feed themselves and their families, staying healthy and staying safe. Nevertheless, this gives us a unique insight into the positive aspects of women who sex work’s lives, from more women than

ASKING WOMEN WHO SEX WORK ABOUT POSITIVE ASPECTS OF THEIR LIVES CONT.

most previous sex worker surveys. Women found these questions emotive but several commented that they were grateful for being given the opportunity to answer them, rather than the research questions purely focussing on them as service users, 'in need' of support.

FINDINGS ABOUT SEX WORKERS' HAPPINESS, ACHIEVEMENTS, HOPES AND DREAMS

WHAT MAKES WOMEN WHO SEX WORK HAPPY?

As expected, what makes women who sex work in Greater Manchester happy is unique and personal. Most responses were 'ordinary pleasures', including spending time with children and other family and friends, relaxing pastimes, creative activities and being useful. Often, women's happiness relates to having basic needs met.

"I love reading and spending time with my family and friends."

"Making cards and drawing, cooking, volunteering"

"I like doing my nails. I like shopping. I like learning English and talking to my daughter"

"Volunteering, swimming, being outdoors in woodland, spending time with people I like"

"Drugs and money make me happy, and having a place to live"

"Speaking to my daughter and going to see her"

"Not being poorly".

Some women enjoyed thinking about what made them happy, and appreciated being asked, but at least one got upset. Two women, sadly, said they had nothing to enjoy.

WHAT MAKES WOMEN WHO SEX WORK PROUD?

Clearly, many women who sex work have a lot to be proud of. Most often, they talk about being proud of their children (13/34). Other common themes include overcoming difficult circumstances; reducing or stopping drug use; securing housing; stopping sex work; creative achievements. Sadly, two (different) women said there is nothing they are proud of.

"I'm proud of who I am. I feel I am astute, getting over the negatives in life."

"I'm proud of stabilising my self on methadone, [I've] brought my drug use rite down. I've moved into a new home and I wanna take my art work to that next level"

"I'm proud of my singing voice. I'm proud of my flat - I've got it looking nice after many years of being homeless"

"I'm proud of the people my children are becoming due to my support"

"I'm proud that I got my children to a safe country, that we don't live in fear. My husband was a bad man and tried to kill me. Now we are safe!"

INDINGS ABOUT SEX WORKERS' HAPPINESS, ACHIEVEMENTS, HOPES AND DREAMS CONTINUED

WHAT 'THREE WISHES' DO WOMEN WHO SEX WORK HAVE?

Women's wishes are detailed, usually very practical and sometimes poignant. The most common wish (n=16) is for better connection with their children, sometimes because they are living apart from them. Other common wishes included financial security; secure housing; becoming and/or staying drug-free; better health; finding a different job; better education; changing bad situations.

"I want to get out of this hellhole, somewhere far away, well away from here. I hate it...Get away from this circle of people, this life I am living."

"The thing I want most is good health for my family and without that nothing matters."

"For my family to not be in debt and be financially stable."

"Firstly I wish to obtain my GCSE maths and English. To go college or uni for my level 3, 4 and 5 counselling. Also be a facilitator of the freedom programme."

"To see my son and explain things my end."

"I want to stay off drugs and the streets. I know that is 2 wishes but they come as a team... I can't have one without the other".



SERVICES AND SUPPORT

HOW DOES MASH RESPOND TO WOMEN'S ASSETS?

MASH provides strength-based one-to-one support for women focusing on their goals. We support women to think about and articulate their goals, separate from any other people in their lives. Women have control over their support at MASH, dictating the pace and direction and developing the skills to come up with their own strategies and solutions in the future. MASH helps women to make small changes as well as to work towards long-term goals in their life, such as support to access drug treatment or reconnecting with family. Last year MASH supported 230 women on a one-to-one basis to help them identify and achieve their goals.

WHAT WORKS FOR WOMEN WHO SEX WORK?

Person-centred planning and strength-based approaches are standard practice in most work with those who need support and want to achieve positive change: focusing on "what's strong not what's wrong" is accepted good practice for empowering people and communities and achieving positive outcomes. There are already many available tools, including ones for strength-based conversations, and for co-planning individual or group outcomes. Some services and practitioners do already use strength-based approaches with sex workers, but since the research base is missing, they are not always properly planned or resourced. Strengths-based commissioning and planning could significantly change our understanding of women's lives and experiences, help to ensure better service responses, and potentially also increase women's own self-understanding and empowerment.



RECOMMENDATIONS – HOW COMMISSIONERS CAN USE THIS INSIGHT

MASH are developing new support pathways to help women focus more on their strengths, achievements and hopes, especially around education, training and employment opportunities, and peer support. We aim

to expand our services across Greater Manchester, and particularly to reach more women facing multiple unmet needs and those from minoritised groups. These future plans, if we can secure adequate resources, will help make sure that women who sex work can also share the benefits set out in the [Greater Manchester Strategy](#) for a fairer, more prosperous city for everyone.

▶ **To discuss this briefing in more detail, and partnership opportunities, please contact Annie Emery, CEO: annie@mash.org.uk**

Notes: The independent researchers were [Kerry Swain](#), [Julie Wrigley](#) and [Fiona Weir](#). These briefings have been prepared by Fiona Weir and MASH. Throughout these briefings, we define women as anyone identifying as a woman. You can find further information, including sources for all the points in this briefing, in the research report.

To read the full report including sources please visit www.mash.org.uk