



ROYAL COMMISSION INTO VICTORIA'S MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM

Project Respect Submission

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About Project Respect

Project Respect is a specialised women's service working with women in the sex industry and women trafficked for sexual exploitation. We work from a feminist and intersectional framework, which positions women at the centre of our work and recognises the structural systems which underpin and perpetuate gender inequality and are the only service of this kind in Victoria.

We are a support and referral service for women in the sex industry and women trafficked for sexual exploitation. We undertake outreach to licensed brothels across the Greater Melbourne Region to provide information to women should they require it, provide case-coordination for women in the sex industry, and intensive case-management for women trafficked for sexual exploitation. We also support women who indicate they would like to reduce their hours or make a sustainable transition out of the sex industry. We deliver capacity-building workshops to a broad range of social, community and welfare services, which includes sections on human trafficking indicators, support and referral pathways. We run a peer-led Women's Advisory Group consisting of women with experience of the sex industry who provide information, guidance and input on strategic direction for the organisation. We also create a safe space for women, including a monthly peer-led community lunch.

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Introduction

Project Respect welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. Project Respect's submission is informed by its work as a direct service provider in the community sector. It is important that the experiences of this vulnerable cohort are recognised and heard.

Terms of Reference

What are the drivers behind some communities in Victoria experiencing poorer mental health outcomes and what needs to be done to address this?

Women in the sex industry and women trafficked for sexual exploitation experience poorer mental health outcomes for a variety of reasons, including a combination of systemic drivers and psycho-social drivers.

In the 2018-2019 financial year, Project Respect provided individual case coordination and support to 48 women, including women trafficked for sexual exploitation. 42 of these women disclosed that they had a diagnosed mental health condition. Most commonly, this included anxiety (40), depression (37), and PTSD (26). 13 women expressed suicidal ideation or behaviours. 7 of these women were admitted as involuntary patients to psychiatric facilities. 3 of these women were on temporary visas. In the 2017-2018 financial year, Project Respect provided case coordination to 25 women in the sex industry and 14 women trafficked for sexual exploitation. 34 of these women disclosed they have a diagnosed mental health condition¹, including anxiety, depression, and PTSD.

Gender inequality

The sex industry is deeply gendered. Overwhelmingly, it is women who work in the sex industry, and men who purchase sex. According to the World Health Organisation, gender is a critical determinant in mental health and mental health illnesses as it determines social positions, status and treatment, and susceptibility to mental health risks². Gender inequality creates a sense of entitlement and a false expectation where men seemingly believe they have the power to do whatever they like within a booking, that they are superior to women. Women in the sex industry are at high risk of physical and sexual assault, and of behaviours designed to make women feel uncomfortable, frightened or threatened³. These behaviours are driven by gender inequality.

Exposure to violence

Exposure to violence, including gender-based violence, sexual assault, verbal abuse, technology facilitated abuse, emotional and psychological abuse are just some of the experiences a woman in the sex industry must endure on a near daily basis. Furthermore, evidence shows that women in the sex industry are more likely to have experienced childhood violence and trauma and have normalised their experiences⁴. This history of violence and trauma paired with daily experiences in the sex industry reinforces minimisation and normalisation as a coping and survival mechanism. The severity of these experiences is evident in the fact that women can begin to mentally dissociate as a coping mechanism, so regularly it becomes second nature. These employed coping mechanisms can also have complex impacts on the development and understanding of a women's identity. The

¹ Project Respect 2018, Project Respect Annual Report 2017-2018

² World Health Organisation (2019) *Gender and Women's Mental Health*. [online] Available at: https://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/genderwomen/en/

³ Consumer Affairs Victoria (2018) *Safety of sex workers, clients and brothel employees*. [online] Available at: <https://www.consumer.vic.gov.au/licensing-and-registration/sex-work-service-providers/running-your-business/safety-of-sex-workers-clients-and-brothel-employees>

⁴ Project Respect 2015, Submission to Royal Commission into Family Violence

detrimental impact that continuous exposure to trauma has on an individual's mental health is well documented.

Stigma, discrimination and isolation

For the most part, women supported by Project Respect keep their experiences of the sex industry private, largely due to stigma and the risk of discrimination from friends, families, other employers, or other service providers. Stigma and discrimination can prohibit a woman in the sex industry from accessing support services that she needs, including mental health supports. When women are unable to disclose the type of work that they do due to fear of stigma and discrimination, they are likely to be socially isolated and unable to share their experiences of the industry, contributing to poorer mental health.

Complex, intersecting issues

Many of the women supported by Project Respect experience complex, intersecting issues, which contribute to poorer mental health outcomes, particularly women trafficked for sexual exploitation. Not only have these women experienced considerable trauma in being trafficked, but they are also quite often having to navigate cultural differences, language barriers, social isolation, financial hardship and uncertainty regarding their immigration status.

In the 2017-2018 financial year, Project Respect support 14 women who had been trafficked for sexual exploitation. 13 of these women disclosed a diagnosed mental health condition. All 14 women experienced homelessness or housing instability, 12 women experienced financial hardship, 11 women were socially isolated. Most women trafficked for sexual exploitation have spent several years in a state of limbo, on a temporary visa, not knowing whether their protection visa would be granted, or if they would be repatriated to their home countries.

The impact this constant state of not-knowing, combined with housing insecurity, social isolation, history of trauma and financial hardship, is detrimental to an individual's mental health. Many of the women trafficked for sexual exploitation supported by Project Respect are still active in the sex industry. These women are subjected to daily exposure to violence, gender inequality, and stigma and discrimination. These work conditions, combined with the multiple other issues a woman is likely to be facing, have severe negative consequences on mental health.

Furthermore, women on temporary visas are unable to access a range of services as their visa status makes them ineligible for service provision⁵. This includes access to housing services such as community or social housing, financial supports including Centrelink, and health services including counselling. These women may not be able to access services due to language barriers, a lack of cultural appropriateness or a lack of knowledge about available supports. These factors mean that women on temporary visas may not be able to access supports when required, further isolating them and contributing to poorer mental health outcomes.

⁵ AWAVA 2018, *Path to Nowhere Report: Women on Temporary Visa's Experiencing Violence and their Children* [online] Available at https://awava.org.au/2018/12/11/research-and-reports/path-to-nowhere-report-women-on-temporary-visas-experiencing-violence-and-their-children?doing_wp_cron=1562306614.9724600315093994140625

Lack of adequate support services

Currently, there is a lack of adequate support services that understand the complexities of the sex industry and the issues women in the industry face. This results in this vulnerable cohort having inadequate supports that recognise and respond appropriately to their needs. Few services encompass and understand the specific complex needs and are therefore being triaged inappropriately and women are unable to access the support they require.

Project Respect has witnessed practitioners who express concerns when they perceive a woman's issue to be too complex and believe they do not have the skills necessary to adequately provide support. Hence, women are reporting feeling abandoned by services, or placed in "the too hard basket". This minority continue to fall through the gaps of the broader service system. This is evidenced by 7 women supported by Project Respect who had access to counselling, however found it too challenging to engage in services, and subsequently found themselves involuntarily admitted into psychiatric facilities. For some of these women, this resulted in a misdiagnosis and a further health decline as their issues were not addressed

Recommendations

- That frontline staff from mental health service providers are trained to adequately recognise and respond to the complex, compounding and intersecting issues women in the sex industry and women trafficked face, that drive poorer mental health outcomes
- Service providers should replace an inadequate siloed approach that triages only one aspect of a person's experience with a nuanced holistic understanding of the broad spectrum of complexities, appropriately addressing individual's unique needs
- Implement support groups targeted at women in the sex industry to provide a safe space for participants to identify and understand the correlation between their experiences in the industry and the impact this has had on their mental health. This space will also allow women to begin processing, healing and learning tools to manage their mental health
- Implement psycho-educational groups targeted at men who purchase sexual services to increase awareness and understanding of the harmful behaviours they engage in that can impact on the health and wellbeing of women involved in the sex industry. This group will also promote broader education in order to reduce stigma face by women.
- Policy reform to ensure women on temporary visas have full access to services including mental health, as well as Centrelink, social housing and Medicare, regardless of their visa status. This ensures their health and wellbeing needs are met, whilst reducing vulnerability and risk factors in experiencing further harm