Dear Chair and Members of the Licensing Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the review of Aberdeen City Council's Sexual Entertainment Venue (SEV) Licensing Policy.

The Aberdeen Violence Against Women and Girls Partnership (VAWGP) brings together key statutory and third sector partners working to tackle violence against women and girls in Aberdeen. Our work is guided by Equally Safe, Scotland's national strategy to prevent and eradicate violence against women and girls, which is co-owned by the Scottish Government and COSLA. Equally Safe recognises that violence against women, including commercial sexual exploitation (CSE), is both a cause and a consequence of wider gender inequality. This includes activity within SEVs, where gendered power dynamics and the commodification of women's bodies are central to the business model.

Strategic Position on Sexual Entertainment Venues

Sexual entertainment venues are commercial spaces where predominantly men, who are fully clothed, pay to watch women, who are undressed or partially dressed, perform for their sexual gratification. The Violence Against Women and Girls Partnership holds the position that sexual entertainment venues are a form of commercial sexual exploitation. This is in line with Equally Safe, Scotland's national strategy to prevent and eradicate violence against women and girls. This position is also reflected in our local Commercial Sexual Exploitation Position Paper, which has been endorsed by the Public Protection Committees and Chief Officer Group (see Appendix 1).

This stance is not based on moral judgement and is not intended to disregard the diverse experiences of people working in SEVs. Rather, it recognises the broader context in which SEVs operate, as a business model that profits from the sexual objectification of women, most often for the entertainment of men. While some individuals see their participation as a personal choice, it's important to recognise that such choices are often shaped by wider systemic inequalities, such as poverty, gender-based violence, insecure housing and limited economic opportunities. For many women, engagement in the sex industry reflects a lack of choice rather than truly free and informed consent.

The continued licensing of SEVs undermines the city's broader efforts to tackle violence against women and promote gender equality. These venues normalise gender inequality by reinforcing harmful stereotypes that portray women as objects for male consumption. Their visibility in prominent public spaces send a message that the objectification and sexual exploitation of women is acceptable. This also shapes how boys and men understand gender, relationships and masculinity, reinforcing gendered expectations that can harm their wellbeing and how they relate to others. We also recognise that SEVs sit within a wider landscape of

commercial sexual exploitation, including prostitution, pornography and trafficking. Ending commercial sexual exploitation is not only important for women's safety, but also for building a more equal and respectful community for everyone.

This position reflects not only our commitments under Equally Safe but also international frameworks such as the Istanbul Convention[1], which recognises sexual exploitation as a form of violence against women and a violation of human rights. Local authorities have a legal duty under the Public Sector Equality Duty to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between people. This requires actively considering how decisions affect different groups, particularly those already facing disadvantage. Licensing decisions such as those relating to SEVs are not just administrative, they can have real implications for advancing equality and building a more inclusive society.

The Violence Against Women and Girls Partnership holds the view that the appropriate number of SEV licences in Aberdeen is zero. In the absence of an immediate move to this position, we strongly urge Aberdeen City Council to adopt a clear policy of phased reduction, with a long-term goal of reaching zero.

Response to Consultation Questions

1. As there are currently six licensed premises in the city centre at the time of writing, but only four are in operation, what would be an appropriate number of Sexual Entertainment Venue premises in Aberdeen city centre?

Other

2. If your answer to the above question is "Other", please provide your suggestion below.

The Violence Against Women and Girls Partnership holds a clear position that there should be no sexual entertainment venues operating in Aberdeen. SEVs are a form of commercial sexual exploitation, as recognised within Equally Safe, Scotland's national strategy co-owned by the Scottish Government and COSLA. Their existence is fundamentally incompatible with the aims of Equally Safe and with Aberdeen's commitments to the equality, safety and wellbeing of women.

The council has the legal power to regulate and limit SEVs under the Air Weapons and Licensing (Scotland) Act 2015. This gives Aberdeen the opportunity to determine the appropriate number of SEVs in the city, including the option of setting a zero limit.

In our view existing SEV licences should not be renewed. This would allow for a managed approach to ending SEV provision in the city and sends a clear message that the public licensing of commercial sexual exploitation is not aligned with Aberdeen's values or policy direction.

If the committee is currently not willing to set a zero limit, we recommend that the number of SEV licences be capped at four, reflecting the current number of operational venues. This number should then be reassessed each time a venue closes or a licence is surrendered, with

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[1] The Istanbul Convention, ratified by 45 countries including the UK, is formally titled The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence.

a clear policy that no new licences are issued to replace them. This would result in a phased reduction in SEV provision, ultimately leading to zero.

3. Should the number of Sexual Entertainment Venue premises outwith the city centre remain at zero?

Yes.

4. If your answer to the above question is "No", please explain why.

N/A

5. Have you noticed any impact on the community from the introduction of the licensing of Sexual Entertainment Venues?

Yes.

6. If you have answered "Yes" to the above question, please explain what the impact has been.

While the introduction of SEV licensing has provided a degree of oversight, there has been no assessment of whether it has actually improved the experiences or safety of performers working in these venues, a key aim of regulation. Without meaningful monitoring or evaluation, it's difficult to know whether the licensing system is achieving the intended outcome.

Members of the Violence Against Women and Girls Partnership, and others working across the VAWG sector, continue to raise concerns about the broader impact of SEVs on women and the community. These concerns are grounded in professional experience and a wider understanding of how venues that centre the sexual objectification of women can shape attitudes, reinforce harmful gender norms and influence behaviour.

We don't currently have strong national or local data on the impact of SEVs and more work is needed to understand the experiences of performers, women who live, work or socialise in areas where SEVs are based, and women in the wider community. We recommend that the Council explore ways to better understand these impacts, including through community engagement, equality impact assessments, and conversations with both performers and women's support organisations.

There is also concern that the presence of SEVs contributes to an environment where some women feel less safe, particularly at night, potentially influencing how they use and move through public spaces. This is especially relevant in Aberdeen, where SEVs are located in the heart of the city centre, close to major transport links, shopping areas, and hospitality venues. Safety in public spaces (including accessing public transport and fear of sexual harassment) was a key issue raised by local women in the recent Aberdeen Gender Inequality and Poverty Report[2]. The visibility of SEVs in the city centre contributes to the normalisation of the objectification of women and raises questions about the kind of city we want to be and the

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[2] https://www.swbg.org.uk/content/publications/SWBG-Aberdeen-Report.pdf

message we send about gender equality. Aberdeen has an opportunity to shape a city centre that reflects its commitment to inclusion, safety, and equality for everyone.

The impact of SEVs extends beyond women and girls. In a culture where sexual entertainment is often very visible and accepted without much question, it can send messages about what is expected of men and boys, to be sexually dominant, emotionally detached and entitled to women's bodies. The normalisation of sexual objectification for commercial purposes reinforces unhelpful gender roles and unhealthy, unrealistic expectations of masculinity. This is not good for the wellbeing of men and boys, as it can reinforce limiting ideas of what it means to be a man and also the idea that women are less equal or less deserving of respect, making it harder to form healthy, equal relationships.

7. Do you have any comments on any aspect of the existing Sexual Entertainment Venue licensing policy?

The current policy states that the appropriate upper limit of sexual entertainment venues in Aberdeen City Centre is six. The Violence Against Women and Girls Partnership holds the position that the appropriate number of SEVs is zero. We therefore believe the policy should be revised to reflect this, or at the very least, support a phased reduction in licences rather than maintaining a cap of six.

While we do not support the continued licensing of SEVs, we believe it's important to contribute to the policy review to help ensure that, if any licences are granted, they are subject to the strongest possible safeguards.

We note that the policy states the Licensing Committee does not take a moral stance on SEVs. However, recognising SEVs as a form of commercial sexual exploitation, as defined in Equally Safe, Scotland's national strategy jointly owned by the Scottish Government and COSLA, is not about morality. It is about meeting our public sector equality duties and addressing the structural gender inequalities that underpin all forms of violence against women and girls.

We recommend that the policy is strengthened through a clearer and more explicit recognition that SEVs are part of the broader landscape of commercial sexual exploitation, as defined in Equally Safe. While the policy does reference Equally Safe in the section on violence against women and girls, we believe this could be developed further.

In particular, we suggest:

- Including a statement in the policy introduction acknowledging that SEVs contribute to the normalisation of gender inequality and are recognised as a form of commercial sexual exploitation in Equally Safe, the national strategy co-owned by the Scottish Government and COSLA.

- Acknowledging that many women working in SEVs do so within the context of structural inequalities, such as poverty and other intersecting forms of disadvantage. These factors can limit women's choices and lead to engagement in the sex industry when there are a lack of genuine alternatives.

- Explicitly referencing the local authority's responsibilities under the Public Sector Equality Duty, including the requirement to consider how SEV licensing decisions affect women's safety and gender equality.

- Requiring equality impact assessments for all SEV licence applications, renewals, and any future policy changes, with specific consideration of the impact on women's safety, wellbeing and equality.

- More clearly applying the location considerations in line with the Air Weapons and Licencing (Scotland) Act 2015. The act requires local authorities to consider the character of the locality, including the presence of schools, places of worship and services supporting women, children and young people. It also requires consideration of whether there have been incidents of anti-social behaviour, sexual assault, prostitution, harassment, trafficking or exploitation in the area. Despite this several current SEVs are within close proximity to such spaces, in many cases less than a kilometre away. There is little evidence to suggest that these location and contextual factors have been assessed in practice. We would recommend the policy include a clear commitment to applying these transparently and consistently.

We also believe the policy could be strengthened by providing more clarity on how licence conditions are monitored and enforced. This should include the use of unannounced inspections and clear consequences for non-compliance. Transparent and consistent enforcement helps make sure that venues are meeting the required standards and that performers' safety and wellbeing are prioritised.

8. Do you have any comments on the existing set of standard conditions attached to Sexual Entertainment Venue licences – these can be found at pages 13–15 of the policy?

While the Partnership does not support the continued licensing of SEVs, we believe it is important to help strengthen existing safeguards should any licences remain in place.

There are a number of areas where we believe the current standard conditions could be improved to better protect performers.

- The customer code of conduct should include clear language on consent, respectful behaviour and zero tolerance for harassment, with prominent signage at entrances, tables and in toilets to reinforce expectations and promote safety.

- The use of the phrase "conduct of performers" places undue responsibility on individual workers rather than venue management and licence holders. We recommend replacing this with "conditions of performance" or "performance regulations".

- The performer information pack should include clear signposting to advice and support services, such as those offering information on health care, domestic abuse, sexual assault (SARCS), mental health, sexual health and financial/debt support. Key information about these services should also be displayed in staff

and performer areas.

- Add a condition requiring venues to have a clear and accessible reporting process for complaints or concerns raised by performers, including an option to report anonymously.

- Clarify that any breach of performer boundaries, including attempts by customers to negotiate services outside the venue or violate rules, should be logged and trigger a review by management.

- All staff should receive regular training on how to identify and respond to signs of exploitation, including human trafficking and coercion. Training should include how to escalate concerns appropriately.

- The current condition (28) requires a written policy but does not specify what it should cover. We recommend this include details such as access to safe transport home, staff support at the end of shifts and protocols for responding to harassment or unwanted attention outside the venue.

- While the policy currently requires booths not be fully enclosed (condition 29), we recommend also requiring that any semi-private spaces have either real-time CCTV coverage or direct staff supervision to prevent breaches of boundaries, exploitation or violence.

- Payment and remuneration records should clearly distinguish between wages, tips, and any venue-imposed fees or charges. This ensures transparency and protects performers from exploitative financial practices.

9. Would you like to make any further comments relating to the Sexual Entertainment Venue licensing policy?

This is an opportunity for Aberdeen to align its licensing approach with national policy commitments and take a practical step to reduce gendered harm in the city. As a modern and progressive city, Aberdeen should adopt a licensing policy that supports a managed approach to ending SEV provision.

We recognise that this position may feel like a radical departure from current practice. However, strong and proactive action is necessary if we are to tackle the root causes of violence against women and girls and uphold our shared commitments under Equally Safe.

Appendix 1: CSE Position Paper

Commercial Sexual Exploitation: Position Paper and Information Briefing

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to state the position of the Aberdeen City Violence Against Women and Girls Partnership on commercial sexual exploitation (CSE). This paper provides an overview of key issues, highlighting the inherently exploitative nature of CSE and its disproportionate impact on women and girls, while acknowledging the diverse experiences of those involved. It explores the factors that lead to individuals becoming involved in the sex industry, the impact on those involved, the motivations and attitudes of men who consume sexual services, and the broader social implications of CSE. By establishing our position, we aim to advocate for policies and practices that reduce harm, support those affected, challenge demand, and tackle the normalisation of CSE.

Our Position

Commercial sexual exploitation is a pervasive form of gender-based violence that disproportionately impacts women and girls, though men, boys, and non-binary individuals are also affected. CSE often involves coercion, lack of genuine choice, and systemic inequalities rooted in patriarchal structures that commodify and dehumanise individuals. Tackling gender inequality as a root cause of violence against women and girls (VAWG) is central to our approach.

While recognising diverse experiences and perspectives within the sex trade, our position, aligned with the principles of *Equally Safe: Scotland's Strategy for Preventing and Eradicating Violence Against Women and Girls* (2023), prioritises addressing instances of CSE that are involuntary or exploitative.

We emphasise the importance of disrupting and deterring demand for sexual exploitation, recognising that without demand, the cycle of exploitation cannot continue. Addressing this demand is essential to breaking the cycle and preventing further harm.

Our commitment extends to improving access to support services, reducing stigma, and advocating for compassionate approaches that support, protect, and empower individuals providing sexual services. We recognise the social and economic factors that can drive involvement in CSE, such as poverty, lack of housing, and limited access to education or employment opportunities, and are committed to addressing these challenges. This includes developing safe exit pathways, providing vital services such as housing, healthcare, and

employment support, and promoting harm reduction strategies to improve safety and wellbeing for those who remain in the industry.

We oppose approaches that broadly legitimise or regulate all forms of CSE as "work" without addressing the inherent power imbalances involved. Instead, we advocate for accountability for those who purchase sex, challenge societal normalisation of sexual exploitation, and work towards a society where no one is compelled to sell sex as a means of survival.

Definition

Commercial sexual exploitation refers to the exploitation of another person's body through coercion, manipulation, or abuse of vulnerability. Most commonly, it involves men purchasing sexual services from women or benefiting financially from their exploitation. CSE includes activities such as prostitution, internet or phone sex, stripping, lap dancing, the production of sexually explicit materials (e.g. pornography), sex tourism, and trafficking.

For many, involvement in CSE is driven by coercion, manipulation, or economic desperation, with systemic barriers compromising genuine consent. Women make up the majority of those in the sex industry, with estimates suggesting they account for 85–90% (Scambler, 2007). However, accurately quantifying the scope of the sex industry is challenging. Some activities, such as stripping or creating sexual content online, are more socially accepted and not widely reported on, while others, such as trafficking-related exploitation, are hidden due to their criminal nature.

Even when framed as voluntary, CSE reinforces power imbalances and perpetuates cycles of oppression. Its acceptance sustains harmful stereotypes, contributing to women and girls being viewed as sexual objects, and fosters a culture tolerant of gender-based violence.

Understanding the Gendered Drivers of Women's Exploitation in CSE

CSE is not solely the result of individual choices but is shaped by systemic factors that disproportionately impact women and girls. Understanding why women are more at risk of becoming involved in CSE requires us to look at the economic, social, and cultural drivers that perpetuate gender inequality and create vulnerability to exploitation. While some individuals may view their involvement in CSE as a form of empowerment or a way to exercise agency, our focus is on addressing the experiences of the majority who are impacted by coercion, limited choices, systemic inequities and other overlapping factors.

Economic hardship is a significant factor driving involvement in CSE. Systemic inequalities, such as the gender pay gap, discrimination in hiring, and limited access to education and stable employment, mean women, particularly from marginalised communities, are more likely to live in poverty. Large gender disparities in unpaid labour, particularly in parenting and care work, further exacerbate financial inequalities. In the UK, 45% of single-parent households, most of which are headed by women, live in poverty (Gingerbread, 2022). This economic vulnerability is intensified by women's overrepresentation in informal, low-paid, and insecure work; 25% of women are in severely insecure jobs compared to 15% of men (Florrison, 2022).

A person's intersecting identities, such as ethnicity, immigration status, disability, and LGBTQ+ identity, can amplify factors which may lead someone to become involved in CSE by creating structural barriers and limiting access to essential resources. For instance, women with disabilities, who may face systemic barriers to education, employment, and support services, are up to three times more likely to experience sexual violence, including trafficking and CSE, than non-disabled women (World Health Organisation, 2021). In 2021 the English Collective of Prostitutes estimated that 41% of people involved in selling or exchanging sex in the UK are migrants, with the majority from Eastern Europe. They may face heightened risks around becoming involved in CSE or difficulties exiting CSE. This could be due to factors such as fears of deportation, limited social networks, and limited access to suitable services. These overlapping factors not only increase the risk of becoming involved in CSE but also create significant obstacles to accessing support or resources to exit, perpetuating cycles of exploitation.

The Encompass Network, a collective of Scottish services working to support women affected by, or at risk of becoming involved in any area of the sex industry, conducted a snapshot in 2023 that showed among the 53 women supported by their services, 43% had experienced sexual abuse as children, and 28% had been in care as children. Other adverse experiences, such as homelessness and involvement in the justice system, further contribute to this vulnerability, with 49% having been involved in the justice system and 9% having convictions relating to prostitution. 66% had experienced domestic abuse, and 60% had experienced rape or sexual assault, highlighting the pervasive impact of gender-based violence in their lives. Domestic abuse can further entrap women financially, as abusers may control or restrict access to money, damage credit, or interfere with employment. Substance use, which is often a response to trauma, can function as both a coping mechanism and a factor that drives some women into CSE, as they may turn to selling or exchanging sex to fund their alcohol or drug use.

Cultural and social norms play a significant role in women's involvement in CSE. Societal norms that objectify women perpetuate the idea that their bodies are primarily for male consumption. Research shows that sexually objectifying media can lead to the dehumanization of women, reinforcing perceptions of women as objects rather than individuals (Galdi et al., 2021). Media representations that sexualize women and girls and glamorize the commercialisation of sexual services normalize these beliefs, making exploitation seem more acceptable. Studies highlight how such portrayals shape societal attitudes, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and reinforcing gendered power imbalances. (Papageorgiou et al., 2023). These cultural influences intersect with systemic barriers, such as the criminal consequences faced by women involved in CSE, which create significant obstacles to exiting. This reflects broader societal attitudes that place the burden of criminality on women rather than addressing the systemic factors that drive them into CSE. At the same time, the lack of legal consequences for those who buy sex or profit from CSE perpetuates demand, enabling exploitation to continue unchecked (Grenfell et al., 2022).

 While CSE primarily affects women, men can also be victims, often experiencing exploitation at the hands of other men. Like women, they may become involved in CSE due to factors such as economic hardship, experiences of violence or abuse or marginalisation due to intersecting identities. Men may also face unique challenges, including less recognition as victims and specific stigmas that make it harder to access support.

Addressing CSE effectively requires understanding these gendered dynamics. Gender-sensitive approaches that promote economic empowerment, challenge harmful norms and provide support for those affected are essential for creating pathways out of exploitation and reducing demand.

Understanding Demand and Men's Attitudes Towards CSE

Understanding why men purchase sex or engage in other forms of commercial sexual exploitation is necessary to disrupting demand and addressing harm. Demand drives the supply of CSE, and men's participation reflects broader societal norms that objectify women and uphold patriarchal systems. These norms perpetuate the belief that men are entitled to access women's bodies to satisfy their own desires or address personal struggles.

Men engage in CSE, including purchasing sex, consuming pornography, and attending sexual entertainment venues, for self-reported reasons often tied to unmet emotional or physical needs. Loneliness, rejection, low self-esteem, and dissatisfaction with traditional relationships are frequently cited as motivations (Farley et al., 2009). For many, these activities provide a sense of control and a way to avoid the complexities of emotional intimacy and accountability, reinforcing patriarchal power dynamics (Bindel, 2017). Self-reported motivations for consuming pornography include sexual curiosity, stress relief, and the exploration of fantasies (Burtăverde et al., 2021). Similarly, men describe attending sexual entertainment venues as a form of escapism, a way to feel dominant, and an opportunity to fulfil fantasies in an environment designed to prioritize male desires and reinforce power over women (Frank, 2005).

Regular consumption of sexual content, particularly violent or degrading pornography, reinforces harmful stereotypes, distorts views on intimacy, consent, and equality, and desensitizes men to real-life violence. Studies show that exposure to such content fosters attitudes that normalize coercion, reduce empathy for women, and trivialize sexual aggression (Malamuth et al., 2000; Garner and Elvines, 2013).

Research also shows that men who purchase sex often rationalise their actions by dehumanising women in prostitution, viewing them as fundamentally different from other women. This enables buyers to justify exploitation while disregarding the systemic harm they perpetuate. Farley et al. (2011) found that while men were aware of the harm caused by prostitution and human trafficking, they often chose to ignore their role in perpetuating it. In the same study, 96% of men claimed prostitution is consensual between two adults, yet 73% acknowledged that women often enter prostitution out of economic desperation, 50% agreed women are victimized by pimps, and 85% believed women do not enjoy the sexual encounters.

Although some men report feelings of guilt or shame after purchasing sex these emotions often coexist with rationalizations that minimize harm or shift blame onto women. For others, reliance on transactional relationships becomes a way to cope with personal struggles, further perpetuating exploitation and cycles of emotional distress (Farley et al., 2011). However, these personal conflicts do not absolve men of responsibility for the harm caused by their actions.

Impact on Those Involved in CSE

Women involved in selling or exchanging sex face a range of complex and overlapping risks that can significantly affect their health, safety, and overall wellbeing. These risks are shaped by factors such as economic hardship, social marginalisation, past trauma, and, in many cases, coercion or trafficking. The true scale of harm experienced by women trafficked into CSE is difficult to capture in statistics, as their experiences frequently remain hidden due to fear, criminalisation, and systemic barriers to disclosure.

Physical violence is a widespread danger; Church et al. (2001) found that 81% of women in street prostitution had experienced violence from clients, compared to 48% of those working indoors. Similarly, Hester and Westmarland (2004) reported that three-quarters of UK women in prostitution had been physically assaulted, with over half experiencing rape or serious sexual assault. Women involved in CSE also face a significantly higher risk of homicide than the general population, as highlighted by Cunningham et al. (2018).

Despite these risks, incidents of violence often go unreported or are not adequately addressed by the legal system. Research from National Ugly Mugs, a UK charity focused on ending violence against individuals in the sex trade, highlights a lack of engagement with law enforcement among those reporting victimisation. In 2020, only 7.7% of off-street independent workers chose to involve the police, and just 69% consented to share information anonymously with them. These figures reflect a mistrust of law enforcement, leaving many cases unresolved and contributing to ongoing cycles of harm and exploitation.

The psychological impact on women in CSE is profound. Many experience chronic anxiety, depression, and complex trauma. Substance use can become a coping mechanism to manage these stressors, further entrenching women in cycles of exploitation. A snapshot exercise conducted by the Encompass Network in November 2023 revealed that 89% of the 53 women supported on a single day had mental health issues, with 68% experiencing depression, 49% anxiety, and 19% PTSD. Substance use was also prevalent, with 83% using drugs, including crack cocaine (47%) and heroin (42%). These figures underscore the interconnected nature of mental health challenges, substance use, and systemic barriers, which make exiting CSE incredibly difficult. Although there is limited research directly linking commercial sexual exploitation to physical health issues, studies have shown that experiences of trauma and poor mental health can significantly contribute to long-term physical health problems (Schnurr et al, 2021). Trauma has been associated with conditions such as chronic pain, cardiovascular issues, gastrointestinal problems, and a weakened immune system. These physical health issues may compound the difficulties faced by those involved in CSE, further limiting their access to essential support and healthcare.

Stigma and discrimination compound these challenges by creating barriers to accessing services. Healthcare and mental health support are often inaccessible or inadequate for women in CSE. A survey of frontline workers by Potter et al. (2022) found that while nearly half felt primary care was somewhat accessible, the majority believed these services failed to meet women's needs. Access to mental health support was even more limited, with three-quarters of respondents stating it was inaccessible or mostly inaccessible. Contributing factors include trauma, fear of stigma, and challenges in navigating referral processes. Without adequate support, many women face ongoing financial instability, social isolation, and limited alternative employment opportunities, making a different future seem unattainable (UK Government, 2020).

While the online sex industry is often perceived as safer than in-person exploitation, it comes with its own set of risks. Women involved in activities such as camming, sexting, or live interactions frequently face digital abuse, including harassment, threats, and privacy breaches. Beyond the Gaze (2017) reported that nearly half of women in the online sex industry had experienced repeated unwanted contact, with many subjected to verbal abuse. A BBC investigation highlighted additional dangers, including doxing (publishing private or identifying information online) and digital stalking, which can lead to significant emotional distress. Moreover, the pressure to continuously produce explicit content to maintain income can lead to psychological harm and financial instability. Women in this industry often face coercion or manipulation to perform acts they find uncomfortable, and the unauthorized distribution of their content can result in ongoing harm, including social stigma and difficulty finding alternative employment (Donevan, 2021). These risks illustrate that even in perceived safety, exploitation and harm persist.

The experiences of men involved in the sex industry differ but are similarly shaped by social norms and expectations. Men face risks such as physical violence, sexual assault, and psychological harm, though these often manifest differently compared to women. Jamel (2011) found that men are less likely to experience physical violence from clients, possibly due to perceptions that male clients, particularly gay men, are less confrontational or that those who identify as straight may wish to keep their involvement with male individuals providing sexual services a secret. Additionally, the power dynamics between male clients and male providers are often less pronounced than those between male clients and women in CSE.

Despite these differences, men in CSE also encounter significant structural barriers. They may face heightened stigma due to societal perceptions of masculinity, which can make their experiences of harm less visible and discourage them from seeking help. Support services often focus on women, leaving men with limited access to tailored resources. This gap in services further entrenches men in cycles of exploitation, as they lack the support needed to safely exit CSE (Hester et al., 2019).

The complex and varied risks faced by individuals in CSE, whether in-person, online, or through the production of pornographic content, are shaped by systemic inequalities that perpetuate harm and exploitation. Addressing these risks requires a nuanced understanding of how these factors intersect and contribute to the challenges faced by those involved.

Broader Societal Impacts of CSE

CSE both reflects and shapes societal attitudes and behaviours that contribute to gender inequality and normalise harmful practices. Societal norms that objectify women and tolerate exploitation create an environment where CSE is more likely to occur. In turn, the prevalence and visibility of CSE perpetuate these harmful attitudes, making exploitation seem more acceptable and further entrenching gender inequality. This cycle undermines efforts to promote equality and has far-reaching consequences for society as a whole.

CSE plays a role in normalising violence against women and girls. When sexual exploitation is accepted or overlooked, it suggests that coercion, control and violence against women's bodies is permissible. This normalisation fosters an environment where gender-based violence is more tolerated or dismissed, making it harder for survivors to seek justice and support.

CSE can reinforce harmful stereotypes about women and girls. By commodifying women's bodies, the sex industry creates a culture where women are valued primarily for their physical appearance and sexual availability, which undermines efforts to achieve gender equality (Papageorgiou et al, 2023). The visibility of CSE impacts how men and boys view women, often reducing them to objects for male consumption, diminishing empathy for women's experiences and perpetuating disrespectful or abusive behaviours (Farley et al, 2011). Exposure to CSE through media, pornography, or every day conversations can negatively influence how boys and young men perceive relationships and consent, fostering attitudes that prioritise male entitlement over mutual respect and equality (APA, 2010).

While these impacts are significant, it is important to recognise that not all women involved in selling sexual services view their experiences in the same way. For some, participation in the sex industry may represent a form of empowerment, self-expression or control over their own bodies and choices. Nonetheless, despite individual perceptions, the broader context of CSE contributes to shaping social norms which impacts all women and girls. These varied perspectives remind us that discussions about sexual freedom and rights must balance both personal autonomy and the reality of exploitation within CSE.

Local Context: Aberdeen

Local Initiatives

In Aberdeen efforts are underway to address commercial sexual exploitation through local initiatives:

Operation Begonia: This initiative involves a dedicated team of Police Scotland officers focused on identifying women involved in 'on-street' prostitution. The aim is to provide tailored support to help these women exit the sex trade, in collaboration with multi-agency partners. In 2023, Operation Begonia engaged with 237 women, conducted 58 patrols, and reached 13 new women (with an additional 20 who have not been involved in selling sex for over a year).

Quay Services: Provided by Alcohol and Drugs Action (ADA), Quay Services offers dedicated support to women involved in prostitution in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire. In total, there were 218 contacts in 2023, with 12 unique clients receiving ongoing support and 39 clients receiving support specifically for involvement in selling or exchanging sex.

These initiatives are an important starting point for addressing CSE locally. They provide essential support and services to individuals affected by exploitation and are a key part of the city's response to this issue.

Conclusion

Commercial sexual exploitation is a pervasive form of gender-based violence that exploits systemic inequalities, disproportionately affecting women and girls, but also impacting men, boys, and non-binary individuals. It perpetuates harmful stereotypes, reinforces gender inequalities, and normalises violence, creating a culture where exploitation is tolerated. While acknowledging the diverse experiences of those involved, our position remains clear: CSE is inherently exploitative and incompatible with gender equality and human rights.

To reduce the harm associated with CSE, we believe it is important to challenge the societal norms that allow it to continue, reduce demand for sexual services, and provide meaningful support to those affected. This includes supporting policies that discourage the purchase of sex, expanding access to support services, and fostering greater public understanding of the realities of CSE.

We call on policymakers, service providers, and community members to join us in this effort to challenge all forms of CSE, protect and empower those affected, and build a society where no one is compelled to sell sex as a means of survival. By working together, we can help create a safer, more just society for all.

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