



## 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.

#### HOW MANY WOMEN SEX WORKERS IN GREATER MANCHESTER EXPERIENCE PROBLEMS WITH HOUSING OR HOMELESSNESS?

11% of women who sex work taking part in our survey say they need help around housing or homelessness. This is lower than expected and may reflect that women experiencing homelessness were less likely to complete our survey than those in relative stability. We also asked women about their ambitions for the future: **safe, secure housing** is the second most common ambition (reconnecting with children is the first).

### CONTEXT

Past research shows that homelessness and housing problems affect many women who sex work. Here are some key findings:

**Being homeless can increase the likelihood that women will engage in sex work:** Many of the women in an NPCC study (2019) had experienced rough sleeping, homelessness and years living in temporary hostels, while on housing waiting lists. Some were resigned to the long wait, while for others the need for housing was urgent, yet seemed unachievable.

**“If they are in a homeless hostel and there’s girls in there that work the streets... they tend to get in people’s heads and say, if you’re ever skint, I can take you down to a place...all you have to do is a, b and c...so they get blagged into it... it’s an easy game to get into.”**

## CONTEXT CONTINUED

### **Sex work is also linked with hidden homelessness.**

Often women have exchanged sex for somewhere to sleep or stayed in abusive relationships due to the risk of becoming homeless.

**Women who are rough sleeping are often unable to access state benefits**, and so are led to daily on-street sex working as a means of urgent survival. *“Now, it is every day without fail. I am worn out. I am working every day to survive.”*

**Women who are homeless and sex working are especially likely to have a range of ‘extreme unmet health needs’** (– see our separate briefing on Physical Health).

**Women who are homeless and sex working are also more likely to experience violence and other crime.** Research shows 63-80% of women sex workers had experienced violence, and women who sex work are 12 times more likely to be murdered than other women (– see our separate briefing on Gender Based Violence).

**Particularly, women engaged in survival sex are also often homeless, and these women have multiple and complex needs**, such as addiction, mental illness and experiences of trauma. It is often difficult or impossible to separate out the different factors, causes and effects of homelessness and sex work.

## SERVICES AND SUPPORT

### **WHAT HELP HAVE WOMEN WHO SEX WORK IN GM BEEN ABLE TO GET?**

The figures from our primary research show that 11% of women say they need help with housing or homelessness but only 4% are able to get it.

Women who sex work who are also homeless have multiple unmet needs, and experience many inequalities. Women are further impacted by intersectionality such as race, gender identity, age or disability status. A person-centred, trauma-responsive approach is needed to address these, but currently, many local organisations



provide services with a single focus, addressing only housing / homelessness or addiction or food poverty or mental health. Women with multiple unmet needs may be less able to access services, even when they are joined up; fragmented services affect them especially badly. Women who experience many inequalities may also be less trusting of services and less willing to access them, because of past experiences of stigma, exclusion, discrimination and/or injustice. Commissioning in Greater Manchester recognises the additional needs of women who are homeless and also sex working: the [GM Homelessness Prevention Strategy](#) states that people with experience of sex work are at greater risk of homelessness due to the inequalities they face.

Women who have accessed MASH reported overwhelmingly positive experiences; some said that MASH had literally changed or saved their lives. However only 1-in-5 women surveyed (21%) had used MASH and those resident or working outside of Manchester city were less likely to have accessed MASH.



## SERVICES AND SUPPORT CONTINUED

### WHAT SUPPORT DO WOMEN RECEIVE FROM MASH?

MASH provides one-to-one support for women who are experiencing homelessness, including helping them to access emergency accommodation, supporting them to consider their options and engage with council-led housing teams, and supporting them with their wider needs to increase maintaining a tenancy. We also undertake gender-specific outreach for women sleeping rough, supporting them specifically around experiences of violence and exploitation. MASH's night time outreach is a critical service for women in need of emergency housing support, and we are able to refer to the 24-hour Women's Direct Access crisis service. Last year 151 women experiencing homelessness were provided with person-centred support by MASH.

MASH is working in multi-agency partnerships in Greater Manchester, including as a specialist for women as part of the GM Housing First Partnership, and we work hard to ensure that our support contributes to the [GM Homelessness Prevention Strategy](#). The strategy explicitly recommends gender- and trauma-informed approaches, and we have significant expertise in both areas.

### WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO ACCESSING SERVICES?

Women report that concerns around confidentiality is the most significant barrier to accessing services (21%). Other barriers include services not being available locally (16%) or being inaccessible due to transport (9%); and women not knowing how to access services (15%) or what is available (12%). Some women also talked about language/cultural barriers, which compounded issues around stigma and lack of trust in services.

### WHAT WORKS FOR WOMEN WHO SEX WORK?\*

Approaches that take account of, and seek to address, trauma and stigma are vital. We also have robust new insight about what types and patterns of delivery work best. Most women who sex work specifically want face-to-face support via drop-ins (57%), outreach services (48%) or regular (weekly) sessions (38%).

Overwhelmingly, women want services that are available all days of the week including the weekend and evenings. 34% of women also said they needed practical help like transport to appointments. Trusted relationships are very important. Women who sex work want female support staff, and someone they know who will not judge them.

Very often, how support is provided is at least as important as what is offered:

*"Sex workers report needing non-judgmental, sex worker friendly services. Some services that aim to support workers can add to the stigma they experience, and respondents requested that they 'Stop shaming us', citing the difficulties in discussing issues with support services that hold strong ideological positions against sex work"*

## RECOMMENDATIONS – HOW COMMISSIONERS CAN USE THIS INSIGHT

The majority of organisational stakeholders surveyed (67%) believe that there are gaps in services for women who sex work in GM. They suggest:

- Comprehensive, multidisciplinary services like MASH across Greater Manchester
- Women-only drop-in services for sex workers across Greater Manchester
- Gender-specific outreach in all boroughs for women sleeping rough who may be exploited sexually
- Affordable, safe, accommodation with appropriate person-centred, trauma responsive support for women who are sex working across the whole of GM.

In addition, we believe that ensuring that the experiences of women who sex work and experience homelessness are shared with leaders and policy makers, will improve systems and services for women.

If we can secure adequate resources, we will expand in ways that explicitly meet the commitments set out in the [GM Homelessness Prevention Strategy](#). We have particular expertise to contribute, including (but not only) around gender- and trauma-informed approaches, and coproduction with women who have lived experience of homelessness and multiple disadvantage. We want to ensure that the 5 'missions' of the strategy are also achieved by women who are sex working, particularly that they can access and sustain a home that is safe, decent, accessible and affordable, and that they have respite, recovery and reconnection support.

▶ **To discuss this briefing in more detail, and partnership opportunities, please contact Annie Emery, CEO: [annie@mash.org.uk](mailto: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](http://www.mash.org.uk)**