

THE OTHER SIDE OF ALCOHOL AND SEX

Links between substance misuse and sexual exploitation are often more complex than we presume.

By Shannon Harvey

“When I was 12 I ran away to feel loved by older men. I met a man who I thought would look after me and love me like I wanted. He gave me cigs and beer... My mum and dad rejected me at a very young age. I wanted to feel supported... He was charming for the first few months. I felt loved but then he introduced me to two friends. They abused me, they used me to sleep with, they passed me along as if I was nothing.”

This is one young woman's story from *Out of the Box*, a booklet of stories by young people sexually exploited in Doncaster and London. Many of the stories come from young women accessing Streetreach in Doncaster, a drop-in centre and outreach service for young women and adults at risk of, or involved in, prostitution. As well as offering workshops, activities and access to training and employment, Streetreach provides a structured day care programme and drug treatment programme, because for most of these young women, substance misuse and sexual exploitation are two sides of the same coin. Project Manager Marilyn Haughton believes that although alcohol and to some extent illegal drugs are often part of the grooming process, they tend not to be significant factors for routes into sexual exploitation. She says the girls they work with generally don't need to be bribed or controlled with substances, it is love and affection they crave.

“If he wants her to do something she doesn't want to do – have sex with his friends, travel across town – he will have sex with her as an enticement rather than using drugs and threats,” says Haughton. “The girls believe that as long as he wants to have sex with her she is loved, useful, beautiful. And these are the things that are usually missing from their lives.”

However, the risk factors for sexual exploitation and substance misuse do overlap, often because substances are used as a consequence of exploitation. Haughton says that as the relationship progresses and he gets bored of her, violence and aggression increases. He can no longer be bothered to ‘romance’ her, and instead uses her to procure other, often younger girls.

“The misuse of alcohol can occur later in their sexual exploitation cycle when they feel rejected, unloved and worthless,” she says. “They use

substances to alleviate some of these feelings. When heroin becomes the drug of ‘choice’, they then spiral into the cycle of prostitution to fund this habit.”

Haughton's account highlights a dissonance between the way professionals often construct young women's experiences, and the way young women themselves understand their lives.

THE RISK FACTORS FOR SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND SUBSTANCE MISUSE DO OVERLAP, OFTEN BECAUSE SUBSTANCES ARE USED AS A CONSEQUENCE OF EXPLOITATION

As professionals, when we use the term ‘sexual exploitation’ we are generally referring to our shared understanding of young people's exploitation through prostitution, often tied to prevalent understandings of a model of grooming and pimping by an older male. For young women, however, this narrow construction of sexual exploitation often fails to speak to their own experience and emotions about the relationships and contexts in which they experience sexual violence.

The nia project, a women's organisation in London, has recently completed a three-year project training young people to train professionals about sexual exploitation. Quickly realising that existing definitions of sexual exploitation weren't resonating with the young people they worked with, they asked a young women's group at the New Horizons Youth Centre in Kings Cross to come up with their own definition.

The definition they wrote reveals that in young people's experience, sexual exploitation encompasses a spectrum of experiences from childhood sexual abuse to sexual bullying at school, sexual violence and coercion within intimate relationships, sexual exploitation within groups or gangs, as well as grooming leading to exploitation in prostitution. Their definition of sexual exploitation is:

“Someone taking advantage of you sexually, for their own benefit. Through

threats, bribes, violence, humiliation, or by telling you that they love you, they will have the power to get you to do sexual things for their own, or other people's benefit or enjoyment (including touching or kissing private parts, sex, taking sexual photos).”

Although substance misuse can of course be a risk factor for sexual exploitation, sexual exploitation is similarly a risk factor for substance misuse. As practitioners looking out for indicators of either, it is perhaps more important for us to recognise that some of the key risk factors for both substance misuse and sexual exploitation are shared: low socio-economic status, traumatic life events (including previous experiences of abuse) and low self-esteem.

A 2003 survey by the US-based National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse found that experiences of physical or sexual abuse made girls at least twice as likely to smoke, drink or use drugs as those who weren't abused, and girls who have suffered sexual violence are three-and-a-half times more likely to regularly use sedatives, tranquillisers, painkillers and opiates.

And crucially, these risk factors are gendered. Here in the UK, Elizabeth Fuller's 2007 survey for the NHS Information Centre found that girls were more likely than boys to have obtained drugs from older friends or their boyfriend or girlfriend, and that girls were almost twice as likely as boys to report that they took drugs on both the first occasion and the most recent occasion to “forget my problems.” For young women with experiences of abuse – and indeed, adult women – substance use can become a strategy for coping with the effects of trauma.

Jill Collier, Streetreach's Senior Drugs Worker, says that the girls who access the drop-in centre, who are around 14 and 15 years old, are using alcohol problematically, specifically binge drinking, rather than using other drugs. Collier's observations do seem to be supported by the statistics: young women are now, according to Alcohol Concern, more likely to be admitted to hospital for alcohol-specific conditions than young men.

While she supports girls as young as 12 with alcohol use, Collier also supports adult women. She is well placed to understand the progression, from problematic alcohol use and being

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at risk of sexual exploitation at a young teenager, to an adult woman funding a heroin habit through involvement in street-based prostitution. Collier tells me that most of the adult women she supports used alcohol and were sexually exploited as young teenagers. Marilyn Haughton of Streetreach adds that of seven adult women involved in street-based prostitution murdered in Doncaster, three were being exploited in prostitution when they were under 16.

If low socio-economic status, traumatic life events and low self-esteem are shared risk factors for both sexual exploitation and substance misuse, it's perhaps no surprise that looked-after young women are consistently shown to be particularly vulnerable. In her research with adult women who had been looked-after and were selling sex since before they were 16, Maddy Coy of London Metropolitan University's Child & Woman Abuse Studies Unit found that specifically, it was frequent care placements that most impacted on young women's development of their self-identity. She suggests that it is this damage to self-identity that makes young women vulnerable to the coercive pressures of predatory pimps, economic desperation and peer networks. This is an idea that also holds the answer about how we can best work with young women experiencing, or at risk of, substance misuse and sexual exploitation.

If disrupted self-identity – whether due to frequent care placements, experiences of sexual violence or other trauma – makes young women vulnerable to sexual exploitation and substance misuse, then as practitioners we need to find ways of working that recognises and increases spaces for these young people's agency.

Camille Warrington coordinates the National Working Group for Sexually Exploited Children & Young People, and she acknowledges that responding to young people's victimisation while also supporting their sense of agency can be a real challenge for practitioners. She writes: "Negotiating these two seemingly contradictory positions requires an ability to respect young people's own narratives while simultaneously feeling able to question and challenge them."

Yet, as practitioners, when we deny these young women opportunities to be involved in decision-making about their lives, we risk replicating the controlling behaviours of those who

exploit them. Professor Jenny Pearce at the University of Bedfordshire notes that when young women reject support services, this may actually be a way in which they are seeking to regain control over their own lives. Our challenge is to understand and communicate to young women the overlapping risks we know they face in relation to substance misuse and sexual exploitation, whilst also finding ways to increase opportunities for them to participate in and mould the services they receive from us.

When asked about significant relationships in their life, adult women involved in street-based prostitution often name their key worker in a substance misuse service. This speaks volumes of the potential power of the therapeutic relationship. It also tells us that when we are working with young women with disrupted self-identities and at risk of sexual exploitation, we need to be aware of just how significant our contact with them may be. Engaging creatively with a truly participatory approach increases the likelihood that young women will stay involved with our services. If young women are vulnerable when they want to feel "loved" and "useful", as Haughton suggests, our services must be places that young women feel valued, respected, and able to exercise control over their own lives.

Against Violence and Abuse's Stella Project has worked on the overlapping issues of domestic violence and substance misuse since 2003. In December, we launched our new Young Women's Initiative, a three-year research and development project in partnership with Middlesex University. The work will be conducted in two London boroughs and the findings of the research will provide, for the first time, insight into the prevalence of substance misuse and domestic and sexual violence experienced by young women accessing services in London, young women's help seeking, and the ability of our current services to meet their needs.

■ **Shannon Harvey** is the Stella Project London Coordinator at Against Violence and Abuse (AVA). More information about the Young Women's Initiative is available at www.avaproject.org.uk.

My life as a sex slave

Emma Jackson

At the age of 13 I was groomed and sexually exploited by a gang of men operating around the UK. When the grooming first started they would give me vodka and cannabis, which at 13 I knew was wrong but found it exciting and something that gave me a buzz. As the grooming went on, I found out that the alcohol and drugs they had given me were no longer free and it was pay back time. They used to tell me I had to pay them back and to do so I would have to sleep with his friend or cousin.

In a strange way, alcohol and drugs were my comfort, they took me to a better place, a place where nothing mattered anymore.

Alcohol and drugs were also fed to me when they would rape or sexually assault me, usually to make it easier for them to do whatever they wanted to do to me because I wouldn't be able to put up a fight.

When I was at my lowest point and being abused daily, I would use drugs and alcohol to escape from my nightmare. The more I was out of it the better. In a strange way, alcohol and drugs were my comfort, they took me to a better place, a place where nothing mattered anymore. It also made it easier for me to deal with my abuse, as at that time it blocked most of it out.

When I look back I realise alcohol and drugs were just numbing the pain for a few hours and also fuelling my depression. I was pressing the self-destruct button because I felt like I had nothing else in life.

■ **Emma Jackson** is the author of *The End of My World: the shocking true story of a young girl forced to become a sex slave*, published by Ebury Press.