

# 'On the Streets': The Double Jeopardy of Being Homeless and a Street Sex Worker

Elaine Batty, Rionach Casey, and Kesia Reeve

## Abstract

Despite an extensive literature across the fields of urban studies, geography, public health, sociology, and criminality exploring the lived experiences of street sex workers, and an explicit acknowledgement of the prevalence of homelessness amongst this population there is surprisingly little attention paid to the relationship between homelessness and prostitution. Addressing this gap, the paper explores the (inter)relation of sex work and homelessness. It demonstrates that vulnerable housing situations expose women to sex work and/or increase the likelihood they will remain in the industry, just as involvement in street sex work can lead to homelessness. It will suggest that female sex workers are exposed to far greater risks and punishments if they are also homeless; and that homeless women are exposed to greater hardship and housing insecurity if they also work on the streets. This is articulated in terms of a double jeopardy. The paper reports findings from an empirical study still underway and is not fully developed. As such it remains relatively empirical, with the modest aim of exploring a hitherto acknowledged but under explored relationship between housing and prostitution.

**Key words:** street sex work, prostitution, homelessness, pathways, biography, double jeopardy

## Introduction

Street-based sex workers constitute some of the most excluded and marginalised individuals within the homeless (or those at risk of homelessness) population in Britain. The on-going policy focus on ending rough sleeping has ensured that resources are being directed towards the most visibly homeless, i.e. rough sleepers (the majority of whom are men) while at the same time homeless women, some of whom are sex workers, are on the streets, less visible, and less catered for. While it may be presumed that prostitution constitutes sex worker's biggest problems, the women themselves relate it to their homelessness, drug

addiction and lifestyles characterised by poverty, relationship and family break-up and multiple deprivation (Shelter, 2008).

There is a growing body of work in urban studies on the lived experiences of sex workers and the impact of the sex trade on their own health and life circumstances and on their clients, as well as on the urban environments in which they work. The literature regarding sex workers can be categorised into four main strands: public health and other health related aspects of prostitution (including drugs and mental health) (Nquyen *et al*, 2004; Jeal and Salisbury, 2007); criminal justice, policing and the regulation of sex workers in urban spaces (Pitcher, *et al*, 2006; O' Neill, *et al*, 2008), work related issues (contexts, conditions, managing risk, stresses and identity) (Barnard, 1993; Saunders, 2006, 2008) and research on clients (McKeganey and Barnard, 1996; Saunders, 2008).

In addition there is a long history of urban scholars investigating homelessness as a social phenomenon. Within this body of research homeless women are increasingly recognised as a discrete group within the homeless population. Previous research by two of the authors has analysed the challenges and barriers that women, some of whom are sex workers, face when they are homeless (Reeve, Casey and Goudie, 2007). While it has long been recognised that prostitution and homelessness are entangled issues (May, et al., 2007) comparatively little, with some notable exceptions (such as McNaughton and Sanders, 2007) has been written about the housing situations and histories of street sex workers. The article addresses this gap in the literature and seeks to build on previous work by making explicit the links between homelessness and working in the sex industry. It explores the particular and additional risk factors, articulated here as a *double jeopardy*, that present themselves when women are both homeless (or vulnerably housed) *and* sex workers.

## **Theory**

The housing pathways framework of analysis was a useful and appropriate means to begin to make sense of the data. It prompts consideration of both *structures* of the housing system and wider society – factors through which opportunities and choices are constrained or enabled, and the *actions* of individuals in response to these mechanisms and processes, which have a direct bearing on housing opportunities, needs and aspirations. Hence, the emphasis when exploring housing pathways is on uncovering the understandings and experiences of individuals *and* crucially, linking their actions to wider social structures. This approach enables analysis that moves beyond a dichotomous reading of structure and agency. The housing pathways approach seeks to capture the changing set of relationships

and interactions (practices) that an individual experiences in its consumption of housing through time (Clapham, 2002). A particular strength of the pathways approach is the importance placed on acknowledging and understanding the potential for variation and difference through time and between different places in patterns of housing consumption and associated interactions and relations between individuals and institutions. Reflecting on the issue of identity helps illustrate the importance of capturing this dynamic. Identity can play a key role in the consumption of housing, who a person thinks they are and how they are categorised by others informing their sense of where they belong. We use the pathways approach to shed light on the complex interaction of our respondents' biographies, the discourses that surround sex workers and their experiences of services, agencies and professionals that they come in contact with. Following Clapham (2003) this provides a framework which enables structural and personal factors to be considered together (p. 126). Rather than describing the structural factors as constraints and treating them independently from the biographical factors we focus not only on the behaviours of individual sex workers, but also on the structural factors which may have influenced their actions and increased their risk of homelessness.

## **Methodology**

This paper draws mainly on data from a study exploring the housing needs of homeless people with complex needs in a city in the UK Midlands. The project focused specifically on three client groups: street sex workers; problematic drug and alcohol users; and people with a history of violent or offending behaviour. This paper uses data regarding the street sex worker sample. The study utilised both quantitative and qualitative research methods. A total of 24 homeless or vulnerably housed women involved in street prostitution completed a relatively lengthy but predominantly 'closed question' survey which asked for details about their housing history, their work as a prostitute, other needs and vulnerabilities (drug use, offending behaviour, experience of the care system, mental health issues amongst others) and the support they had received. A total of 17 of these women were also interviewed in-depth (further details below). The majority of research participants were accessed through a local voluntary sector project working with street prostitutes although several were accessed through services working with homeless people, drug users, and rough sleepers.

The study team also spent many hours conducting participative observation in the aforementioned voluntary sector project, which is a resource and drop-in centre for street sex workers in the city. Members of the research team spent several afternoons a month (over a six month period) in the company of street sex workers as they relaxed in the centre, watching television, taking part in craft activities and eating meals. On two occasions two of the authors accompanied the project's outreach team on their night time outreach work in the red light areas. They observed the outreach workers making contact with the women and distributing hot drinks, condoms and information (including 'Ugly Mugs' sheets). The authors conducted a count of sex workers and also used the opportunity to be introduced to several of the women and to recruit as many as possible for the in-depth interviews.

This paper also draws in places on research conducted in 2006 exploring the experiences and needs of homeless women. There was no explicit focus on street sex work here but a relationship between prostitution and sex work emerged in analysis. A total of 44 single homeless women were interviewed in depth in four English cities, supplemented by a questionnaire survey of 144 single homeless women in 17 English towns and cities.

#### *Applying the Pathways Approach*

The methodology for both projects was designed to give respondents the opportunity to tell their own stories in a relatively unstructured way which would enable the researchers to uncover the essence of their sex work and homelessness trajectories. The pathways approach prompts the collection of longitudinal data in order to uncover variations in interactions and the relations between agency and structure over time and space. For this reason a biographical or narrative approach was considered to be the most appropriate. Biographical life history research, like grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), begins with an empty space and rejects the formulation of theories and concepts prior to the research. Bryman (1998) characterises this as:

*viewing events, actions, norms, values etc from the perspective of the people who are being studied; to provide detailed descriptions of the social settings; commitment to understanding events, behaviour etc in their context; a research strategy which is relatively open and unstructured; the rejection of the formulation of theories and concepts in advance of field work which may impose a potentially alien framework on subjects. (Bryman 1998;61)*

Roberts (2002), also emphasises the role of the individual and the freedom biographical research gives individuals to express themselves:

*'biographical research seeks to understand the changing experiences and outlooks of individuals in their daily lives, what they see as important, and how to provide interpretations of the accounts they give of their past, present and future'. (Roberts 2002:1)*

These commentators concur that lived experience can be understood through the stories people tell. In this telling, we remember, we rework and re-imagine and reflect back on the past. (Berger et al 2005).

The narratives provide rich data for the analysis of perceptions and the meanings informing decisions and actions. The challenge was to go beyond situations to explore wider structural processes and mechanisms impinging on actions and shaping outcomes. To this end particular attention was paid to *structural forces* (poverty; the housing and benefits system and the criminal justice system); *institutional bodies and processes* (including housing allocations, crime legislation, organisational rules) and *relations and interactions* between sex workers and key institutions within the social welfare system. This will concentrate analysis on both the wider social structures that frame our respondents' interactions and the meanings held by different actors that inform social action.

### **Sex Work and Homelessness: Reciprocity and Double Jeopardy**

A relationship between street sex work and homelessness is acknowledged in the extensive academic and policy literature about sex workers (although less so in the homelessness literature) but the complex interrelation between the two is rarely explored or understood. Comment on the relationship between homelessness and sex work rarely extends beyond noting that homelessness is common amongst street sex workers, pointing to the consensus view that stable appropriate housing is a pre-requisite for escaping street sex work, and (to a lesser extent) that a need for temporary accommodation can drive homeless women into forms of prostitution (e.g. Home Office, 2004; Reeve, Casey and Goudie, 2006). And the coverage, brief and scant as it is, is found predominantly in policy documents, research reports and local project evaluations. The important relationship between sex work and homelessness does not appear to have engaged the interest of academics.

Drawing on empirical data, this section discusses the way in which women's experiences of street sex work interact with their experience and circumstance of homelessness. It suggests a certain reciprocity, demonstrating that homelessness exposes women to a greater risk of entering street sex work while involvement in prostitution, in turn, exposes women to the risk of homelessness. It then explores the particular and additional risks that present themselves when women are both homeless (or vulnerably housed) *and* street sex workers. We articulate this in terms of a double jeopardy, discussing several examples of the ways in which women are exposed to increased risks and hardship by virtue of the combination of their homelessness and sex working.

### The Reciprocity of Street Sex Work and Homelessness

The study took a biographical life history approach to eliciting women's housing 'careers' which invited them to share their housing stories from a young age up to the present. It quickly became clear that women involved in street sex work had housing histories characterised by instability and early experiences of homelessness. They were likely to move in and out of homelessness more frequently and become homeless at a younger age. Heidi, Megan and Anna's stories are used below to illustrate the ways in which homelessness, sexual exploitation and routes into sex work are inextricably linked. They exemplify the homeless experiences of many respondents, with housing and sex working histories which are varied and interspersed with periods of homelessness and institutionalisation (Prison and Care in particular). In particular their stories show the way in which homelessness makes women vulnerable to entering sex work, bringing them into contact with people working in the sex industry, or intent on grooming, that they are otherwise unlikely to have encountered.

**Heidi's Story:** Heidi is 17 years old and has been in residential care since she was 12 years of age. She made a request to enter temporary respite care following on-going arguments with her mother and stepfather and her stay was then extended indefinitely when her mother refused to take her back. Heidi explained that '*I agreed to go at first...and then at the end of the six weeks I wanted go home cos I hated it but me mum didn't want me home so I ended up staying there.*' From there she was put in a series of five residential care homes none of which she liked. When she was 13 years old she started truanting and was soon befriended by an older girl who took Heidi to the house of a 46 year old man. They began to 'hang out'

there on a daily and he soon put pressure on her to have sex with him. Fortunately Heidi came to the attention of a local organisation running a project for young women at risk of sexual exploitation and, considering Heidi to be at risk of exploitation by this older man, worked with her. At the time Heidi was reluctant but is now grateful for their intervention. She does now, however, work intermittently as a street sex worker to fund her boyfriend's drug dependency.

**Anna's Story:** Anna was abandoned by her mother at a young age and left in the care of her chronically alcohol dependent father. She left home at the age of 16 and moved to Nottingham and then Manchester with a group of women, some of whom were sex workers. Coming back to Stoke at the age of 17 she found herself homeless and 'sofa surfing' in a number of friends houses. Never staying anywhere too long for fear of overstaying her welcome, Anna also slept rough and stayed with her father periodically. She managed to get a place at the YMCA hostel and became friendly with another resident, Sophie, who was a sex worker, and at 20 was older than her and more 'street-wise'. Within a few short weeks of living at the YMCA Anna began accompanying Sophie to the area where she worked the streets, at first to keep her company and to be her around in case of any trouble with clients. Anna then became involved in sex work herself.

#### **Megan's story**

Megan is 44 years old and has been a sex worker for 28 years. She started periodically running away from home at the age of 10, and *"just doss[ing] down with friends all the time"*. Her journey into sex work began when she was groomed by a pimp at the age of 15. Megan explained: *"[my friend] was going out with this man and I wanted to go out with them and he'd got a friend so I just went along so I could have a drink, go to the pictures. I was 15 at the time and he was nice to me. He was buying me presents, taking me places. And then he started beating me up..."* He forced Megan to work as a street prostitute and repeatedly beat, threatened and raped her. At around the same time Megan had secured a private rented tenancy by dressing in a suit and telling the landlord she was 18. She managed to keep this tenancy for three years, using some of her earnings from prostitution to pay the rent. Her pimp appropriated most of her money so *"it was hard but I did it"*. At the age of 17 Megan was then left devastated by the death of her father, explaining that *"I just gave up...I just hated everybody, I didn't want help off nobody, fell out with me sisters, ended up losing the house..."*. She spent some time living a 'hostel for homeless people and battered wives', followed by a council property and then a private rented house. At the age of twenty three

Megan found herself with two children fathered by the *pimp*, who forced her to carry on working. [He] the pimp 'was still wanting his money so I had to find babysitters'. She did eventually successfully prosecute her pimp. In her late 20s Megan was introduced to drugs by a friend, and began taking heroin in an attempt to lose weight. This quickly spiralled into heavy use, perpetuating her sex work to fund her drug use and resulting in an 18 month prison sentence for drug offences. Megan now has a stable home (a council tenancy) but is still drug dependent. She has recently discovered that her 18 year old daughter is dependent on heroin. Keen to make sure her daughter does not have to work on the streets, Megan continues to work as a street prostitute so she can pay for her own and her daughter's heroin.

The relative youth of these women at the time they first became homeless is of some relevance. The homeless street prostitutes we surveyed were significantly more likely than those respondents who had never engaged in sex work to have become homeless before the age of 16. Over half had experienced homelessness by the age of 16 compared with 34 per cent of non-sex workers. A number of triggers to leaving home at a young age emerged in the interviews which pointed to the prevalence of three inter-related factors: sexual and other forms of abuse in the home, an unsettled family background and drug and alcohol dependency. This is confirmed in the findings of other studies which point to the prevalence of these experiences amongst homeless women. However, as Reeve *et al* (2006) highlight, a crucial distinction between adults and children has to be made in that homeless women under the age of 16 cannot have their own tenancies and have far fewer options open to them. Unable to access most homelessness services and temporary accommodation, they are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation by adults, both pimps, and in a small minority of cases, other female sex workers.

In Anna, Marie and Megan's cases, their situation of homelessness brought them into contact with sex work in a way they might otherwise not have done had they been adequately housed. But sex work is also relied on by homeless women as a means of securing accommodation. In the words of one respondent, sex effectively becomes 'currency'. Exploring the various ways in which the homeless women interviewed in both studies engage in a 'sex for accommodation' exchange reveals this to be a complex issue, incorporating many different types of unwanted sexual liaisons which are sometimes, but not always, mediated by money. This includes women forging ongoing unwanted sexual relationships with men so they can move in with them, women engaging in paid prostitution to earn enough money to pay for a night in a hotel, or in the hope their client will let them



spend the night, and women 'picking up' men under the pretence of desiring a sexual encounter with them in order to secure a nights accommodation.

*"A guy walked past who I know...who I know has a bedsit, so I sort of jumped on him and I was sort of 'J..., alright mate' and so I went back to his place with him and got into bed with him just so I could have a bed unfortunately."*

*"I would do pretty much anything to not be outside [sleeping rough] – get into bed with blokes, things like that"*

One woman moved in with a client in order to provide herself with longer term housing, maintaining the façade of a mutual relationship at his request and being compensated financially for that. There were also examples of women (usually rough sleepers) exchanging sex for urgently needed commodities such as clothing, and for food. One rough sleeper provided a disturbing but frank account of the desperation which frequently drives her to 'go home' with strange men. In so doing, she expressed the sentiments of many of the women we interviewed:

*"It isn't nice being freezing to death, and that cold your bones are aching, and you're shivering that much, it's horrible. And you're that desperate that you go back with someone..., big, fat, greasy, smelly, dirty man bouncin' on top o' you, just for you to have a roof over your head. That's horrible."*

The discussion so far has considered the way in which homelessness can precipitate, or increase the risk of entry into street sex work. In turn, involvement in street sex work directly impacts on women's housing situations, making them vulnerable to homelessness and repeat homelessness. Our research suggests that as long as a woman works as a street prostitute she is effectively at risk of becoming or remaining homeless and is very likely to do so. This risk travels from many directions including: street sex workers' inevitable contact with the criminal justice system; their (necessary) reliance on the bottom end of the private rented sector; the financial imperative to pay court fines rather than housing costs; and the difficulties associated with maintaining non mainstream employment within a mainstream housing system. To elaborate.....

Soliciting is a criminal offence and prostitution is considered to constitute 'nuisance behaviour'. Street sex workers therefore rarely evade arrest for long and/or find themselves

subject to Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) the conditions of which typically prohibit them from entering the red light district or soliciting elsewhere. With court fines and victim charges to pay<sup>1</sup>, no other source of income<sup>2</sup> and, in many cases, drug habits to support, custodial sentences for breach of ASBOs, non-payment of fines, or (in attempt to keep to the terms of an ASBO or avoid incurring more fines) alternative offences committed to secure funds for drugs are almost inevitable. It is well documented that a prison sentence frequently triggers homelessness amongst those who were adequately housed at the start of their sentence, and sustains it amongst those who were not. Homelessness, then, is disproportionately visited on those groups (including street sex workers) who have regular contact with the criminal justice system, and prisons in particular.

This was confirmed by this study. Most commonly, the street sex workers interviewed were released from prison to a situation of homelessness (often rough sleeping) having received very little advice or assistance about securing housing, as the extracts from Elsa and Jane's interviews below illustrate. Those with tenancies when they were sentenced struggled to sustain them. Unable to pay the rent (Housing Benefit is only payable for 13 weeks) some women handed in their notice, others were evicted for rent arrears while in custody or shortly after release and, assuming erroneously that incarceration renders them ineligible for housing, one woman handed her keys back to her landlord.

#### **Extract from Elsa's interview**

Interviewer you were made homeless every time you went into prison, did anyone ever give you any housing advice or...

Elsa No nothing, they told me to go to places like [X supported housing project]

Interviewer They just give you a sheet of paper with contacts?

Elsa Mmm, contact numbers and all that on.....all different places to get in touch with them.

Interviewer But they wouldn't help you get in touch with them before you came out?

Elsa No they never phoned up places to try get me in anywhere or anything like that.

Interviewer So every single time you came out of prison you were homeless?

Elsa Mmm.... I'd come out and wouldn't have a roof over my head and obviously

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<sup>1</sup> The 'victim surcharge' ranges from £5-£10 for a fixed penalty notice to £15-£30 for more serious crimes

<sup>2</sup> Street sex work was the sole income of some of the women interviewed, who were not in receipt of any benefits

have to go round trying to sort things out for meself.

Interviewer And how much money would you get into your hand when you...

Elsa You get £42 when you come out, a week's money, that's it.

Interviewer And would you have to....start signing on again?

Elsa Yeah...takes weeks to sort out.

Interviewer So you'd have to go out [sex] working then?

Elsa Yeah you're back in the same situation again. I do think seriously that the prisons should help you more with your housing and things, especially if they know the circumstances, that you're homeless when you went in there, they know you're going to be homeless when you go out, I do think really that they should do more for the housing and that.

### **Extract from Jane's interview**

Jane I did try me best in there [prison] this time to get in touch with the housing people but I kept putting apps [applications] in after apps to see 'em and not once did they came to me door and ask to interview me or nothing.

Interviewer Is this in prison?

Jane Yeah

Interviewer But nobody came?

Jane No

Interviewer So basically when you came out you'd got nowhere to stay?

Jane No

The social rented sector in the UK provides secure, affordable housing but accessing and maintaining a social rented tenancy can be problematic for street sex workers. The street sex workers interviewed did not, by and large, perceive the social rented sector as a viable housing option, a perception that had some basis in fact. Until recently, the local authority housing department in the Midlands city where one study was conducted was actively excluding all people subject to an ASBO. Local authority allocations policies more generally tend to allow exclusions against people 'guilty of unacceptable behaviour' and applications from people with criminal records are often subject to greater scrutiny and investigation.

But sex workers need not be *actively* excluded to face barriers accessing the social housing sector. Frequent spells in prison meant that many of the street prostitutes interviewed had held and lost council tenancies which was deterring them from reapplying, assuming (sometimes correctly) that surrendering or being evicted from a council tenancy would

render them ineligible or be held against them in some way. Many had experienced previous poor treatment from staff within housing offices, particularly once their profession or associated offending history became known. This had a lasting effect on their confidence and willingness to approach the local authority again for accommodation. Other women erroneously believed that they were ineligible for council housing because of their profession or their associated drug dependency or criminal record, as our continued discussion with Elsa illustrates:

*Interviewer Did it ever occur to you to apply to the council before?*

*Elsa I've been involved with the drugs and everything haven't I so... I wanted to sort myself out and obviously I'm not getting any younger now, I'm getting older and that, I want to settle down, get off the drugs and that.*

*Interviewer So you deliberately didn't apply to the council before now...?*

*Elsa Well I know I wouldn't get on the council, the council aren't going to give a place to someone on drugs are they really?*

*Interviewer So in those 16 years did you ever apply to the council for a house before?*

*Elsa No not at all till recently...I've been in and out of prison and stuff as well, that's why. Elsa*

Elsa was not excluded from housing by the local authority but her assumptions about eligibility criteria and her perception of herself were acting as (self) exclusionary mechanisms. Forms of 'self exclusion' from housing were relatively commonplace and several women described how the rules and formality of mainstream housing (hostels in particular which tend to impose an evening curfew and sometimes require residents to leave the building during the day) precluded them from continuing with sex work, leaving them with few options but to continue squatting or sofa surfing. Others, entrenched in a life of homelessness, prostitution and drug addiction described feeling confined by institutional rules and suspicious of service providers, particularly when previous contact with 'authorities' had proved traumatic (removal of children by social services for example)

When women did acquire their own tenancies, whether in the social or private rented sector, they tended to remain at risk of homelessness (or repeat homelessness). The financial burden of court fines for loitering and soliciting left women struggling to maintain rent payments. Non-payment of fines can and does lead to a custodial sentence and so the

women interviewed tended to prioritise fines over all other financial commitments, accruing rent arrears and threats of eviction in the process. Social housing providers are typically unwilling to consider allocating another tenancy until former rent arrears have been substantially re-repaid, a goal that was out of the reach of most of the women we interviewed.

Amongst those participating in the study, problems accessing and maintaining social housing tenancies resulted in an over-reliance on the private rented sector for accommodation which was contributing significantly to the housing difficulties and insecurity experienced by women involved in street prostitution. They tended to reside in the low cost, easy to access, high turnover segment of the private rented market, often located within the area where street prostitutes work. These tenancies rarely seemed to last long. There was evidence of unscrupulous landlord practices (for example insisting that women vacate properties at very short notice) and not issuing tenancy agreements. Karen (below) is a case in point. There was also anecdotal evidence that some landlords renting properties to women involved in prostitution were requesting sex in lieu of rent.

**Karen's story:** Karen had a relatively stable childhood (domestic violence notwithstanding) and lived with her parents until she was 18 years of age. She began to use cannabis and amphetamines at the age of 16 and met her boyfriend, who was also a drug user at that time. Her mother was very wary of her boyfriend, and thought he was a bad influence, particularly in view of his drug habits. This caused a lot of problems at home and Karen was asked to choose between ending her relationship (and continuing to live at home) or leaving home to live with her boyfriend. Karen choose to go and live with her boyfriend in private rented accommodation. They acquired a council flat in a low demand area before long and lived there together for a couple of years. During this time Karen began to work on the streets to fund her and her partner's drug habit. They were burgled at one point and Karen was left traumatised by the experience. She subsequently developed mental health problems which remained undiagnosed for many years. They then split up and Karen moved out of the council flat and into a private rented terraced house. She did not have any tenancy agreement and, unaware of her rights, was under the impression that she could be evicted at any stage, at short notice. The property was extremely damp and was structurally unsafe. The landlord was negligent and refused to carry out repairs despite many requests from Karen. However, he was forced into action when he was served a notice of repair by the council's environmental health department. She was given the option of moving to another terraced house owned by the same landlord and being in a vulnerable state of health felt she

had no choice but to do so. She also thought that because she had successfully managed to maintain her property despite being a sex worker she should carry on with the same landlord, despite his obvious shortcomings in that regard.

The findings thus far point to the reciprocity of sex work and homelessness. Young women who are homeless, or in insecure accommodation, are especially at risk of becoming drawn into sex work. Working in the sex industry places particular constraints on women (real and perceived) which exacerbate their disadvantages in finding suitable accommodation. The consequence is that women who successfully exit homelessness are at risk of repeat homelessness for as long as they work as a prostitute, just as women who make the transition out of sex work remain vulnerable to re-entering this work as long as they remain homeless.

### **The Double Jeopardy of Street Sex Work and Homelessness**

There is a direct link between women's housing situations and the penalties they incur for working as a prostitute. Street-based prostitutes without a permanent address are in a difficult position when it comes to avoiding arrest, getting bail and applying for (electronic) tagging. With no permanent address women cannot qualify for tagging and getting bail can be problematic too. Curfews are used as an alternative to additional fines, but these are only imposed when women have an address they can be at every night for the length of the curfew. If not, they are in danger of receiving a harsher punishment. It could be argued, then, that women are being penalised for their homelessness. Elsa's comment points to the difficulty women face, in particular the increased risk of arrest, when they do not have immediate access to accommodation to which they can retreat after an encounter with the police:

*"I've been warned by the police to go home and if they see me out again that night then obviously they'd arrest me and charge me"*

There was also evidence of low level exploitation of women working in street prostitution by the friends on whom they rely for temporary accommodation. Several participants complained that they were expected to support the household with whom they were staying, providing all the food, paying the bills and sometimes paying rent (even where this was covered by housing benefit). Participants' friends reportedly perceived their work in the sex

industry as an easy means of securing extra income for the household, and were quick to exploit this. With nowhere else to stay, respondents rarely had any choice but to agree to their friends' financial demands despite this requiring an increase in client numbers.

*"At the moment I'm just staying with friends and I don't like it there because they're taking the mick out of me and I'm going out, buying food, loads of different things, the food situation is like I'm buying say £40 worth and they're eating it and then they're starting on their own food and then they're leaving me without and then the rest of the week I've got to do without." Jane*

**Case Study:** Tina was sexually abused as a child, taken into care and placed in a children's home where she had some traumatic experiences. She became a heroin addict, but nonetheless managed to secure a council tenancy. She sustained this tenancy for a few years, but came to the attention of the housing department when the neighbours complained about the comings and goings from her flat. XX has weaned herself off heroin but drug dealers continue to harass her and try to tempt her back onto drugs. She now feels her home is a no-go area and is no longer a place where she feels safe. The situation is made worse by the fact that she has rent arrears with the council hence does not qualify for a transfer. She described her situation as follows:

*"If I got help with everything I needed, basically the debts that I cannot afford to pay were wiped, got moved to a house where... I don't feel safe at my house any more, if I got moved I wouldn't be out on the street, I would not need to be on the street" (Tina)*

## **Conclusions**

In summary, sex workers experience many barriers to accessing and maintaining their own accommodation. Some of these are 'generic' barriers that are common to a wide range of homeless individuals, and in particular to homeless women. Hopefully this article has made more explicit the additional problems which sex workers face, which position them as being at particularly high risk of homelessness.

In keeping with the homeless pathways approach, several key themes emerged as having an impact on sex workers' housing situations. Sex worker's encounters and interactions with the criminal justice system, related debts and fines, as well as their higher risk of incarceration all serve to exacerbate their already fragile housing situations. Interactions with the housing system, in the form of housing services and agencies were found to be

significant in shaping sex worker's accommodation histories and situations. In addition to facing structural barriers relating to eligibility for housing there was also an element of self-exclusion where women felt that their status as sex workers would also be a barrier to accessing council housing. This raises issues about the importance of dispelling misinformation and ensuring that women working in prostitution have access to well-informed key workers and agencies.

Although tentative at this stage, these findings present some key areas for further investigation and analysis. It is already clear that women involved in street prostitution have a range of unmet needs with regard to housing, drug use, debt, domestic and other forms of violence. Women involved in prostitution are placing themselves in danger on the streets because they are not accessing adequate housing and support, they are sleeping rough or with clients, and they are becoming homeless because they are receiving no help with their debts. Others are being exploited by friends and private landlords, and some are not even claiming the basic welfare benefits to which they are entitled. It is also clear that services seeking to assist women in street prostitution will need to understand and be sensitive to the complexity of these needs, and to the unique issues and circumstances which women sex workers present with.

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