

PATHWAYS TO EXIT

A study of women's
journeys out of
prostitution
and the response
to their complex
support needs

Ruth Breslin
Dr Mary Canning
The Sexual Exploitation Research Programme

December 2023



About the study

Ruhama has been supporting women in prostitution in Ireland for over thirty years. During this time the organisation has developed significant expertise in responding to the needs of women who have experienced sexual exploitation, and supporting those who wish to do so to exit (leave) the sex trade. This study is the result of a unique research partnership between SERP researchers and Ruhama service users and staff to explore in greater depth what exiting entails, both for women embarking on this journey, and for those professionals who support them along the way. Specifically, this study aims to:

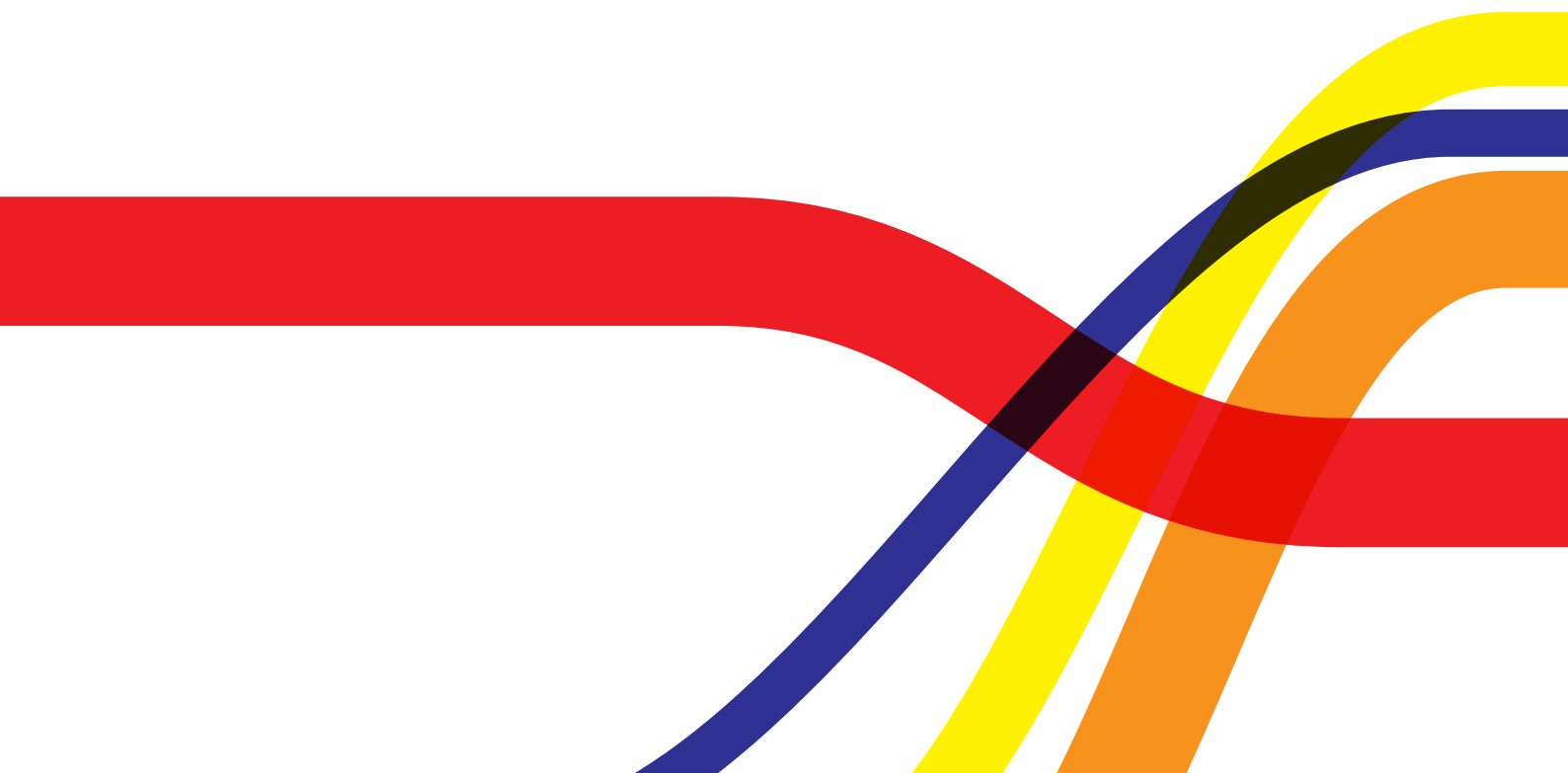
- Provide an enhanced, survivor-informed and evidence-based understanding of women's 'exiting journeys' and pathways, the barriers they face and the multifaceted supports they require to achieve a sustainable exit
- Document the model of practice employed by Ruhama and the principles that underpin it
- Explore the role of supports, including peer support, in empowering women to recover from the trauma of sexual exploitation, build new lives and strengthen their voice in matters that affect them
- Inform both policy and practice responses to the provision of exiting supports for women, in line with the delivery of plans under the *Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence*.

This study, conducted over a period of two years 2021-2023, adopted a mixed methodological approach, employing both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The study is based on data gathered from a variety of sources, including:

- A survey of Ruhama service users, which achieved 62 individual responses
- Three focus groups with Ruhama service users, involving 23 participants
- One-to-one in-depth interviews with 11 women accessed via Ruhama's services
- Semi-structured interviews with seven Ruhama staff
- One focus group with Ruhama staff, involving 17 staff members
- Seven study information and feedback sessions – four with service users and three with staff.

Throughout its development and undertaking, the study was directly shaped and informed by women accessing Ruhama's services. This approach is based on the principle that women – in this case survivors of sexual exploitation – are the experts in their own lives and experiences. To truly understand the nature of exiting it was vital that their unique perspectives guided the conduct of the study in a meaningful way. This was achieved primarily through information sessions and focus groups with services users which provided opportunities for women to guide, advise and inform the researchers in a number of key areas.

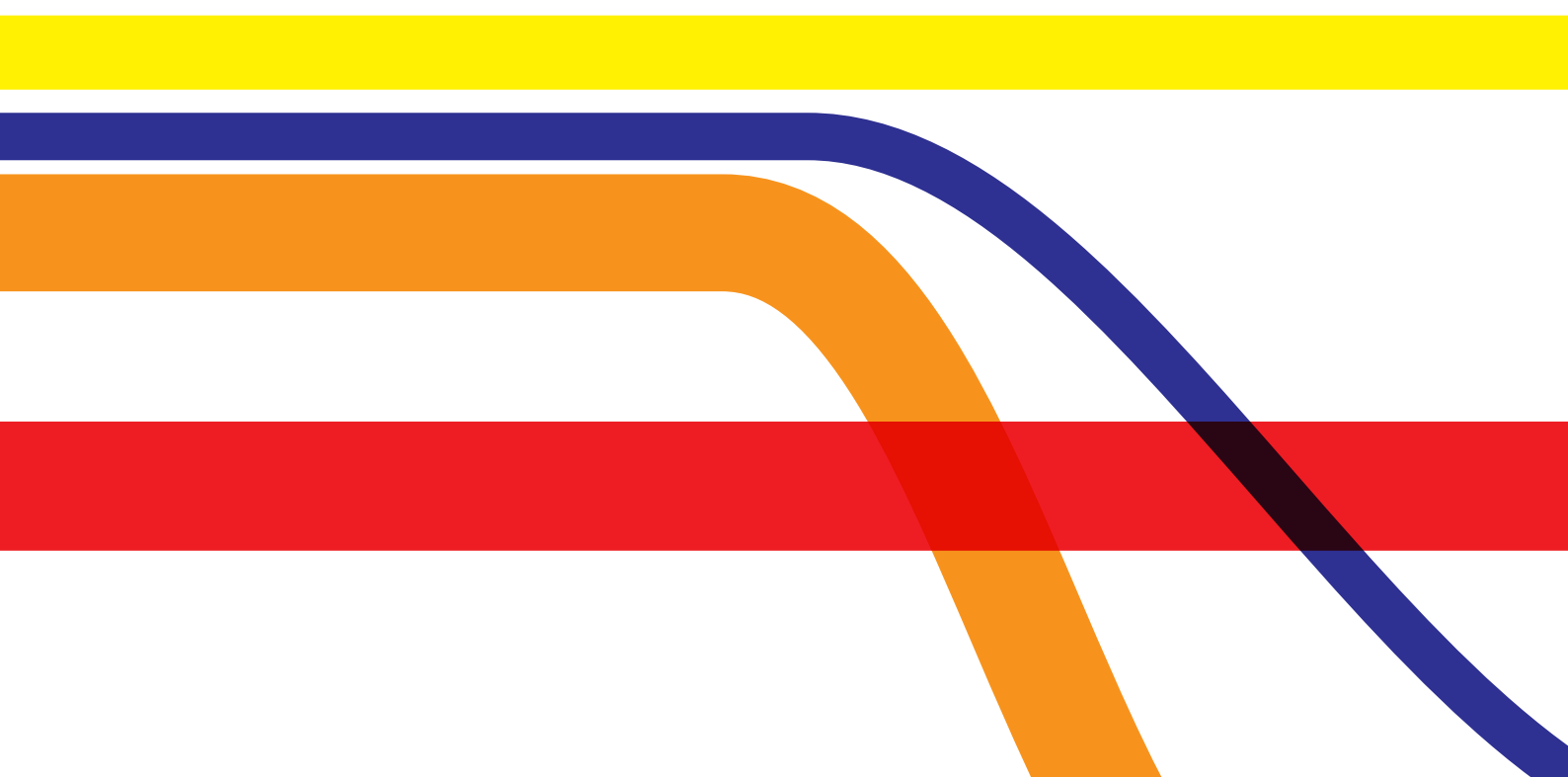
[T]here are so many women going through what I went through and they don't want to speak out. They are afraid...So, whenever Ruhama ask me about this research, I said 'yes' [to participating]...so that it will help other people that are going through exactly what I went through, so that it will help them. Eme



Key findings

Women's entry into prostitution

This study starkly demonstrates the many **vulnerabilities, adversities and coercive forces** that draw women into the sex trade and often serve to keep them trapped within it. **Significant adversities such as poverty, child sexual abuse and neglect, domestic violence, homelessness and addiction** were common features in the lives of interviewees and often intersected, rendering them very vulnerable to being sexually exploited. In many instances pimps and traffickers used women's poverty to their advantage, deceiving them with false promises of a better life. For women who recounted choosing to enter prostitution it is clear from their life stories that this 'choice' was made in the context of **incredibly constrained and challenging circumstances, again underpinned by poverty**. The majority were first drawn into prostitution as young women, but for some interviewees and **nearly one fifth of survey respondents the sexual exploitation first started when they were still children.**



So, coming from a broken home and no responsible parents...I had to parent myself...I had to leave home when I was I think 16 - 15 going to 16 - and I was in the street since then on my own. So, that's where it all started. A friend of mine introduced me to a certain lady...to help me get a safer place...a promise like I'll go get a job and work and then get my kids over [to Ireland]...So, I agreed, only for me to come here and discover like it was not as they had told me. Amara



Women's experiences in prostitution

The findings reveal, once again, the profound harms of prostitution and the **serious levels of sexual violence and sexual exploitation** women are subjected to within the trade, which have **significant, traumatic and often long-term consequences** for their health and wellbeing.

The shortest amount of time spent in the sex trade was less than one month, while two participants had spent 20 years there. Experiences of **severe violence and harm to their mental, sexual and physical health** were the main reasons women sought to exit. Interviewees described the harm they sustained at the hands of sex buyers, pimps and traffickers, including being **beaten, raped, and sexually, emotionally and physically assaulted**. They also described living in near constant fear for their own safety and that of their loved ones.

As a result of the **severe trauma** they were experiencing, many interviewees described **dissociation or instances that were indicative of dissociation** – they needed to remove themselves from what was happening to their bodies in order to be able to cope with the unwanted sexual contact and performance of the sex acts demanded by sex buyers that they typically found repulsive. Women described **triggers, intrusive flashbacks, feelings of hopelessness and a loss of the will to live** as a result of their traumatic experiences in prostitution. For some, learning to cope with this trauma is a lifelong struggle.



[Y]ou're thinking that you're just going to have vaginal sex and they end up like turning you around and you get anally raped, or they shove their cock into your mouth... being seriously abused in every kind of an imaginable way...I was gang-raped as well, because when I went to this guy's house and was held down and...I can't move. Rose

And there were times that some of these people, I don't think they see us as human beings, once they have paid their money, they are allowed to do anything to you. So, I have had vegetables and other stuff, even steaks, put inside me, and...it strips you of the person you are. Abigail

You close your eyes and you're always haunted by the past...I have a lot of flashbacks. Sometimes I hate myself. Sometimes I'm disappointed at myself, even though it wasn't my fault.

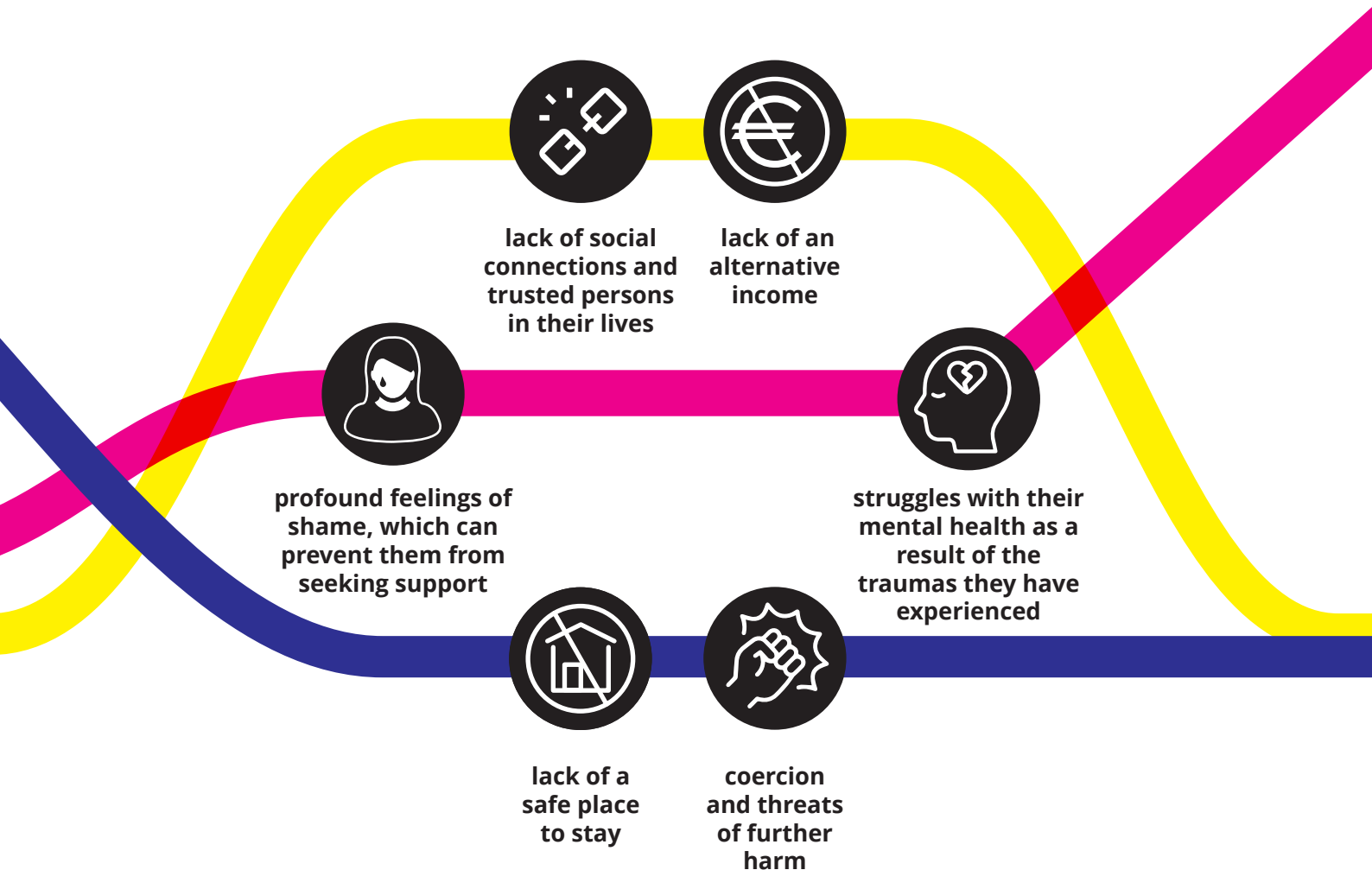
(Focus group participant)

Trauma never goes away...It will always be there for the rest of your life. It's not something that you are going to forget... it is a process that you have to learn to manage...You can be having a normal life and then all of a sudden it just comes and it's like you've gone back to zero... start feeling suicidal and everything...

(Focus group participant)

Barriers to exiting

Given the abuses to which they are subjected, it is unsurprising that **the majority of women wish to exit prostitution** and are simply seeking a better life, but many face **significant barriers** to doing so. These include but are not limited to:

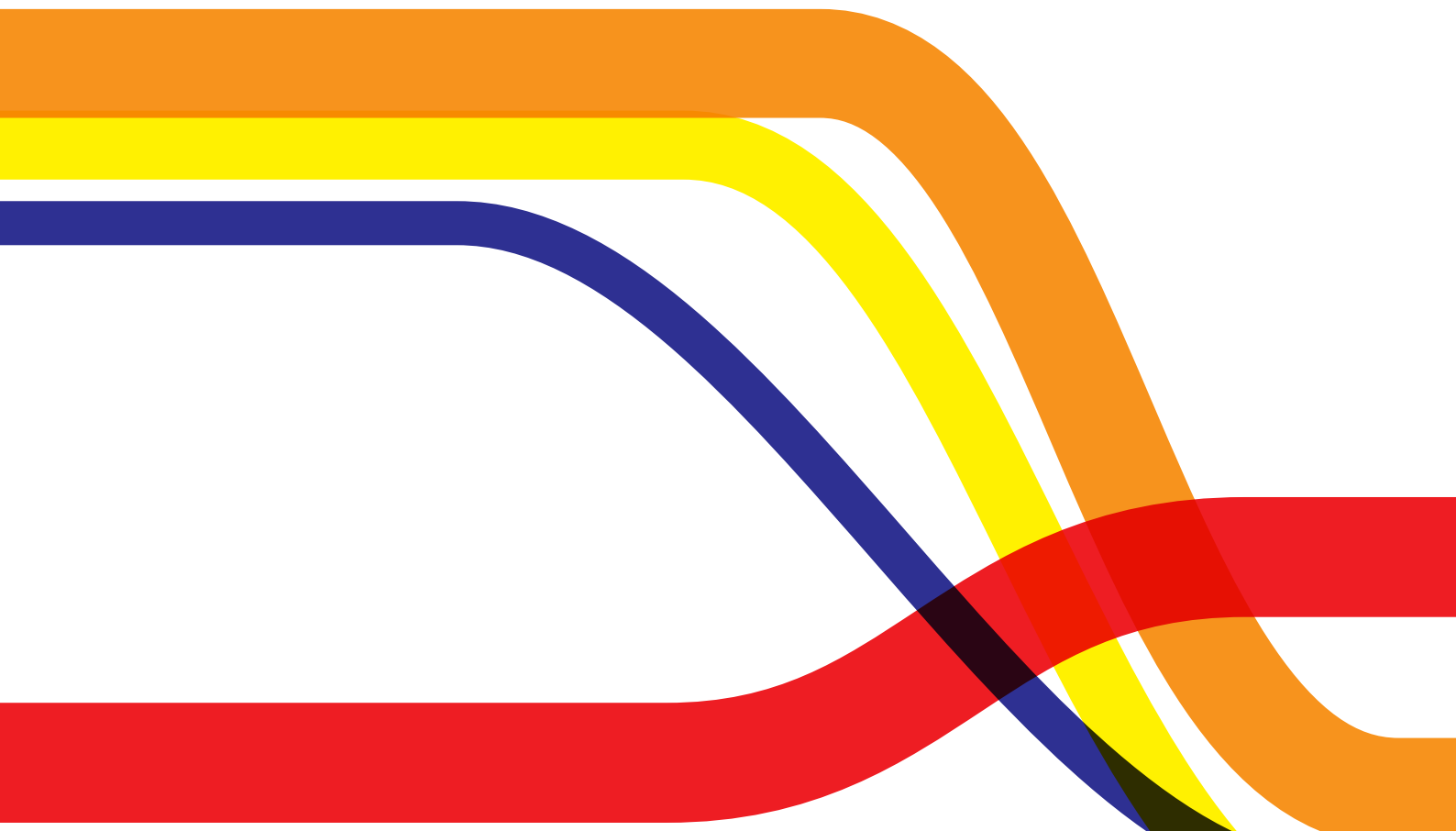


The majority of study participants were facing **multiple barriers** which made their exit difficult, or in some cases unsustainable, **leading some women to return to prostitution** after a period of exit. Women also described **feelings of self-blame and shame** for their involvement in prostitution which made it incredibly challenging or even impossible for them to open up to others about their experiences and seek help. For most women **exiting is rarely a simple linear process**, and for some it can take many years.

I wanted to leave many times. I tried to leave. But I end up with really deep depression...I couldn't cope with life. It was too much for me...For many years I wanted out. Not my head. My head wanted to keep working [to remain in prostitution], but my soul wanted out. I wanted to be free...[but] I didn't know how to do it... Odele

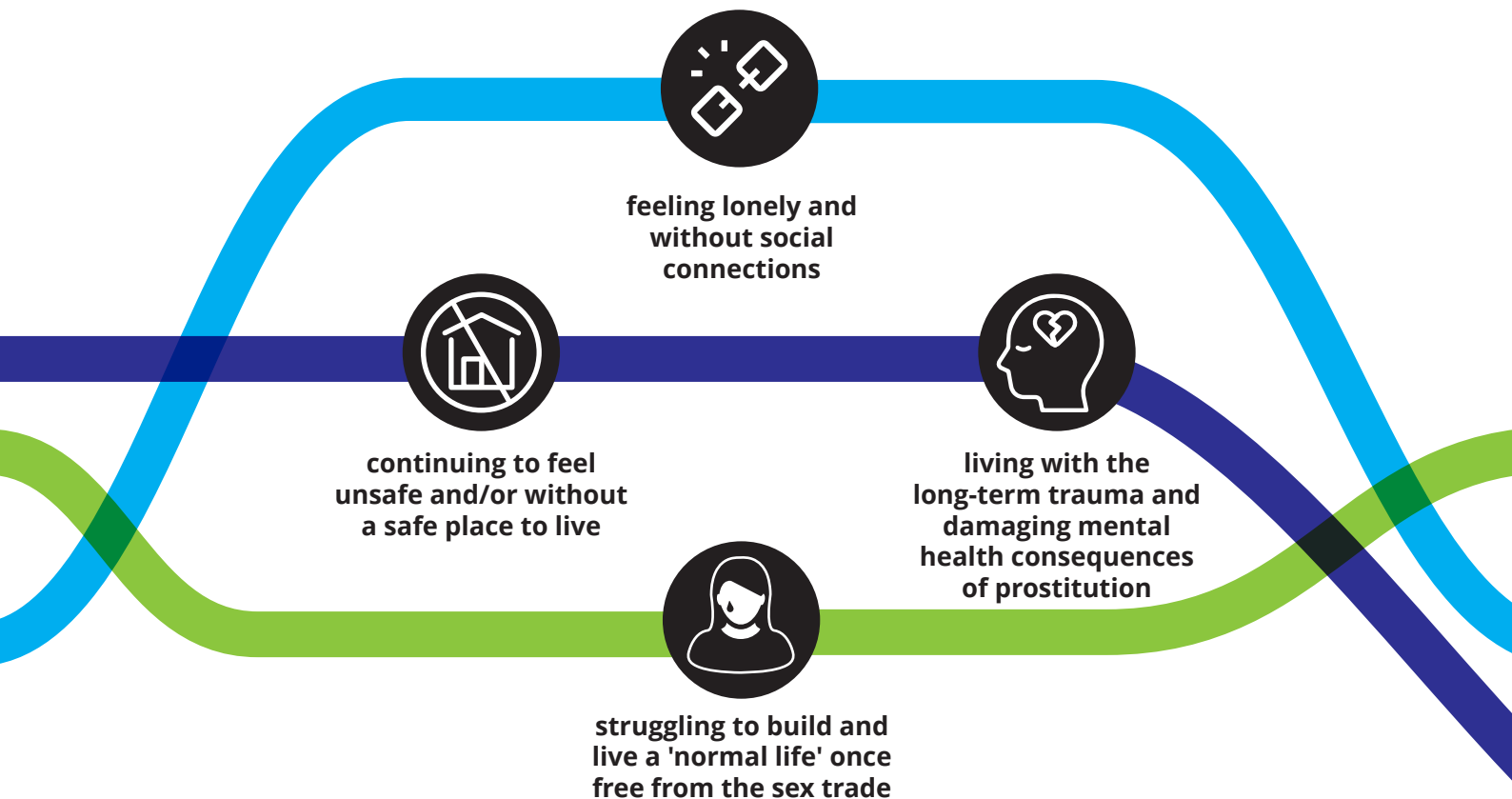
I live with the guilt of working as a prostitute...It's a belief that I don't deserve [anything]...I take all the responsibility for me, all the guilt. I put it on my shoulders because I think I should have done better. Because I put myself in those situations, and I find that so shameful and [I feel] no one can accept me as a person now because of that. Larisa

My exiting was a long, long fucking journey. Like, as soon as you start, I think you want to get out of it. Right now, where I'm at is I'm just getting through day by day...I'm just trying to work on my recovery... Emily



Barriers to recovery

Upon exiting, women describe how many of the **barriers** they have already experienced persist, **blocking or delaying their recovery from sexual exploitation** and hindering their ability to build a new life. These barriers to recovery include:



Participants reported **symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)** following their exit from prostitution. Such symptoms are reflective of trauma from repeated and prolonged systemic abuse that is prevalent in the sex trade but which continues to be felt even after women have left. It is notable that many of these more intensely-felt experiences only come to the fore after a woman has exited, when she is no longer in crisis or 'survival' mode. However, this provides her with more time and space to reflect on her past experiences in prostitution – in many instances this is when the **multiple impacts of trauma start to hit the hardest**, hindering her ability to simply live a 'normal life'.

I felt like I was tortured, only psychologically...Inside...my body stay safe...but for me I don't feel [safe]...I stayed three months before I get a tablet for traumatise. And in this time I stay in the torment through bad place inside...I get into more traumatise...I have big traumatise now. I'm out of this three years. Lilian

You cannot forget because in your darkest moment the memory comes back staring at you, whether you want to or not, the memory is something that you will live with forever...It still haunts me... It's always there. It's like a hidden demon that is with you forever. Sade

Ruhama's response

As a result of these experiences, women tend to have **multiple and often complex support needs**, which require a dedicated and carefully structured response. As the only specialist non-governmental organisation in Ireland that is funded solely to provide supports to women who have experienced sexual exploitation, Ruhama is working to address women's needs through its comprehensive care and case management approach.

Centring women who have been sexually exploited

Women who have experienced sexual exploitation are centred at the heart of Ruhama's model of practice. While this model has elements similar to those operating in other fields, **the unique aspect of their model is that it has been designed to respond to the very specific, multiple and often complex needs of victims and survivors of sexual exploitation.** This is described as the 'lens' through which Ruhama works. This 'lens' takes account of the many sexually violating and traumatic experiences women in prostitution have endured and informs in every way the dedicated supports that women receive from the service.

I think person-centred is the most important...that we're not prescriptive, that we're not paternalistic, that it is what she wants to do at her pace...Walking with her, not ahead of her or behind her. (Staff 5)



Principles underpinning Ruhama's response


Ruhama's work to respond to women's specific needs is underpinned by three key principles. These include **recognition of the profound harm of prostitution to women** resulting from the sexual violence and sexual exploitation that they have experienced within it, which in turn leads staff to **work in a trauma-informed way** throughout all aspects of service provision. Ruhama is also making progress to **embed a more survivor-informed approach**, which can play a vital role in enhancing women's recovery after prostitution, as well as contributing to the development and delivery of a more authentic service.

[W]e hold firm on the position [that prostitution is gender-based violence], that we feel is really important because of how harmful the sex trade is and because of the level of...violence that goes with it... I've had a lot of experience working with people in recovery. But the level of harm is different with sexual violence than anything else I've ever worked with... (Staff 7)

The continuum of care

Core to Ruhama's response is supporting women along a continuum of care according to 'where they are at' in their lives, and particularly in relation to their involvement in prostitution. This means that support is provided to all women impacted by the sex trade, regardless of whether they are currently active in prostitution with no plans to exit, are considering or attempting exit, have already exited, or have escaped a coercive situation or person such as a pimp or trafficker.


...we work in a person-centred way, which means we meet people where they're at and what they present with. So, that could be anywhere on the continuum of care, from somebody who's active in prostitution to somebody who hasn't even contemplated [exiting], to somebody who is maybe contemplating [it]...[to] victims of sex trafficking, people who've exited, people who exit and relapse and come back. So, anywhere along the continuum. (Staff 7)



The care pathway

In line with this continuum of care, staff stressed the importance of **giving women a very clear view of their care pathway through the service** and the different supports that they can avail of along that path, which should be aligned to their evolving needs. Women's journeys along this pathway are designed to have a beginning, a middle and an end – because ultimately the goal is **to support women to a place of empowerment** where they no longer need to rely on the support of Ruhama and can move to independence.

You're trying to respect and work with the human being that's in front of you...that sense of working together where people can empower themselves, where they can strengthen themselves but it's very much collaborative... I don't do something 'to' you, we work together to make some kind of change happen. (Staff 3)



Care planning and case management

Through the care planning process each woman's needs are carefully assessed and **she is supported to develop her own tailored care plan, which identifies the supports she requires** and the short, medium and long-term goals she wishes to achieve. Applying **Ruhama's comprehensive and coordinated case management approach**, caseworkers plan and continually evaluate the actions required to meet each woman's needs. They advocate with and for the service user to ensure she is receiving the best possible supports she requires, working alongside both in-house and external support providers. This approach acknowledges that the majority of women impacted by sexual exploitation have multiple and often complex needs that cannot be met by a single agency. Interagency work is therefore essential, but with **one central, coordinating agency taking the lead** in this work to ensure an efficient, integrated approach.

Essentially when somebody comes into the service, their needs are assessed, and then they are directed to whatever supports can be offered...whether it's legal, medical, educational, whether they're looking for a job...a plan is made and worked on. But it's very much a unique, tailor-made, individual plan for each particular person. (Staff 3)

So, case management is all about involving the other organisations. And in an ideal world you would have the same templates and it's about sharing the care plan so that you don't constantly [re]assess and re-traumatise the person. So, they have one comprehensive assessment, and they will have one care plan in each organisation focusing on their part of the care plan, for example housing, health, education, etcetera. (Staff 7)



A model for all stages

Ruhama's innovative model of practice is highly adaptable in the ways it can tailor supports for migrant and Irish women impacted by prostitution, whether trafficked or not, including women with no plans to exit. **Support is provided in a person-centred and non-judgemental way, according to each woman's needs and wishes at the time she accesses the service.** Women currently active in prostitution can avail of a wide range of practical and emotional supports that also serves to minimise the harms they are experiencing and enhance their safety.

[T]he sex trade is incredibly harmful, it's incredibly exploitative...it's so demeaning. And the damage that that does mentally to women is lifelong. And you don't want anyone in that situation short, medium, or long-term if it can be avoided. But the reality is there are people in that situation, and that's where you're meeting them where they're at. And, hopefully, they won't always be there. But you've got to respect people's choices for whatever reason as to why they are there and why they may have to stay there. So, I think it's important as a service to highlight there's lots of different options available whatever path somebody is on. (Staff 7)

A model that supports exiting

A further key strength of Ruhama's model of practice is its flexibility and agility in supporting exiting. **This allows supports to be tailored to women at all stages of the exiting process.** Whether a woman is pre-contemplative (not ready to consider exiting), at the contemplative stage (considering it), planning her exit, actively receiving assistance to exit, or building a new life after exit, Ruhama can provide the appropriate supports internally, or coordinate supports from external agencies, at every one of these stages. This approach is also designed to take account of the fact that **exiting is rarely a simple linear process, and for some women can take many years.**

...we're very aware that we're leading the way with that model [that supports exiting], I would say, rather than foisting it on others. It's a model that is tried and tested. It works. We know it works for exiting...every strand you look at in it relates to exiting and supports exiting in some way.

(Staff 1)



Women's support needs

Study participants identified **the most important supports that they determine are required to exit**, prioritising:

- health supports, especially those related to mental health
- supports to secure a safe place to live
- training and education
- financial supports and access to employment
- legal advice and representation, particularly in relation to immigration
- supports from staff and peers who understand what they have experienced in the sex trade.

Key elements of support provided

Central to the support Ruhama provides is **casework**, which involves advocacy and the coordination of all the interventions each woman needs within and external to Ruhama, including **supports to navigate the justice, immigration and welfare systems and access healthcare and housing**. Other critical supports provided include **trauma therapy, the Education and Development service, the Bridge to Work programme, the Seeking Safety programme and the Peer Support programme**.

Numerous study participants described not knowing about Ruhama initially and not knowing where to turn to for help when they wanted to exit. **Outreach work** is therefore a further essential component of the service in order to identify and support some of the most vulnerable cohorts of women in prostitution who have previously been unable to access help. This study also highlighted the burgeoning and **innovative nature of Ruhama's work in developing peer supports** for women impacted by prostitution and providing a new platform for the development of survivor voices. This **work on survivor voice** has the potential not only to empower individual women to speak out as the experts in their own lives, but also to inform the public narrative on issues of prostitution and trafficking.



I think, the caseworker, you know, setting up that relationship so that the first person they meet in Ruhama, they will always have that person as a contact. They can go back to them for anything, so they have one person that they know is involved in their case all the way through, and I think that's really important... (Staff 1)

[W]e try to help people to move from A to B, from where they are now in terms of their education...their dreams and hopes for the future...to where they might actually want to go, and for some people, that's two centimetres down the road and for other people, it's a 1000 miles down the road and there's everything in between...what's important in all of this is that whatever service we're offering, it's tailored to the person and what they need...

(Staff 3)

The peer support that we envisage in Ruhama is a pillar of support for women who are impacted by prostitution and the sex trade...it is a relationship of mutuality where we are listening to each other, we are not telling anyone what to do, we are sharing our experiences of what we did, we are offering 'this is what I did, and whatever you decide to do I am going to stand beside you and I am going to support you'. (Staff 2)



Pillars supporting the work

This study identified a number of crucial pillars that support Ruhama's work. These include a range of **supports for staff** in providing effective responses to women who have experienced such extensive trauma. Staff also require supports to undertake their work in a wider environment that is sometimes hostile to Ruhama and/or to the organisational position that prostitution is a form of gender-based violence. A **supportive external environment** in which Ruhama can locate and ground its work was also deemed essential, with legislation and public awareness and education having key roles to play in this regard. A further vital pillar that supports the work is **good governance**, which ensures transparency and accountability across all aspects of the organisation's operation.

...that whole extra element of working with very traumatised women around their trauma...I think the environment that is here with staff around debriefing and support...really helped with that...you can have back-to-back appointments and you're listening to horrific stories, hour after hour, so...you need a good support system which... is in place here in Ruhama...I feel very supported in the work I do, and I don't think I could do it if it wasn't there. The environment is nice, the staff are great, there's a real culture for debriefing...

(Staff 5)

Conclusion

This study has revealed the **undeniable harms and traumatic consequences of sexual exploitation which result in women having multiple and complex support needs that require a carefully structured, multilayered response.** Recognising and responding to these needs is largely encapsulated in Ruhama's current model of practice. The women who participated in this study are overwhelming positive about the supports they received to exit and recover from their experiences in the sex trade, and this is **reflected in the improvements they reported to their overall health and wellbeing since first accessing Ruhama.** However, there are barriers and challenges that remain for women who are exiting and those who support them, which are addressed as far as possible in the recommendations that follow.

...you know, when people say to me 'why would you work in that, it's so hard?' And I suppose for me, one of the motivating factors is it [sexual exploitation] is so wrong on so many levels. And that's what motivates me to make it different, because... nobody should have to experience what the people experience who come in here [to Ruhama]. And I think that's where the passion comes from, [in] the staff team because it is so fundamentally wrong on every level. (Staff 7)

Recommendations

Key recommendations for Ruhama

- **Strengthen the model:** ensure all staff, volunteers and Board members have a thorough understanding of Ruhama's model of practice; continue to review and refresh/update the model as the service evolves; continue to fully embed trauma-informed and survivor-informed principles into daily practice
- **Enhance outreach:** grow networks and referral pathways through continued assertive outreach work to reach as many potential beneficiaries as possible
- **Grow awareness of the service:** use targeted communication mechanisms to reach as many cohorts of potential service users as possible
- **Continue to develop peer support:** resource this important and burgeoning area of work sufficiently and review regularly to assess impacts
- **Sustain survivor voice:** ensure that this work is effectively resourced and that sufficient trauma-informed supports are provided to survivors who choose to speak out
- **Bear witness and respond to sexual violence:** continue to provide staff with ongoing support and training in responding to the extreme levels of sexually violating acts that women experience in prostitution
- **Embed the position that prostitution is a form of gender-based violence:** support staff to fulfil their roles while also providing time to explore and critically examine the organisation's position on prostitution and sex trafficking as forms of gender-based violence
- **Provide external training and support:** extend training to external agencies working with vulnerable women on the complex support needs of women who have experienced sexual exploitation and the ways in which Ruhama meets these needs through its care and case management approach.

Key recommendations for frontline professionals

- **Upskill to respond effectively to sexual exploitation by:** developing a deeper understanding of the harmful and traumatic consequences of the sexual violence that is inherent in prostitution, and responding appropriately; being able to identify the signs that someone has been subject to/is at risk of sexual exploitation and respond to them accordingly; gaining a fuller understanding of the nature of Ruhama's model of practice as a specialist agency supporting women impacted by the sex trade, and refer and collaborate accordingly.

Key recommendations for politicians and policy makers

- **Fund exiting services:** in line with the objectives of the *Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence*, ensure that women in prostitution have access to appropriate exit routes by sufficiently resourcing Ruhama to deliver its model of practice as the only specialist non-governmental organisation in Ireland supporting women in this regard
- **Address the complex needs of women exiting:** adopt an accountable, evidence-based and survivor-informed cross-Government and cross-Departmental approach to addressing women's needs and the many barriers they face to exiting and recovery following sexual exploitation, with a focus on the following areas of responsibility:
 - **Housing:** the capacity of gender-specific accommodation must be greatly increased and extended to include women who have not been trafficked but have experienced exploitation in the sex trade, as well as offering women a range of medium to longer term supported housing options
 - **Welfare:** consideration should be given to an exiting fund, accessed via the social welfare system in partnership with specialist frontline agencies working in the field, that would provide women, regardless of their immigration status, with a welfare payment to support them through the initial stages of the exiting process so that they do not have to return to the sex trade simply to survive
 - **Education:** women exiting prostitution, regardless of immigration status, must continue to be supported into and through further and higher education via the enhanced provision of flexible, funded places and adequate, accessible grants, especially for mature students, dedicated to supporting their education journeys
 - **Health:** health professionals must be adequately resourced and trained to identify and support women impacted by prostitution and sex trafficking, and the reach and accessibility of sexual health services for women in the sex trade need to be greatly enhanced across the country
 - **Immigration:** action is needed to expedite the processes that determine migrant women's immigration status in Ireland and/or confirm that the State recognises them as a victim of trafficking – such decisions must be made in a prompt and timely fashion so that women can progress in their recovery following sexual exploitation
 - **Justice and policing:** the relevant legislation must be updated to strengthen the powers of An Garda Síochána (AGS) to secure the prosecution of sex buyers in order to tackle the demand for prostitution. AGS must continue to adopt a victim-centred approach to ensuring the safety and welfare of all persons selling sex, and more personnel across the country need to be trained in this approach. The Garda National Protective Services Bureau and its divisional units also require enhanced resources to pursue both buyers and prostitution profiteers as the only way to effectively reduce the size of the sex trade.

Further resourcing is required to extend the reach and human resources of the specialised Organised Prostitution and Human Trafficking Investigation Units across Ireland. Proposals to expunge the criminal records of those convicted for selling sex prior to the 2017 legislation must also be expedited

- **Public education:** Well-resourced, evidence-based awareness raising and public education campaigns are needed to inform the public about the nature and impacts of commercial sexual exploitation, including prostitution, pornography and sex trafficking, and the relevant legislation in this regard.

Key recommendations for advocates, the media and the wider public

- **Address the nuances and platform survivors:** those driving debates on the sex trade must recognise the negative consequences for both survivors and service providers in framing prostitution as 'work' and take a more nuanced and analytical approach – this includes seeking to be more inclusive of survivors, providing safe platforms for their testimony to be heard
- **Prevent future harms:** prevention work, and particularly work to prevent the targeting, grooming, recruitment and coercion of vulnerable young people into the sex trade must be grounded in sound research evidence and survivor testimony on the true nature of prostitution and the often-lifelong harms and suffering for which it is responsible.

Key recommendations for researchers

- **Undertake longitudinal analysis:** a study of women over their exiting 'life course' that is more longitudinal in nature would enable researchers to chart and assess what supports are ultimately the most effective in the long-term for women seeking to achieve and sustain a permanent exit from prostitution
- **Focus on mental health, and the impacts of trauma, stigma and shame:** a study of the long-term outcomes and impacts of prostitution on women's mental health is needed, including an exploration of the impacts of trauma and the role that the deep layers of stigma and shame experienced by women arising from their involvement in prostitution plays in preventing them from seeking support and subsequently recovering from sexual exploitation
- **Enhance understanding of the sexual exploitation of children:** an in-depth research study is required to explore retrospectively with survivors and support providers what interventions could help prevent, identify and respond more effectively to the sexual exploitation of children and young people.

I learned to accept that that's what I've been through and that's what I've done but it does not define me. The pains, the hurt, the trauma will always be there, but I learned to accept and learned how to live with it...yes, I will always have these trauma traits, but accepting and saying there's something better for me...I always say it's an ongoing healing process. Amara



