

## HTMS Ambassador Programme

# Prostitution & Sexual Exploitation

**HTMS (Human Trafficking & Modern Slavery) is the exploitation of people through threats, coercion, fraud or deception. It involves the abuse of an adult's or a child's position of vulnerability for another person's gain. There is significant demand for prostitution across the UK, created by men who feel entitled to be able to pay mainly women for sexual acts. The scale of this demand, and the amount of money to be made, makes it very profitable for exploiters to traffick women and girls into prostitution in the UK and to move them around the country once they are here.**

### **Prostitution & Sexual Exploitation**

More than a decade ago it was estimated that there may be around 80,000 women in prostitution in England and Wales, but there has been no updated estimate of its scale and nature since then. This is a period when the marketing of prostitution online, especially via websites which are legal and treated like they are promoting any other 'service', has proliferated and has probably enabled the expansion of prostitution beyond the urban centres which were previously the 'red light' destinations.

Despite some media narratives that depict prostitution as glamorous and a chosen lifestyle for some women, it is well known that there is considerable violence, coercion, threats to families and forced debt associated with this 'trade' in women. In both the UK and overseas, it is women's poverty and exclusion that push some women into selling or 'exchanging' sex for money and other needs, and put them in contexts where traffickers can deceive and threaten them.

**Women at The Well**, a London-based Catholic charity with a specialism in responding to the needs of women subjected to prostitution, trafficking and sexual exploitation, finds that its clients commonly face:

- complex mental health issues;
- drug and alcohol dependency;
- domestic and sexual abuse, often following experiences of childhood trauma and abuse (much more likely to have experienced the care system);
- homelessness including rough sleeping;
- criminal justice system experience.

## HTMS & Prostitution & Sexual Exploitation

It is commonly believed that prostitution is illegal in England and Wales (law and policy is slightly different in Scotland and Northern Ireland), but in fact **only certain specific acts are criminalised**. These include soliciting and brothel-keeping. It is generally not illegal to advertise prostitution as the websites do, nor to pay for sex.

**There is very significant demand for prostitution across the UK, which means there is a 'market' that traffickers and exploiters 'supply'**. This is done by exploiting the needs of women who need money, drugs/alcohol or a safe place to stay. And, it involves filling 'escorting' sites and rooms in short-let flats with women from overseas who did not understand that they were to be trafficked for sexual exploitation.

**In 2025, no part of Government or policing has a good grip on where prostitution is taking place, who is being exploited by whom, the proportion of exploited women who are migrants, and what proportion of them are settled or undocumented.**

There is less visible street prostitution than two decades ago, but it undoubtedly persists and can involve some extremely marginalised women, including trafficked women. Presently, the 'trade' is taking place online and in private property, which means it is more 'out of sight'. It is known to be **mixed up with organised crime**, but even despite this it is not a high policing, health or community priority.

**The trafficking of women for sexual exploitation by British men who are willing to pay is a human rights violation in our very midst.**

## Women at The Well

Women at The Well, a CSAN member, was set by Sister Lynda Dearlove of The Sisters of Mercy in the King's Cross area of London in 2007.

The charity is able to take referrals from all over the country. It provides practical support at its daily drop-in centre where there is food, hot showers, laundry and clean clothes, with no charge and no appointment necessary. Women at The Well also provides practical advocacy and emotional support through issues including housing, debt, addictions and health and family issues.

Last year:

- There were around 2,000 visits to our drop-in centre;
- More than 200 women received long-term advocacy and practical support;
- More than 400 women were reached on the streets and in other precarious circumstances.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- Be informed about the realities of prostitution, other forms of sexual exploitation and trafficking today: [www.watw.org.uk/news-and-campaigns](http://www.watw.org.uk/news-and-campaigns)
- Challenge those who minimise prostitution and who say it is inevitable or all about choice
- Ask local elected people and police leaders in your area (including your Police & Crime Commissioner) what priority they give to assessing the scale of sexual exploitation and trafficking into prostitution in your area, and what they are doing about it. Tell them that you expect them to understand that grave human rights violations are often involved and there must be more attention to supporting victims and tackling 'demand' for this abuse.
- Support **Women at The Well**; sign up for our newsletter; invite Women at The Well to speak at your event or church.

### **If you are concerned about someone, seek help:**

You are never wasting anyone's time if you raise concerns about possible harm.

If it is an emergency, call **999**

If you wish to report a crime anonymously, you may call **Crimestoppers: 0800 555 111**

If you see adverts for prostitution, or if you think a local property may be being used for sexual exploitation purposes – tell your local councillors and your local police what you have seen and ask them to investigate further.

If you are concerned about someone rough sleeping, you can contact the national rough sleeping referral line **StreetLink: <https://thestreetlink.org.uk/>**

You can also report any concerns to the **UK modern slavery and exploitation helpline**, a free 24-hour helpline where you will be able to discuss your concerns, receive advice and support.

You may call the helpline on: **08000 121 700** or you may visit the website and report your concerns online at <https://www.modernslaveryhelpline.org/>