

**"The Type of Girl That
Would Do That"**



Peer led research into sex work in Durham and Darlington

**CHANGING
LIVES**

October 2016

EXPERIENCE OF CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION (CSE) AND GROOMING

There have been several high profile cases¹³ around the UK in which CSE¹⁴ has taken place and been mishandled by both statutory and non-statutory agencies. These cases have brought the public's attention to situations in which children have been coerced into engaging in sexual exchanges, over prolonged periods of time. Documented failures of local authorities and services have, in part, led to the continuation of widespread exploitation, often involving highly vulnerable children and young people.

There are common features within these cases, including but not limited to, lack of knowledge about legalities surrounding the selling and purchasing of sex and attitudes towards children and young people. This has often led to young people who have experienced this form of exploitation being defined by professionals as 'child prostitutes'.

Children and young people are often said to have 'consented' to the exchange of sex for drugs, alcohol or gifts. This consent cannot exist with the UK's legal framework. As Barnardo's¹⁵ note, "any young person can be a victim of CSE....It happens when a young person is encouraged, or forced, to take part in sexual activity in exchange for something". It is illegal to purchase sex from someone under the age of 18. This therefore, renders the term 'child prostitute' obsolete. The notion that a person who is under the age of 18, can 'consent' to sexual exchanges, is therefore invalid.

Interviews carried out in this study found six women who show signs of having experienced this form of exploitation. These women are all currently aged 18-25 years old. One woman disclosed that her exploitation began when she was 15 years old and she was introduced to a party scene involving multiple older men, by a cousin. A second, transgender woman, disclosed that her exploitation began when she was 13 years old, when an older man would meet her outside of school and buy her gifts. Social Services in the area of this study also stated, in their interview, that they are aware of at least one additional case and a local police investigation into more widespread and systemic sexual exploitation.

There is much confusion amongst these women surrounding what exactly constitutes exploitation. Further, there is confusion surrounding what constitutes healthy friendships and sexual relationships:

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Because stuff happened a lot when I was younger, so I just thought it was normal.

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These women often have been groomed by, and socialise with, the men who they exchange sex with. They therefore find it hard to reconcile this idea of friendship with the realities of exploitation. Five of the women report that they are "just starting to realise" what exploitation means, the other does not talk of her exploitation in such explicit terms.