



CHANGING LIVES



SECURING SAFE FUTURES AND FREEDOM



Experiences of Sexual Exploitation in the Age of Transition from Childhood to Adulthood

A Briefing from the STAGE Project
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Introduction

The STAGE project, supported by the National Lottery Community Fund, brings together charities Changing Lives, The Angelou Centre, Ashiana, GROW, A Way Out, Together Women, Basis, and WomenCentre to provide trauma-informed support for women who have been groomed for sexual exploitation across the North East and Yorkshire. Since STAGE began in 2019, we have supported over 500 women affected by sexual exploitation, many of whom have existing vulnerabilities, including experiences of stigma, discrimination, and disadvantage.

This briefing is based on learning from the women supported by STAGE. We present evidence obtained through a series of workshops with project staff that highlights the need for effective transitional safeguarding of young people, continued multi-agency support past the age of 18, and increased understanding of the impact of trauma on young people's life trajectories.

Age of transition refers to a period of change from childhood to adulthood - between 16 and 25 years - and, for the young people STAGE supports, this often includes their transition to adult services. Young women transitioning into adulthood are experiencing multiple transitions at the same time, from leaving care services to living independently and no longer accessing intensive support.

Young women aged 16-25 make up the second largest group supported by STAGE (26.2%), following those aged 26-39 (51.3%). STAGE caseworkers work closely with those in the age of transition with different backgrounds, including looked after children (LAC), those in the care of their parents, and those transitioning to young people's accommodation and/or living independently.

Sexual exploitation can and does continue past the age of 18, and the failure to recognise that young people in transition may be in need of support can ultimately leave them exposed to further harm.

What is Adult Sexual Exploitation?

Sexual exploitation of adults is a form of sexual abuse that is poorly understood and rarely recognised across many sectors. Whereas understanding and responses to child sexual exploitation (CSE) have improved, particularly since the statutory definition of CSE was published in 2017, women whose vulnerabilities have been exploited for the advantage of others are still often described as 'prostitutes' or 'making poor choices', rather than people who have been subjected to horrific forms of sexual abuse and do not receive the support that they deserve and are entitled to.

Sexual exploitation occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a person into sexual activity. This is often done in exchange for something the individual needs or wants (e.g. money, food, shelter, drugs) and disproportionately advantages the perpetrator (e.g. financial advantage, increased status). In some cases, the perpetrator will be instrumental in creating the need, thus making the individual dependent on them (e.g. encouraging drug use to create addiction). It can result from grooming over a period of time, where the perpetrator makes the other dependent on them emotionally, physically and/or financially.

Sex work and sexual exploitation should not be conflated. While sex work may be consensual, this is not the case for sexual exploitation. A person cannot consent to a sexual activity if they see no reasonable alternative to engaging in the activity or have a reasonable belief that not engaging in the activity would result in negative consequences for themselves or others. This does not, however, deny that exploitation occurs within sex work, or that people who engage in any form of sex work are at risk of exploitation.

Recommendation 1: Introduction of a statutory definition of adult sexual exploitation to ensure a consistent understanding and recognition of the ways that sexual exploitation continues and presents itself in adulthood.

Shifting Perceptions

Misconceptions about adult sexual exploitation can have a negative impact on the support that young people are able to access.

Young people that have experienced sexual exploitation, and are often still being exploited, are regularly assessed as not requiring further support upon reaching adulthood and the legal age of consent. This leaves them vulnerable to further exploitation.

Not only does their vulnerability to exploitation not vanish upon turning 18 but, for some women, they are at increased risk of sexual exploitation as perpetrators know that the protection around them often decreases at this age. Furthermore, although women are legally able to consent to sex at 16 and to sex work at 18, the impact of grooming, abuse and exploitation experienced at a young age increases women's vulnerability and can impair their ability to meaningfully consent.

Case study

G, a 22-year-old British Pakistani woman, grew up in a conservative and religious household, was subjected to sexual abuse by a man from her extended family during childhood. The abuse continued outside her family home by a man she met through a friend, who groomed and introduced her to alcohol and drugs, for the purposes of sexual exploitation.

Between the age of 15 to 18 years old, G was seen as a victim of child sexual exploitation by services and was placed on a child protection plan. However, upon turning 18, both adult social care and the police did not offer G further support as they deemed her to be making unwise decisions and benefiting from her own abuse, which she was still exposed to on a weekly basis, now as a young adult.

G went missing and, when she was located, she disclosed that she had been sexually assaulted. Her STAGE caseworker supported her to report to the police however the responding police officer stated that that it cannot be classed as sexual exploitation, because G is over 18.

Young Black girls and women's disclosures of sexual exploitation in particular are frequently missed, due to their hyper-sexualisation and adultification by professionals, wherein they are viewed as more mature and less innocent or vulnerable than their white counterparts. Further information on Black and minoritised women's experiences of sexual exploitation, can be found in STAGE's briefing, [*Understanding the Needs and Experiences of Black and Minoritised Women Facing Sexual Exploitation*](#).

As well as being denied safeguarding support, there also appears to be a dichotomy within policing between the perceptions of victimhood of children and young adults, with some young women shifting to being seen as perpetrators, which fails to take into consideration their ongoing vulnerability to exploitation.

Case study

B, an 18-year-old woman, was abused by her mother and stepfather while growing up and was exposed to sexual exploitation by her ex-partner who was significantly older than her.

After receiving a message on a social media platform from a man she did not know, B and her friend went out to meet him. He proceeded to supply them with alcohol and drugs and took advantage of their intoxication to sexually assault them.

Because her friend was 17 years old, B was treated as the 'perpetrator' for organising this meet-up, instead of also being classed as a victim. Not only did the police disregard B's own experience of assault, but they missed the opportunity to identify and address her vulnerability to this form of exploitation. B is currently on bail for human trafficking and part of her bail conditions is not to speak to anyone under the age of 18; yet she was placed in a young people's accommodation.

Engaging with men who groom, abuse and exploit them as an adult is often seen as a 'choice' because young people 'should know better'. Many women supported by STAGE have been exposed to and personally experienced abuse and exploitation from a young age. These experiences can make it difficult to navigate future relationships and can make them more vulnerable to further abuse. Therefore, ongoing support and intervention into adulthood may be required.

Online Harms

Young people transitioning to adulthood are particularly at risk of harm from online sexual exploitation, due to their increased and often unrestricted access to technology and the internet, especially social media and gaming platforms.

Online sexual exploitation can take many forms. Many young women, like A in the case study below, have been victimised by known and unknown perpetrators who threaten to share intimate images with their family and friends unless they provide 'sexual favours'. Young people, especially those with multiple unmet needs, are actively targeted by perpetrators online for the purposes of sexual exploitation, which can easily lead to face-to-face forms of abuse. For example, this can involve grooming them into what they believe is a genuine relationship or offering them accommodation in exchange for sex.

It is essential that adult sexual exploitation can be recognised in all its forms, but currently it is often misunderstood and young women who are being exploited and abused are disregarded by services. There is currently no statutory definition of adult sexual exploitation and no national guidance on how to recognise or respond to it. The government could better protect women who are vulnerable to exploitation by introducing these things.

Case study

A was 17 years old when she was groomed by a man in his 40's who was domestically abusive towards her. Following their split, she met a man in his late 30s who coerced her into joining OnlyFans and took advantage of her financially in order to fund his drug use. Her partner became physically violent to her and she started using drugs to cope. She was able to end the abusive relationship but, once she did so, her ex-partner sent screenshots of her adult service website profile to her birth mother, who then shared them with her foster parents.

Transitions into Adult Services

Among the many transitions that young people who have experienced sexual exploitation face as they enter adulthood, one such transition is the move into specialist sexual exploitation services for adults, assuming they have been correctly identified as needing ongoing support.

Young people under child protection procedures are often referred to STAGE upon reaching adulthood; sometimes even a couple months before turning 18. Once a caseworker is allocated, we often find that the social worker's involvement radically decreases, and more often than not cases are closed entirely because young people are now accessing specialist sexual exploitation support. However, as we shall explore further, reduced involvement from social workers can have a detrimental impact on the young person, especially for those with multiple unmet needs that cannot simply be met by a single professional or agency.

Where such services exist, it is beneficial for young people to be referred to specialist adult sexual exploitation services early on in their journey of transition into adulthood. Working in partnership with specialist children's services to offer holistic and trauma-informed support allows for a smoother transition into adult services and avoids young people falling through the net.

Relationships are key, and young people can find it extremely difficult when they have invested time and trust into one relationship which abruptly ends, only to have to pick things up again with someone completely different. Allowing this change to happen gradually is a more trauma-informed approach and increases the likelihood of young people engaging with adult services. For young people only just coming to the attention of services as they near adulthood, it may be more appropriate to refer them directly to adult services. Many young people benefit from being supported by services not working exclusively with children, because they can maintain the same caseworker throughout and benefit from the already established links with other services catering to those 18+.

Recommendation 2: Services supporting children who have experienced sexual exploitation to make early referrals into adult specialist sexual exploitation services and to work in partnership to facilitate the transition

Slipping Through the Gaps

STAGE advocates for transitional safeguarding, which is defined as an:

“approach to safeguarding adolescents and young adults fluidly across developmental stages which builds on the best available evidence, learns from both children’s and adult safeguarding practice and which prepares young people for their adult lives.¹”

More information on transitional safeguarding can be found in [*Bridging the Gap: Transitional Safeguarding and the Role of Social Work with Adults*](#).

Services’ approach to safeguarding at the age of transition differ from one local authority to another, and this can have a significant impact on the quality of support individuals receive. The risk of people slipping through the gaps is even greater in sexual exploitation cases due to the lack of understanding of ongoing vulnerability into adulthood.

The criteria for adult safeguarding are different for those for children, and if the necessary assessments of vulnerability are not made in childhood, this can mean that young adults are overlooked as they turn 18. Even looked after children, who are entitled to a higher level of support, have not always had their needs fully assessed upon leaving care, and have had minimal support while transitioning to adulthood.

Case Study

At the age of 17, K was targeted for the purpose of sexual exploitation, and was identified to be vulnerable by children’s social care, due to her difficulty assessing risk and retaining information. Despite being in foster care from a young age and identified as vulnerable, no formal mental health or learning disability diagnosis was given. Once she turns 18, K will not be allocated to a social worker from adult social care, since she does not meet the threshold of need.

¹ [Bridging the gap: Transitional Safeguarding and the role of social work with adults \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/612217/bridging-the-gap-transitional-safeguarding-and-the-role-of-social-work-with-adults.pdf)

STAGE partners support many young women that find themselves in a similar position to K upon turning 18. Despite submitting multiple safeguarding alerts, caseworkers are often informed that no case would be opened due to the young person not having a formal mental health or learning disability diagnosis.

Being diagnosed with a mental health issue and/or learning disability can contribute to the continuation of support by adult services – not only safeguarding but also other accommodation and support services. However, we find that even for young women that were working with statutory and non-statutory services early in their lives, getting such diagnosis was not treated like a priority or no signs were identified in the first place. Young people growing up in turbulent homes are also likely to fall through the gaps and never be assessed, despite fitting all the criteria.

It is much easier to ensure the right support is in place if diagnoses are made in childhood. Upon reaching adulthood, it is up to the young people to consent to and engage in such a process but their ability to do so may be constrained by other factors such as drug or alcohol use, unstable living conditions, lack of phone etc.

Good Practice

Support from safeguarding services is not the only option for young people experiencing sexual exploitation as they enter adulthood. Multi-agency working can be an effective way to disrupt ongoing exploitation and reduce vulnerability to future exploitation.

In the North East, a Multi-Agency Exploitation Hub was developed in response to Operation Sanctuary. Meetings are held between police, social care, health and third organisations to discuss criminal and sexual exploitation cases on a weekly basis. The primary aim is for agencies to work together to identify, support and protect children, young people and adults at risk of harm. Moreover, the hub is used to gather information and intelligence on locations being used for the purposes of exploitation, identify organised criminal networks and individuals, and undertake disruption activities.

Recommendation 3: Creation of Multi-Agency Exploitation Hubs in each police force area

Another example of good practice is the Preparing for Adulthood (PfA) strategy introduced by Leeds City Council in 2017, which sought to create a framework for all services working with young people with special educational needs and disabilities and their families to facilitate their transition to adulthood. Significant focus is placed on adopting a person-centred approach to empower young people to reach their full potential. STAGE partners attend the PfA forum every 6 weeks to discuss individual cases, and how to best manage young people's transition, including making referrals to relevant services.

Operationally, a practical step for any organisations working with a young person which can make the transition smoother and help young people to be more independent, is the creation of starter packs with the young person's national insurance number, bank account details, and other key information and documents that are required to make housing and job applications less complicated. STAGE caseworkers have found that children in care are more likely to be supported to apply for and get hold of such documents, but children living at home, especially turbulent ones, can often be overlooked.



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