

# Responding to women in prison for modern slavery offending

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**At a global and local scale, women are represented as perpetrators of human trafficking and modern slavery crimes at proportionately higher levels than almost any other type of offending.<sup>1 2</sup> These women often have backgrounds of complex vulnerability, victimisation, marginalisation and responsibility to care for dependent relatives which contribute to their offending. This article draws on interviews with women convicted of these offences to consider what effective responses might look like. Analysis reveals that the problems that led to offending are compounded by their punishment. This group of women, far from fitting the stereotype of the evil, manipulative traffickers, have experiences and needs similar to those in existing literature on women who have offended. In addition, there is a need to situate their offending and to consider their resettlement in relation to global structural inequalities and labour market structures that limit options for women.**

The needs of women in prison have been well-documented revealing histories of victimisation and abuse, mental health problems, self-harm, and significant impacts of family separation.<sup>3</sup> These problems are compounded for foreign national women through increased distance from family and the threat of deportation.<sup>4</sup> The Prison Reform Trust identified 45 foreign national women in custody who were victims of modern slavery, some of whom had committed modern slavery offences.<sup>5</sup> Signs of some of the challenges these women face and what might be done to support them can be found in the limited literature on their offending

profiles. Overwhelmingly, this reveals problems with debt, economic responsibility, reliance on small networks of male family members who are also perpetrators of these crimes, and experiences of abuse and exploitation.

First hand engagement with female (and male) perpetrators of human trafficking and modern slavery offences is rare. The existing literature discussed here has been undertaken in a variety of countries with different socioeconomic, political, and cultural contexts. Although there cannot be direct comparisons made between the experiences and needs of the women in these studies and those in the current research, there are similarities in the pathways for women involved in human trafficking. Love and colleagues interviewed 10 women convicted of sex trafficking 'some of whom also identify as survivors of trafficking, poverty, and intersecting forms of abuse such as child abuse, domestic violence and assault' (p.2).<sup>6</sup> Their pathways into sex trafficking included 'lack of education, limited financial resources, substance use disorders, physical and emotional abuse and childhood exploitation' (p.14). Shen's research, drawing on interviews with women convicted for internal child trafficking (internal meaning trafficked within China), suggests that victims and those convicted share characteristics.<sup>7</sup> She identified a lack of education, childhood deprivation, and a consequent lack of legitimate opportunities for income. They were economically responsible for children and extended families and relied on small personal networks including intimate partners and families, rather than being part of what might be regarded as organised crime groups. Keo and colleagues interviewed 49 convicted female traffickers,

1. The terms modern slavery and human trafficking are both used throughout this article to refer to similar activities. Whilst these terms are not interchangeable and there is debate about their propriety, this is not the focus for this discussion.
2. UNODC (2020). *Female Victims of Sexual Exploitation as Defendants: A case law analysis*. Vienna.
3. Smart, C. (1976). *Women, Crime and Criminology*. Routledge; Heidensohn, F. (1996). *Women and Crime*. Bloomsbury; Worrall, A. and Gelsthorpe, L. (2009). 'What works' with women offenders: The past 30 years. *Probation Journal*, 56(4), 329-345.
4. Bosworth, M. (2011). Deportation, detention and foreign-national prisoners in England and Wales. *Citizenship Studies*, 15(5), 583-595; Warr, J. (2016). The deprivation of certitude, legitimacy and hope: Foreign national prisoners and the pains of imprisonment. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 16(3), 301-318.
5. Prison Reform Trust (2018). Still No Way Out. Retrieved from: <https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/still-no-way-out-foreign-national-women-and-trafficked-women-in-the-criminal-justice-system/>
6. Love, D.A., Fukushima, A.I., Rogers, T.N., Petersen, E., Brooks, E. and Rogers, C.R. (2023). Challenges to reintegration: a qualitative intrinsic case-study of convicted female sex traffickers. *Feminist Criminology*, 18(1), 24-44.
7. Shen, A. (2016). Female perpetrators in internal child trafficking in China: An empirical study. *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 2(1), 63-77.

identifying that the lack of legitimate opportunities and the access to illegitimate opportunities had shaped the women's entry into trafficking in Cambodia.<sup>8</sup> Nair and Sen interviewed 80 women primarily involved in the sex trafficking of children.<sup>9</sup> Almost all (94 per cent) interviewees had prior involvement in the sex industry as victims of child sexual exploitation (CSE), brokers or pimps, brothel owners, or had inherited the business from family.

Analysis of case files provides further evidence of women's needs. Siegel and de Blank identified that women operated in three ways, as supporters, partners in crime and madams.<sup>10</sup> Broad found that women tended to perform lower-level roles that could render them more identifiable in the investigation and prosecution of these crimes.<sup>11</sup> Second, that previous experience of victimisation can lead to offending; and third, that women often offend with an intimate partner. For many of the women in Wijkman and Kleemans' study of Dutch case files, their co-defendant was an intimate partner.<sup>12</sup> The most common activities undertaken by these women were collecting money, housing victims, controlling victims during work, exploiting and confiscating passport or travel documents. Only seven of the 150 women in case studies were previous victims of sexual exploitation, although half of them had worked as sex workers.

Women were also found to perform roles more diverse than those which might be considered 'low ranking' (p.67). Spanish female sex traffickers often offended with their intimate partners and/or relatives, carried out a variety of roles and were 'characterised by situations of vulnerability and deep gender inequalities' (p. 254).<sup>13</sup>

This group of women, far from fitting the stereotype of the evil, manipulative traffickers, have experiences and needs similar to those in existing literature on women who have offended.

In the context of discriminatory gender practices and the feminisation of migration and poverty, women may seek out or be sought for criminal opportunities. Baarda's research exemplifies the operation of opportunity, where amongst Nigerian female sex traffickers, the 'possibility of earning a good income as a 'madam' in the future may be one of the incentives for victims to comply in an exploitative situation' (p.258).<sup>14</sup> Although there are some similarities amongst these women, Lo Iacono warns against stereotyping,<sup>15</sup> and rather that the complexity of women's circumstances requires consideration of each individual case and their relationships with others.

The overlap of victimisation and exploitation amongst female traffickers further complicates responding to their needs and their desistance. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) analysed 53 cases from 16 jurisdictions involving victims of sexual exploitation as defendants. In many cases, women continued to be sexually exploited while performing activities relevant to their offending. Female traffickers were often intimate partners or relatives of their traffickers but 'very few courts addressed this important dimension' (p.6).<sup>16</sup> Finally, motivations of female traffickers differ to those commonly attributed to traffickers through official narratives (e.g., generating substantial profits) including: to counter their own exploitation; to maintain the affection of or manage threats from their trafficker; and to escape extreme personal and family poverty (ibid). Failures in victim identification, in processes purported to support victims, at borders where people are identified as

8. Keo, C., Bouhours, T., Broadhurst, R., & Bouhours, B. (2014). Human trafficking and moral panic in Cambodia. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 653(1), 202-224.
9. Nair, P. M., & Sen, S. (2005). *Trafficking in women and children in India*. Orient Blackswan.
10. Siegel, D., & De Blank, S. (2010). Women who traffic women: the role of women in human trafficking networks—Dutch cases. *Global Crime*, 11(4), 436-447.
11. Broad, R. (2015). 'A vile and violent thing': Female traffickers and the criminal justice response. *British Journal of Criminology*, 55(6), 1058-1075.
12. Wijkman, M., & Kleemans, E. (2019). Female offenders of human trafficking and sexual exploitation. *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 72, 53-72.
13. Rodríguez-López, S. (2022). Getting to know women convicted of human trafficking in Spain: Personal profiles and involvement in crime. *Women & Criminal Justice*, 32(3), 242-256.
14. Baarda, C. S. (2016). Human trafficking for sexual exploitation from Nigeria into Western Europe: The role of voodoo rituals in the functioning of a criminal network. *European Journal of Criminology*, 13(2), 257-273.
15. Lo Iacono, E. (2014). Victims, Sex Workers and Perpetrators: Gray areas in the trafficking of Nigerian women. *Trends in Organised Crime*, 17, 110-128.
16. UNODC (2020). *Female Victims of Sexual Exploitation as Defendants: A case law analysis*. Vienna.

immigration offenders, and in investigations where victims are often required to carry the burden of evidential proof all contribute to narrowing options for women who have been exploited and may resort to work in illegitimate markets and/or criminality. A wider lens is needed which incorporates not only the individual factors that underpin women's decision-making but also accounts for global inequalities and the structures of labour markets that limit work choices. Supporting women in prison involves considering an alternative discourse to that which demonises human trafficking and modern slavery offenders and is cognisant of the environment into which they are being released. The findings from this research contribute towards understanding the needs of these women in the UK and how staff in prisons and probation can respond to those needs.

## Methodology

The findings presented here are part of a larger research project which aimed to build an understanding of how people become involved in modern slavery. As part of this project, the research team conducted interviews with 30 people convicted for modern slavery and human trafficking offences, and other allied forms of offending (using the Free Association Narrative Interview Method).<sup>17</sup> The interviews with the nine participants who were women are used for the purposes of this article and for considering their pathways into offending and their needs in prison/probation. The women were all interviewed by the author. All but one were recruited through a consenting process initiated by HM Prison and Probation Service, and the remaining participants contacted the project directly having seen details of the project online. All the women chose to be interviewed in English in which they were fluent, and without an interpreter although one was available. The project received ethical approval from the University of Manchester Research Ethics Committee and participants were advised prior to giving their consent that although potential identifiers would be removed from their transcripts, and any reporting would include

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the use of pseudonyms, this would not completely negate the risk of identification.<sup>18</sup>

These biographical interviews began by taking brief demographic data followed by an invitation to tell the story of their life, in their own words. Table 1, below, provides an overview of the women — all but one of whom were serving custodial sentences. After telling their stories, the women were asked additional questions focused on their narratives to elaborate on or clarify parts of their story. Each of the women was interviewed twice, except one who was interviewed three times as she had not been able to tell her full story in two interviews. Following the first interview, the transcription was checked against the recording and discussed with the project co-investigator to identify points for follow up, inconsistencies, and gaps. This formed the structure for the second interview which occurred within three to four weeks of the first. For each participant, a case history was created using quotes to illustrate and depict their experiences and this was situated within the political, historical, and socio-cultural context of the countries referred to in the case study. The themes arising from each case study were compared across all participants to identify common themes, which are explored with reference to the participants, below, using one case study to exemplify the theme in more detail.

## Women's narratives of modern slavery offending

The themes emerging across the women's narratives are presented below in four themes (i) 'Employment' which situates the offending in the context of the women's employment and access to labour markets and (il)legitimate work, (ii) 'Relationships, victimisation and exploitation' which considers the women's histories of abuse, neglect and exploitation in their relationships with intimate partners and others, (iii) 'Economic responsibility' which accounts for what financial responsibilities the women had and who they provided for, and (iv) 'What next' which highlights how the women perceived their futures post-prison. The case studies aim to forefront

17. Hollway, W., & Jefferson, T. (2008). *The free association narrative interview method*. Retrieved from:

<https://oro.open.ac.uk/15410/1/H%26J4FANImeth08.pdf>; Broad, R., & Gadd, D. (2022). *Demystifying modern slavery*. Routledge.

18. Due to limitations of space in the current article, it is not possible to provide a full overview of the methodology, for full details see footnote 18: Broad, R., & Gadd, D. (2022).

the women's narratives and include their words presented in quote marks throughout.

## Employment

All but two of the women encountered obstacles to gaining employment and made decisions to access available work in the context of very limited options. The roles undertaken by women in their offending were varied, including ownership and management of legitimate/illegitimate businesses, drug dealing, employment as a domestic worker, and recruitment of women and girls who were subsequently exploited by male co-offenders. Sandra and Grace owned brothels, having previously undertaken sex work and Nina worked, alongside her intimate partner, to manage a group of sex workers, looking after them and their children as well as creating digital adverts. Hina owned and ran a garment factory, arranging for migration of workers from Pakistan. Susan and Linda were convicted for their respective parts in bringing children to parties with older men to be sexually exploited.

Susan was a care leaver who had been sexually exploited as a child having sex in exchange for drugs.

Linda had escaped domestic abuse and was raising five children, living in fear that her ex-husband would find them. When Estelle struggled to make enough money through work as a cleaner, she recruited Portuguese women to marry Nigerian men for money. Having been excluded from school and never worked, Vicky stored and cut the heroin that was dealt by her brother and his friends. Tambara and her husband arranged for the travel of an overseas domestic worker to maintain their professional jobs.

Not all roles taken by the women in their offending were lower level. Hina owned the business in which the garment workers were exploited and Tambara and her husband were health professionals trying to balance their professional and home life. Despite, or because of previous victimisation and

exploitation, Sandra and Grace managed their own (illicit) businesses.

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**Table 1.** Participant characteristics

Name	Age	Nationality (and ethnicity)	Offence/Exploitation type	Sentence length	Dependent children/ family	Co- offenders	Previous victimisation/exploitation	Involvement in sex work
Sandra	40s	British (Mixed Heritage)	Keeping a brothel Sexual exploitation	9 months	Children	None	Child abuse Child witness of domestic abuse	Yes
Hina	30s	British (Asian British)	Labour exploitation	4 years	Children	Family	Forced marriage Domestic abuse	No
Susan	20s	British (White British)	Child sexual exploitation	6 years	No	Intimate partner and his male friends	Child neglect Rape and sexual assault Sexual exploitation	Yes
Grace	40s	Kenyan	Sexual exploitation	10 years	Children and family in Kenya	Intimate partner	Child abuse/neglect Domestic servitude Sexual exploitation	Yes
Linda	40s	Zimbabwean	Child sexual exploitation	6 years	Children	Intimate partner and his male friends	Child abuse Domestic abuse	No
Nina	40s	Slovakian	Sexual exploitation	7 years	Children	Intimate partner	Domestic abuse	No
Tambara	40s	Nigerian	Domestic servitude	9 months	Children	Intimate partner	No	No
Vicky	20s	White British	Conspiracy to supply Class A drugs Criminal exploitation	7 years	No	Family	Child neglect	No
Estelle	30s	Black Portuguese	Sham marriage	4 ½ years	Children and family in Portugal	Friend	Domestic abuse	No



Grace grew up in very difficult socio-economic circumstances in rural Nigeria. She had been left 'alone' to bring up her two younger sisters when her mum left for work. Grace was 'very angry' with her mum but was beaten by her mum when she asked for help despite her father and three older brothers pursuing their own lives elsewhere. The situation deteriorated so much that Grace and her sisters were drinking 'warm water mix with salt...because we didn't have any food'.

Grace travelled to the UK, on the promise of a college education in exchange for looking after a couple's children. 'I came looking for a better life because I wanted to help...my family'. However, she never attended college and 'they mistreated' Grace. 'Sometimes I was so tired to clean, to wash the dishes in the evening, and I would fall asleep, and they would wake me up' to clean. Grace left with the help of a friend of the couple who promised her different work.

Having been helped out of domestic servitude, Grace was then paid '£20 a day' alongside accommodation to clean and answer the phone in a brothel. After a 'few days', the £20 was stopped and, as Grace was working for 'nothing', she 'started taking men'. The brothel owners 'were taking advantage...because they knew I don't have anything, I don't have stay in the country'. Grace gave half her earnings to the brothel keeper and 'made something for myself that I could buy the food, I could buy clothes, and some of the money I could send to Kenya' via the 'post office'.

Grace eventually opened her own brothel. She was unable to rent a property, being in the UK without documents and so enlisted the help of a client she had met in the brothel, who rented a property for her in exchange for £1,500. Another client (also from the UK), who Grace later married, helped her to retrieve her passport, paying £5000 to the couple who had exploited her as a domestic help. Aside from this, Grace worked mainly alone and was able to use her profits to buy two other properties, one of which she used as a

brothel and the other as a legitimate business — a hair salon. As a brothel owner, Grace kept £20 from each of the women's clients. She was 'very soft' and 'flexible' with the women working for her — although made a considerable amount — '£3,000 a week'. Grace was arrested when exploited women were identified in her brothel. Grace denied knowledge of their exploitation although admitted that there were several women working in the brothel who did not speak English. She

maintained that they were 'happy' and 'not trafficked', despite not being able to speak to them.

Grace had 'staff on reception' (African women), 'security' (African men), three men who 'designed the website' as well as paying taxi drivers '£20 or £30' per client. However, none of these people were convicted alongside Grace because the police could 'see all the money' she had. Grace had divorced her husband (the former client) prior to her arrest because he 'didn't want...children'. She was in a new relationship and had two children in this new relationship. Grace had 'stopped working in the brothel' — only then managing it — when they met. She was convicted with this man because he had some of the brothel earnings in his bank account — he received a community sentence. He and her children visited weekly, and the children ask when she's 'coming home'. Grace completed a 'sewing' course and at the time of interview was looking forward to weekend release, having no

plans for her release other than being reunited with her family.

The roles undertaken by women in their offending were varied, including ownership and management of legitimate/illegitimate businesses, drug dealing, employment as a domestic worker, and recruitment of women and girls who were subsequently exploited by male co-offenders.

### Relationships, victimisation and exploitation

All except one of the women had experienced significant victimisation. Sandra and Linda were victims of child sexual abuse perpetrated by their fathers, and Susan, Grace, and Vicky experienced child neglect from their families. Sandra and Grace witnessed domestic abuse as children, and Hina, Linda, Nina, and Estelle had all experienced domestic abuse. Susan and Grace had experienced sexual exploitation, Susan had also been raped and Grace had been a victim of domestic

servitude. Hina had experienced forced marriage. Only Tambara had no history of victimisation or exploitation. Most offended within groups of men (mostly family members and/or intimate partners) where they were the only woman.

Two of the women were subject to serious physical and sexual abuse which directly impacted on their offending. Nina's partner, and co-defendant, had subjected her to prolonged physical violence. He was arrested for attempted murder after her initial arrest, having stabbed her multiple times. Susan's partner had received drugs in return for sex with her, and she was raped and sexually abused by some of her co-defendants. Linda was coerced by a younger man and subsequent co-defendant with whom she had been in a relationship. Estelle was indebted to a male friend (not convicted) who helped her to settle in the UK and to bring her children over. Grace and Tambara were convicted alongside their boyfriends/husbands but otherwise were in non-abusive relationships at the time of interview.

#### *Nina*

Nina had migrated to the UK from Slovakia along with her daughter, sister, and parents and had moved into community to which she referred as 'gypsy'. She soon started a relationship with a man who she 'don't know about his past, nothing, nothing at all'. Nina quickly discovered that he was a 'big fighter' and the first time he was abusive — 'slapped' Nina — was one month after she got pregnant with his child. Because she 'not speak English' and in her 'country you pay for...termination' Nina 'didn't know' she had options and she 'don't understand...domestic abuse'. After the abuse escalated and became more severe — at one point resulting in her being in a 'wheelchair', Nina tried to leave but he would 'always find' her. She felt unable to leave — 'because I don't have any money, nothing. What can I do? I don't know how to live here without language'. Her partner imported and dealt drugs before diversifying to bringing women working as sex workers in Eastern Europe, to the UK.

Nina initially had no contact with these women, but after she was injured because of severe abuse from her partner, he brought a woman into their home — 'because I got so many injury...she come into my house and start helping'. Accommodating his friends and sex workers in their home became the norm and, once she was recovered, Nina looked after up to eleven people (her partner and his friends, the women working for her partner, their children, and Nina's own children).

As Nina was 'the clever one', one of her partner's male friends showed her how to advertise women on Adultworks. 'My role...is taking pictures, checking websites and pick up phone because these girls don't speak English'. Nina knew that her partner had been

violent towards the girls but was unable to do anything in response to it due to her own fear of him, recalling times where he had been so violent towards her that she was 'vomiting black stuff', refusing to take her to hospital, telling her 'bitch, it's good, it's good for you'.

Nina was convicted with her partner and his friend, all receiving sentences of over seven years. Despite the '£500 or £1000 per week' discussed during the trial, Nina maintained that she did not see any of this money, having to 'feed all these people', 'washing for them, clean for them'. She did not see the situation as exploitation — not 'modern slavery. In my home it's not been like that because that.....girl's got money. When you want go home, you're going home. You've got your passport...You don't want that job, you don't do'.

Nina had 'lost everything' — her children having been removed by social services due to the offending. Nina was due for release in three months at the time of interview and was awaiting a decision on deportation, although still in fear of her ex-partner who 'said when you coming out he still want to kill me'. Nina had a 'good education' before prison and had taken courses in prison — 'beauty and hair' which she 'love' and 'now...nail technician' — work that she wanted to continue after release.

### **Economic responsibility**

Only Vicky had no children. Susan had given birth to two children who were removed due to her drug use. Sandra, Hina, and Estelle had children at the time of their offending for who they were solely financially responsible. For Estelle and Grace, economic survival meant migrating to the UK to send money to their extended family in Portugal and Kenya respectively. Nina, Linda, and Susan did not profit from their offending although Linda and Susan received drugs from their co-defendants in return for, or to encourage, their actions. Nina had accommodation and the means to live but no additional money, and had no option to leave as she was living in fear of her partner. Tambara employed domestic help so that she and her husband could maintain their jobs and lifestyles.

#### *Estelle*

Estelle grew up in a Cabo Verdean diaspora community in Portugal and was an EU citizen. After Estelle's father died, there was 'no one in my family, nobody to support, only my mum, worked day and night to, to support me and my brothers'. At 14, Estelle left education and started working to 'help my mum'. In her late teens, Estelle had two children to a man who was abusive, and she later discovered had another family. Not able to make enough money working in Portugal, Estelle travelled to the UK in her early 20s to financially support her children, her mum, and her

brother, who had schizophrenia and who had become increasingly violent towards their mother. She believed 'in England everybody has a job' and that the 'small money' in England would be 'big in Portugal'.

Not speaking English, Estelle had limited work choices and first worked as a cleaner. She also amassed gambling debt. After two years, she 'missed' her children and wanted to 'find something better for them'. Unsure of how to bring her children to the UK, a Nigerian male 'friend' helped her with the practicalities. Becoming aware of her debts, he suggested an opportunity where she (and he) might profit. While Estelle recruited women from Portugal to take part in sham marriages for money, the Nigerian 'friend' recruited grooms, who would obtain EU citizenship. At first Estelle 'refused' his offer, but then as the 'bills' mounted, her mum became ill, and her brother increasingly violent and in need of medical care, she 'decided yes'. Her role was 'to convince the girls to do it' and she received £1000-2000.

By the time of Estelle's arrest, she had stopped taking part in the 'fake wedding'. She had met and married her husband and wanted a 'normal life'. She was arrested for her part in the offending when one of the brides attempted to marry for a second time, subsequently identifying as a victim of exploitation. Her husband was also convicted because Estelle had used his credit card for purchasing flights for the brides — but the Nigerian friend was never arrested. Estelle had trained as a hairdresser in prison and planned to work in this area on release and looking forward to being reunited with her family.

### What next?

At the time of interview, Hina and Estelle were in mother and baby units with their children — the babies were due to be removed from the prison shortly after the interviews took place. Sandra and Hina were not in relationships and would be reunited with their children post-sentence. Grace and Estelle were in non-abusive relationships and their partners were caring for their children until their release. Linda was undertaking supervised visits with her children due to the nature of

her offence. Nina's children had been removed and she was keen to start reconnecting with them on release. Tambara and Hina were adamant that they would seek appeals for their prosecutions, explaining that they felt that authorities had manipulated their circumstances to meet modern slavery targets. Vicki was planning to live with family members on her release, some of whom had been involved in her offending. All of the women except Tambara had taken employment-based courses while in prison, in beauty related qualifications — learning how to do hair and nails (areas in which many women are exploited)<sup>19</sup> and some planned to take up this work once they had been released. All, except Tambara and Hina, had little formal education and all the women were in precarious employment situations.

### Vicki

Vicki had been convicted for being part of a 'county lines' operation. She and her brother had been found to be exploiting several victims in drug distribution. At the age of 15, Vicki was living with her 19-year-old brother. Her father had been 'abusive' to Vicki's mother, 'swearing all the time'. Vicki's mother then died as a result of cancer. Vicki was excluded from school following behaviour caused by her grief 'getting too much'. Vicki and her brother were helped to find a house in a small town by their uncle, who was an established drug dealer.

When Vicki and her brother started to struggle financially, he offered the opportunity to sell heroin which he supplied. Vicki 'wasn't happy' because her 'mum wouldn't have been happy' but they were making 'two, three grand a day'.

On her arrest in her mid-twenties, Vicki learned that they had been the subject of long-term surveillance operation. Two of the men who dealt drugs for the siblings had reported that they were 'forced' to deal drugs, or they would be 'beaten up' and that the men were 'never paid'. Vicki denied this, saying that the men had fabricated their stories to avoid imprisonment for drug distribution offences.

Vicki was halfway through a seven-year sentence at the time of interview. She was looking to take some qualifications whilst in prison, having completed no formal education prior to her imprisonment. On

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19. See GLAA (2020) Industry Profiles which highlights the recruitment practices, low wages and long hours amongst other features of the industry which contribute its potential for exploitation.



release, she was planning to live with her uncle who had not been convicted for his role in the drug distribution.

## Discussion

The majority of these women had agency in their decisions to take part in the exploitation of others. However, the operation of agency is difficult to conceptualise as a binary — for some of these women their decision making and alternatives were limited by fear of others, by responsibilities to provide for dependants, and as an indirect consequence of previous victimisation. Some of these women may have had a defence under Section 45 of the Modern Slavery Act which contains explicit provision to protect people whose victimisation has led to their offending.<sup>20</sup> Others could have had non-punishment principles applied regarding whether it was in the public interest to incarcerate them for these offences. None seemed to have received adequate legal representation, and their pathways back into the community were far from clear. In many instances, supporting these women in their victimisation and/or exploitation may have diverted them from their pathways into offending. There should be greater consideration for how women are punished for these crimes and how they are supported in recovering from their victimisation whilst in prison and on release.

These women had very limited social networks, and many of the relationships they had which led to their offending were abusive/coercive. Understanding their involvement in offending must come with an understanding of women's lives and the socio-economic context of their decision making. Supporting these women in their desistance must take account of the nature of their relationships on release, and how they might be supported to widen their social networks.

The role of sex work in the lives of these women is complex and requires deeper consideration in the context of literature considering agency and

stigmatisation, which are beyond the remit of the current discussion.<sup>21</sup> In terms of what this means for practitioners working with women who have been involved in sex work, it is important that they are able to view the offence within the wider experiences of women's lives to consider how to respond to potential trauma; to consider the possible stigma associated with sex work and/or sexual exploitation of others; and how re-entry into sex work may feature in women's lives and can be approached without an expectation of exiting this work<sup>22</sup>.

In migrating for work to support their families, or entering into work with family, these women — and many like them — are meeting responsibilities they feel encumbered to fulfil within global and local labour markets that are structured to limit their options. Engagement with such women both in a practice and research setting should focus on in-depth analysis of their motives, and pathways of offending to contextualise trafficking socially, and to design effective gender-sensitive preventive strategies. Whilst not denying the harm they have perpetrated against others, identifying and supporting the needs of women who have been convicted for modern slavery is essential to support their desistance, and to understand how to prevent other women from becoming implicated as perpetrators of these crimes.

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