

## What causes prostitution?

This presentation is based on information gathered at a series of training days on 'Understanding the Harm caused through Prostitution' which was delivered by the Women's Support Project over the past two years. These were attended by between 180 and 200 people from a range of backgrounds - homelessness, addiction, mental health, health, social work, education, voluntary sector, criminal justice. Around 80% of participants were female.

In the course of the training participants were asked to give their view on 'what causes prostitution'. A total of **417** suggestions were offered on the cause, including repeat suggestions. All the suggestions were then organised into **23 categories**, and it was noted how many times each cause had been suggested.

Category	Number of times suggested
<b>Poverty</b> (poverty / debt / low benefits / pay for education / no recourse to public funds)	62
<b>Addiction</b> (drugs / partner's drugs / alcohol)	57
<b>Coerced / pressured / forced</b> (pressured / forced by partner - 24 Forced / pimped - 18 Trafficked - 5 Tricked into it - 1)	48
<b>Childhood abuse or neglect</b> (child sexual abuse most frequently mentioned form of abuse)	35
<b>Lack of alternatives</b> (no choices / no skills/ poor education easy to fall into)	29

<b>Homelessness</b>	25
<b>Family history of prostitution</b> (learned behaviour / it's all you know)	16
<b>Lack of self esteem</b> (form of self harm)	16
<b>Peer pressure</b> (in with the wrong crowd)	14
<b>Think it will lead to a better life for self/family</b> (status / getting used to money / for children perceived financial gain)	14
<b>Demand</b>	13
<b>Public's attitude</b> (historical, myths, cultural acceptance)	11
<b>Family breakdown</b>	10
<b>Miscellaneous</b> (under a spell, likes sex and gets paid, sexual confusion, slavery, bereavement, tolerance zone, through sex industry, reclaiming control, turning the tables)	9
<b>Mental health issues</b>	9
<b>Easy or quick money</b>	8
<b>Survival</b>	8
<b>Lack of support networks</b> (isolation / no social networks)	8
<b>Power imbalance</b>	7

(abuse of power / social inequality / men have money)

**Need for love and affection** 6  
(Loneliness and boredom)

**Lack of deterrent** 5  
(preferred to other crimes / Criminal Justice response)

**Media coverage / glamorisation** 4

**Learning disability** 3

Many of the suggested causes reflect a lack of knowledge and understanding of the reality of prostitution.

- 'Reclaiming control' and 'turning the tables' was puzzling at first - but these refer to women who support their partner's drug use through prostitution. The assumption is that the woman will now have the upper hand in the relationship because she is providing the money. This is not our experience - it is more likely that the woman will have to cope with the prostitution, plus be blamed and abused if she doesn't make enough money, plus have most or all of the money taken away, and on top of all that, probably be abused by her partner because of her involvement in prostitution, and be made to feel guilty that he has to put up with her 'going with other men'.
- Similarly 'loneliness and boredom' implies that prostitution will lead to positive attention and some social excitement.
- Peer pressure / in with the wrong crowd' may have some truth in it but there is a tendency to see this as being about a woman making bad choices or being naïve and there is a lack of awareness of the extent to which women and girls are actively targeted and groomed by men seeking to exploit them.
- "Likes sex and gets paid for it" suggests a lack of understanding of *unwanted sex* and of the impact on women of repeatedly submitting to unwanted sex. We need to be clear that although the women are consenting to sexual activity, this is unwanted sex. In order to be able to cope with constant unwanted sex, the women need to dissociate, either by 'splitting off' within their own head, or through

use of drugs or alcohol. This is one of the reasons why prostitution is harmful, in and of itself, regardless of the setting.

However the main point of this paper relates to how people have interpreted the question '**What causes prostitution?**'.

In total there were **417 suggestions**, which were organised into **23 categories**.

Of these, **only 20 suggestions**, in **2 categories**, refer to buyers of sex.

In other words **less than 5%** of the suggested causes apply to buyers.

All other suggestions and categories refer to women selling sex and are actually factors that lead or force women into prostitution, rather than the cause of prostitution itself. In short almost everyone answered a different question - not 'what causes prostitution', but '**why do women get involved in prostitution**'

The buyers are invisible. When people hear the word prostitution, they think 'prostitute'. This happens to the extent that people sometimes interpret the expression 'anti prostitution', as 'anti prostitute'. It was helpful to understand this, because previously we had been puzzled by the strength of response from some people to the use of this term.

It is useful to look at the parallel of domestic violence - there has been so much work done on raising awareness of domestic violence that if an individual or an organisation declares that they are 'against domestic violence', this is understood as being 'against the person who is using violence'. On the whole, people understand that our disapproval is aimed at the abuser, and we are not judging the victim. This is not the case for prostitution as yet, and we should be aware that when we used the term 'anti-prostitution', some people will assume that our disapproval is aimed at the women. (We are not suggesting that this term shouldn't be used - just that sometimes an explanation of the meaning might be helpful)

Another aspect that needs to be understood more clearly is that it is the act of *buying sex* which 'makes' a woman a prostitute. When this is not

understood, it impacts on the approach to women in prostitution, often holding them responsible for the exploitation they have suffered.

We can see this reflected in policy papers. For example a local authority committee report on tackling street prostitution states "there is a need to look at the root causes of why women become prostitutes" - without considering the demand side (April 2005)

Being Outside, the report of the Expert Group on Prostitution states

"If an effective, lasting impact is to be made on reducing the numbers of women involved in street prostitution.....not only must those currently involved be successfully helped to move away from prostitution.....but ways must be found to stop more women becoming involved", but again, demand is not specifically addressed. (Dec 2004, 7.1)

Women are seen as actively making a choice - men are invisible or regarded as passive. Some of the buters have even convinced themselves that they are helping the women. "well the women are there anyway". "I thought I was helping her out", "she needs the money".

What hasn't been addressed in such policy papers in the past is the fact that if the buyers were removed, women would no longer turn to prostitution as a means of survival because it wouldn't work for them if there wasn't a demand.

This approach also ignores the fact that, if we could somehow solve all the problems of women currently in prostitution so that they could get out, it would only be a matter of days or weeks before a new group of desperate women would be found to replace them.

We need to be clear that

**..prostitution comes from male dominance, not from female nature.....**  
(Andrea Dworkin)

Even when buyers are thought of, it is generalised as 'demand' or social inequality. Most people do not have any clear ideas as to why some men buy

sex and others don't. When pressed the most common suggestions offered relate to men's perceived right to have sex and to be sexually serviced by women, e.g. can't get sex any other way, wife or partner is pregnant, wife or partner wont do certain things, because it is risky it is exciting, think it's acceptable, use of pornography.

Whatever justification is used, we need to be clear about what is happening

**"The men who use women as prostitutes...take women who have been sexually molested as children, who are poor, who are homeless, who have no help or solace in this society, and they use them"**

**Andrea Dworkin, Life and Death**

**Jan Macleod, Challenging Demand conference, 18<sup>th</sup> May 2006**

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