



***Practice  
Guide #10***

**Safeguarding Children of Women  
involved in street prostitution**

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### **Purpose of this Practice Briefing:**

Women who are involved in street prostitution are often vulnerable, with significant levels of chaos in their lives. Some of them are also mothers or will become pregnant. It should not be assumed, however, that children in such circumstances are suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm. This guide outlines some of the main issues to be considered when working with pregnant women or mothers who work the streets, which will assist practitioners to assess the level of risk they pose to their children.

### **Purpose of this Practice Guide:**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

A significant number of women are involved in prostitution; in saunas, private homes (their own, someone else's, or as part of a business) or out on the street. The increased use of the internet and mobile phones has resulted in many women contacting customers through technology, rather than having to be accessible via a public arena. So it is usually women who are the most chaotic and vulnerable who are street working; those who cannot obtain money through legitimate employment, or are even able to work in saunas or in a home environment. Inevitably some of the women will be mothers, or pregnant. There are men who are fathers who also sell sex on the streets, but they are a hidden group and on whom this briefing is not able to comment. Therefore this practice guide solely addresses the issues of women street sex workers and their children.

One of the main reasons that women work the streets is due to their use of heroin, crack cocaine, and / or alcohol. There are very few street workers who are not problematic users of substances. Their involvement in drug use and street prostitution impacts on their lives in many ways, including their mental and physical health; family finances; stable accommodation; contact with the police / courts / prison; relationships with partners, family and friends; being a victim of violence; organisation of self and family life.

Women who work the streets often have experienced childhood abuse themselves. There is wide spread stigma, prejudice and abuse from the public, and from some professionals, around prostitution. Street prostitution elicits the strongest level of disapproval, so it is not surprising that women involved have difficulty with such issues such as trust, self-esteem and confidence.

A woman who is working the streets may or may not have a partner, who may or may not be the father of her child/ren. If she has a partner, he may actively encourage her to work so that he does not have to commit crimes to fund his/their own drug use; he may 'support' her by being out on the street when she is working, noting car numbers in case she does not return for example. Alternatively, or sometimes as well, he may actively dislike her working or not want her to work. There is a myth that women involved in prostitution are pimped by their partners; for some this is true but the picture is not clear cut.

A woman who is involved in street prostitution can be, or become, a good parent. Children may not always be affected by their mother working, but are very likely to be if she is a problematic drug and / or alcohol user, entrenched in street sex work. A child of a woman involved in street prostitution may not always suffer, or be likely to suffer significant harm, but is at least likely to be a Child in Need, who is unlikely to achieve all five key outcomes without intervention from one or more services. There are a number of different factors which ultimately affect her ability to parent. These include:

- Her level of drug / alcohol use, and any resulting chaos
- Her level of insight into how her lifestyle may be detrimental to family life, and therefore her ability to safeguard her child/ren
- The number of children she has, their ages, individual needs and level of understanding
- The level of support she gets from her partner, family and friends.

The following sections outline the key questions for practitioners to consider when working with women involved in street prostitution, when undertaking assessments. Some of these factors exist in any assessment, but should be considered here within the context of the mother's involvement in street prostitution.

## **ISSUES FOR THE CHILD**

- What are the effects of the mother's drug and or alcohol use on the child's life?
- Does she have mental health problems that impact on the child?
- How does street working affect the mother and her ability to provide parenting for the child? Does she use (or use more) drug / alcohol to cope with what the work entails? Is she out late and therefore not functioning well in the mornings or sleeps in? If so how does this show, physically and / or emotionally? Does she suffer abuse / violence from punters? Does the child come into contact with her working life, for example does she bring punters home? Is the child ever exposed to unsuitable adults / sexual activity / sexual materials? Is the child ever left alone? Who cares for the child when the mother is out working? If so, who are the carers and is the child safe with them (they may be other vulnerable women)? Does the mother have a partner? Is he the child's father? How does he react to her working, and how does this impact on the child? Does the family live in stable accommodation or are they often moving? Has she been arrested / remanded? If so who looks after the child? Does she attend necessary appointments (health, criminal justice services, support to exit street work etc)?

- Does the child suffer bullying from other children or neighbours for example, who knows that the child's mother works? Does the child get to school or nursery regularly and on time? Are they able to do their homework, get involved in leisure or play activities? Is the child a young carer for mum / dad / other siblings? Are the child's health and development needs being met? Does the child have any additional needs – educational, or disability for example? If so does the mother adequately respond / cope?
- How consistent is her care of her child? What stable support networks does she have, including non-using partner / family / friends who will look after the child regularly and at any time of crisis? Is there enough money in the household for food / bills / clothes / toys etc? What other agencies are involved and how does she / the family engage with them?
- What is the impact of the above issues on the child, emotionally, behaviourally, physically (in ill health for example)? What interventions are already in place to support the child?

## ISSUES FOR PREGNANT WOMEN INVOLVED IN STREET PROSTITUTION

- How does she feel about her pregnancy and having a baby?
- What does she want to do about being pregnant – bring up the baby, adoption, termination?
- Does she need support with decision making and appointments if termination or adoptions, including post-termination and post adoption support?

### If she is keeping the baby:

- She will need a lot of support, and need to engage positively with multi-agency pregnancy teams e.g. drugs, midwifery, social care, voluntary sector agencies
- Is she still working the streets while pregnant?
- What impact has any other health issues of mother had on the baby, for example heavy smoking, poor nutrition, victim of violence, mental health problems
- What is the input / relationship / support of the baby's father?
- Drug / alcohol treatment may be required for the baby when born
- There may be some considerable stigma for the baby and mother, if the father is a punter
- How is she managing to care for and bond with her new baby?
- How are any other children reacting to their new sibling, especially in light of their family circumstances?
- Has she had other children removed / or who are being cared for by family members? What affect does this have on her now, in her relationship with her new born baby?

## WHAT TO DO IF YOU KNOW OR SUSPECT A MOTHER IS INVOLVED IN PROSTITUTION

- Speak to the mother openly and honestly. Developing trust is key to progress
- Speak to her about the ways that you think her child/ren may be affected. What insight does she show? Explain the options available for supporting her and her child/ren
- Obtain her consent to proceed with your preferred option

### **If you work in Universal Services:**

If you have any concern that a child (including an unborn child) is suffering, or likely to suffer significant harm, make an immediate referral to Children's Social Care. Otherwise:

- Speak to your line manager / safeguarding lead for advice at the earliest opportunity
- If you do not think the child/ren is suffering / likely to suffer significant harm, complete a CAF with the mother and child. Take action according to outcomes. It may be that additional support from universal services is all that is required to support the child, for example school
- Consider what action should be taken if she does not give consent; this may depend on level of concern. Speak with your line manager. Get advice from Children's Social Care and other agencies as appropriate.
- If at any later stage you have concerns about significant harm – contact Children's Social Care. Consent is not required in such circumstances.

For more information regarding parental drug / alcohol use, mental health problems and pregnancy or what to do if you are concerned about a child please refer to your Local Safeguarding Children Board Procedures.

### **If you work in Children's Social Care or other safeguarding services:**

When working with mothers involved in prostitution, it is essential not to assume that the mother cannot adequately parent her child/ren. It is only following a comprehensive assessment, taking into consideration the issues outlined above, that professional judgements can be made.

It is also important to remember that assessments are an ongoing process; circumstances for women involved in prostitution can fluctuate quickly, for the better, or sometimes the worse. For further information, please see your agency's safeguarding / child protection procedures.

## EXITING PROSTITUTION

In many towns and cities there are projects – usually within the voluntary sector – who work with women involved in prostitution, and support them to exit street sex work.

This includes access to drug / alcohol treatment; benefits; housing; childcare and other family issues; different therapies; employment / education; support with court cases etc.

Women do exit street prostitution. For some mothers, having a child or being pregnant is the catalyst for such change. It is vital, therefore, that every woman - wherever possible and without detriment to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of the child - is given the necessary support to keep her family together.