



BaptistCare

HOPESTREET



# WORKING WITH MIGRANT SEX WORKERS IN SYDNEY'S LOWER-END BROTHELS

RESEARCH REPORT | 2019  
BaptistCare HopeStreet Women's Services

*Because  
we care*

# Thank you

We want to thank and acknowledge the strong and resilient women who shared their experiences and insights with us for this report.

## Contributors

.....  
Jessica Davidson  
Sze (Peggy) Mak  
Julia Ellis  
Rebecca Naoum  
Madeline Economos  
Hoi Lam Lo  
Marianna Rombola  
Rubie Ireson

## Coco's Story

A migrant sex worker's experience in Sydney's sex industry





## Contents

Executive Summary	6
Key Findings	7
Report Overview	9
Background Information – Why CALD Women?	12
About BaptistCare HopeStreet Women’s Services	14
Our Project - Health Outcomes and Needs	15
Stigma	17
Mental Health and Stress	20
Safety and Violence	22
Sexual Health	24
Other Areas	26
Recommendations	30
A Broader Commitment	32
Appendix	34

# Executive Summary

BaptistCare HopeStreet's first research report on Sydney's sex industry from our HopeStreet Women's Services team provides insights into the culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) women working in the city's lower-end brothels. The research was collected over a ten-month period and surveyed over 100 women on their experiences being CALD sex workers in Australia.

Survey respondents were found to be predominantly from a Chinese speaking background (80%) and were aged 26-49, contradicting the widely-held opinion that most sex workers are young women in their early 20s.

In NSW, sex work was decriminalised nearly a quarter of a century ago; however the high level of stigma associated with workers in the sex industry has led to an overwhelming number of CALD women (73%) believing that Australian society has an ingrained negative view of the industry. This can result in negative outcomes for some sex workers in terms of their working conditions, including their health, safety and wellbeing, as well as their personal lives.

The stigmatisation attached to sex workers' occupation ties directly to the 5 percent of the individuals surveyed stating they would feel comfortable disclosing their job to loved ones.

The research also uncovered that the majority of the women felt unable to cope with their stress and were unaware of the avenues available to find support services to assist with improving their mental health. The level of days worked,

on average three to five days a week with extended 'on call' hours, was found to be a key contributor for women's limited ability to venture out of their workplaces and thereby limiting or removing their access to HopeStreet Women's Services facilities.

HopeStreet Women's Services provides a range of specialised services and support to CALD women, including:

- Assistance with visas, as a predominant number (90%) of the women surveyed did not have permanent residency in Australia;
- Health, safety and wellbeing support, including ensuring women have a good understanding of the many protective measures brothel proprietors are required under NSW work health and safety legislation to provide them with appropriate safeguards for their physical and mental health; and
- Assistance with experiences of domestic violence, as around half of the HopeStreet Women's Services clients have been affected in the past by violence in their intimate relationships.

This report aims to shed light on the perspectives of CALD sex workers employed in Sydney's lower-end brothels, raise awareness of the challenges faced by the women in the course of their work, and details three key recommendations from HopeStreet Women's Services to improve its services and continue supporting CALD women working in Sydney's brothels.

# Key Findings

This report provides insight into the lived experience of over 100 culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) Asian women working in Sydney's lower-end brothels, as a result of a pilot project conducted by BaptistCare HopeStreet Women's Services. Research collected over a 10-month period explored topics of demographics, involvement with the sex industry, experience of stigma, stress, violence, substance use, sexual health, education and working rights. This project originated from a commitment to understand the needs and wants of these women, and to develop our service in a way that would be useful in meeting their needs and decreasing their experience of marginalisation.

## Key findings from the research project include:

- 80 percent of women in our research group were from Chinese-speaking backgrounds, with the majority of women aged 26-49, contradicting assumptions that sex workers are often young women.
- Over 90 percent of respondents did not have permanent residency, and held a variety of different visas.
- A key area of support that is required has been the need for assistance with visas and immigration issues. Some of our clients falsely believe sex work in Australia would provide an avenue to gain permanent residency.
- The majority of women responded that they work 3-5 days per week, but may be "on call" on these days for long periods of time (over 8 hours or

overnight). This work arrangement and being unable to leave the brothel during these hours has been noted as a barrier to accessing our service.

- When discussing mental health and stigma, 21 percent of women stated they struggle to relax and get agitated easily. The majority of women stated they sometimes feel unable to cope with their stress levels, and do not know how to get support when faced with a difficulty.
- Only 5% of women stated they would be comfortable disclosing their job to family and friends, and 73 percent of workers believed society has a negative view of sex workers. Those that believed that there was a negative social perception were also strongly correlated with not liking anything about their job. Just over half of the respondents indicated that if they had another opportunity currently open to them they would not be involved in sex work, whilst 25 percent stated they would choose sex work over other options. All the women we have worked with have indicated that they have made the personal decision to work in the sex industry.
- We found a strong correlation between knowing how to get support with potentially-violent client situations when needed and enjoying working in the sex industry. One in four women stated they are never able to refuse a client, and 42 percent of women stated they have dealt with difficult or violent clients. Over half of our clients have previous experiences of domestic violence in their intimate

relationships, and we found a high correlation between past experiences of domestic violence and involvement in the sex industry.

- Knowledge on how to access sexual health checks is relatively low. Only 23 percent of workplaces provide condoms and other protective equipment to workers, despite this being required by law.
- 88 percent of women did not have a signed contract, and 15 percent of women knew they were working in an unlicensed premise.

We have used these findings to guide us in developing three recommendations to improve our service provision, and guide our efforts to meet the needs of the CALD sex working community.

## Report Overview

BaptistCare HopeStreet Women's Services have been working with women involved with the sex industry for over 25 years. Historically, our work has been focused on women and transgender women involved with street based sex work. In October 2016 we responded to the changing landscape of sex work by piloting a program focused on supporting women from CALD backgrounds working in lower-end brothels across Sydney. As we began this pilot project, we found a lack of research into the circumstances and needs of migrant women in Sydney's lower-end brothels. This report originated from a desire to understand the needs of this group of women, and to develop a service that would be useful in meeting their needs and decreasing their marginalisation.

This report includes input from over 100 migrant women who work lower-end brothels in Sydney's sex industry. They have participated in the report by completing anonymous feedback surveys and interviews. The feedback surveys, divided into two stages and containing mostly close-ended questions, were optional and for women who interacted with our service. The surveys were collected over a period of 10 months in 2018 and were conducted in Cantonese, Thai and English. The first survey had 19 questions and asked about the women's time in Australia, their involvement with the sex industry, and their experiences of stigma and stress. The second survey had 38 questions and asked about involvement in the sex industry, experience of violence at home and at work, substance use, sexual health, education and working rights.

This report includes staff reflections and learnings from across the two years of working with CALD women during the pilot phase of this program.

This report provides insight into the lived experience of migrant women in Sydney's lower-end brothels. It is not reflective of the sex industry as a whole; however, it does offer greater understanding of the thoughts and opinions of women who have interacted with our services. Not all women who access our service participated in this project, however, as the project includes input from over 100 women we believe there are important trends and findings that are useful in guiding our work with CALD clients, and this may also be applicable to other services and groups involved with the sex industry.

.....

### Terminology

It is important to detail the following terms, in presenting this report.

**Sex Work** – Sex work in NSW has been legal since it was decriminalised in 1995, making it subject to workplace regulation and local government planning laws. Sex work is defined as the voluntary provision of sexual services for money or equivalent goods and services. Individuals involved in sex work may be male, female or transgender, or they may identify with a different gender identity. The acts included as sex work are varied, ranging from erotic displays without physical contact through to high-risk unprotected sexual intercourse with numerous clients. Individuals may occasionally or opportunistically receive a fee or gift in

exchange for a sexual favour without perceiving themselves as sex workers, or they may engage full time in explicitly commercial provision of sex services.<sup>1</sup>

**Slavery** – Slavery occurs when a person exercises ownership rights over another person. Slavery and slavery-like conditions include forced labour, servitude, debt bondage and forced marriage. Slavery exists at the extreme end of a continuum of exploitative labour conditions. In 2008 the High Court of Australia distinguished between slavery and exploitative labour conditions by determining that slavery involves dealing with a person as a commodity, an object of sale and purchase<sup>2</sup>. In our work with clients we have not witnessed cases of slavery in Sydney; this is most likely due to our service being voluntary, and it is unlikely that someone living under these conditions would be able to access our service.

**Exploitative labour conditions** – Refers to workers who are subjected to labour conditions that do not meet fair work standards, and treat workers unfairly for the benefit of the owner or boss. Exploitative labour conditions are based on a difference in power between employers and workers, making migrant workers particularly vulnerable due to a range of factors, such as not having the same legal rights as domestic workers, the threat of deportation, differences in English language skill, and pressure to accept whatever work conditions are offered for the chance to work in Australia<sup>3</sup>. Exploitative labour conditions include a range of situations, including low pay, forcing workers to perform duties or acts they are not willing to do, working longer than recommended hours without the appropriate breaks, providing

insufficient facilities and required safety equipment such as condoms and lubricant and restricting workers' movement and ability to leave the brothel.

**Trafficking** – Trafficking is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a person for the purpose of exploiting them. Traffickers move their victims through the use of force, threats, coercion, deception or abuse of power or vulnerability. Coercion can occur through threats of physical or non-physical harm (for example threats of deportation). If consent to migrate for work is obtained by coercive or deceptive means the consent is considered irrelevant, as a person cannot meaningfully consent under such conditions<sup>4</sup>. Literature suggests the sex trafficking is low in Australia<sup>5</sup> and in our experiences we have not seen any cases of sex trafficking.

We have found that most CALD clients have consented to come to Australia to work in the sex industry, and whilst the conditions they are working in are often exploitative, when compared to the conditions they were experiencing prior to migrating, they consider their current situation to be an improvement or equitable to previous conditions

**Lower-end brothels** – Refers to brothels and massage parlours offering sexual services for below industry average prices. Reviews from forums, newspapers and feedback from clients are also used to identify these brothels.

**CALD Women** – CALD is an acronym for “culturally and linguistically diverse”. This term is used to distinguish the mainstream Australia community from those born overseas, where English is not the main language and cultural norms

and values differ. Of the migrant women that have accessed our pilot program, 80 percent have been from Chinese-speaking communities in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and 10 percent have been Thai speaking from Thailand. At the time of this research, the only languages spoken by staff were Mandarin and Cantonese, in addition to English.



# Background Information – Why CALD Women?

The Kirby Institute and Sydney Sexual Health Centre has identified an increase in the proportion of Asian migrant sex workers in NSW brothels since the early 1990's<sup>6</sup>. The Centre also identified that a growing proportion of women facing marginalisation in the sex industry were from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds. This group make up 76 percent of the sex industry in Sydney, with 50 percent identifying they either have no or poor English skills<sup>7</sup>. As a result, CALD women often have limited choices, face greater risk of being taken advantage of and are at risk of being confined to their working environment. This group are more likely to be working in illegal brothels and more likely to be trafficked than any other group involved in the sex industry in Sydney<sup>8</sup>.

Research has shown that sex workers often face stigmatisation and discrimination that can lead to abuse, low self-esteem, denial of services and isolation<sup>9</sup>. Women from CALD backgrounds are often at higher risk as they are not always aware of support and services available, or due to language barriers are not able to access these services. Many women also face increased isolation, with most of their family and support living overseas.

.....

## Service Gap

For twenty years, BaptistCare HopeStreet Women's Services has supported the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of sex workers in Sydney.

HopeStreet Women's Services provides holistic professional support services to women in the sex industry, and has dedicated bilingual case workers available to support CALD sex workers. The other organisations focused on working with sex workers in NSW offer either peer-based support or ministry-based pastoral support.

Within the category of peer-based organisations, the Sex Workers Outreach Project (SWOP) provides health prevention, advocacy and health promotion across NSW and Scarlet Alliance provides advocacy and support for individuals who identify as sex workers. To work at either of these organisations you must identify as a sex worker. These peer-based organisations work from a pro-industry position, which may limit their ability to reach women who are experiencing exploitation within the industry or who do not want to continue in the industry.

Several ministry/church based groups visit women in brothels. The primary purpose of these groups is to address spiritual needs and provide pastoral care. They do not address complex needs that often require professional skill sets. Some of these organisations work from an anti-industry position, which limits the ability to reach women who want to continue in the industry or who may feel judgement from an organisation that is anti-industry. HopeStreet Women's Services works alongside these organisations, providing training on good practice in engaging with women involved in the sex industry,

and creating referral pathways to HopeStreet Women's Services for clients requiring professional services.



# About BaptistCare HopeStreet Women's Services

BaptistCare HopeStreet Women's Services includes a Women's Centre that is a safe space for women facing challenges and are at risk of marginalisation in Sydney, including women involved in the sex industry, CALD sex workers in lower-end brothels, and women facing complex circumstances such as domestic violence, addiction, homelessness or the challenges of living in social housing communities.

HopeStreet Women's Services provides women (including transgender women) access to free, holistic and confidential professional support through a range of practical services including workshops and skills-based classes, drop-in support, outreach, counselling and case management, safe-sex kits and food support, and assistance for accessing health and government services. Its core aims are to provide increased safety, increase the choices available to women facing difficult circumstances, and enhance a sense of belonging for the women who use the space.

.....

## Our Model

The model of HopeStreet Women's Services Inner City has proven to be effective, with high engagement and positive outcomes for women engaging with the service.

The model recognises the differences between local areas in regards to needs and outcomes. As our service provision expands to more areas, we are active in

pursuing collaborative partnerships with local agencies and churches to ensure our work remains relevant to the local community.

The key elements of our model include:

- A home environment model for drop in and professional services.
- Framework of trauma-informed care, and a strengths-based and solution-focused approach.
- Harm minimisation perspective.
- Outreach using professional bilingual staff to build rapport and trust.
- Drop-in meeting immediate needs for social connection, food, laundry and shower facilities.
- Professional case work, support work, group work, advocacy and counselling provided.
- Providing a women-only space, inclusive of transgender women.



*It is good that you speak Mandarin so I could talk to someone.” – Client*

# Our Project – Health Outcomes and Needs

## Demographics

In 2018, our BaptistCare HopeStreet Women's Services program connected with over 800 women in over 150 brothels and massage parlours across Sydney. The majority of women (estimated to be over 90 percent) that we have worked with in lower-end brothels are from CALD backgrounds. 80 percent of women who have accessed our CALD program have been from Chinese speaking backgrounds in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. 10 percent of women have been from Thailand. Other countries represented include; Japan, Vietnam and Malaysia. Our HopeStreet Women's Services have staff that speak Mandarin and Cantonese, which helps with the language barrier for Chinese-speaking women to access our services, and may contribute to the large proportion of women from Chinese speaking communities accessing our service.

The majority of CALD women (71 percent) working in brothels fall within the ages of 26-41, with 40 percent in the 34-41 age range. The next highest age bracket is the 42-49 age range, accounting for 22 percent of women. This demographic is also reflected by staff observations and contradict many mainstream assumptions that most women who work in the sex industry are young women in their teens and early twenties.

## Visas

The vast majority of women who responded to our survey (93 percent) do not have permanent Australian residency; and hold student, protection, tourist or working visas, with a third of women holding a student visa. With the exception of a tourist visa (5 percent of women surveyed) all other visas allow women to legally work in Australia with restrictions.

For example, student visas allow for a maximum of twenty hours per week of work. From our interactions, it appears that many women who hold student visas are working more than the regulated twenty hours.



*Often women are not able to access some kinds of services (like financial hardship, accommodation) because of their visa status.” – Staff member*

Many CALD women have accessed our service for support with visas and immigration issues. This is sometimes due to incorrect information being given to women that they are eligible for protection visas, or confusion around how to navigate the visa and immigration system. Some of our clients come to Australia to engage in sex work under the false impression that it will be an avenue to gain permanent residency.

Over half of the women (55 percent) have been in Australia for less than 12 months, and the next highest cohort is women who have been in Australia for more than two years (27 percent). The second survey asked how long each woman had been involved in the sex industry, with 59 percent being involved less than 12 months; 31 percent for 1-2 years; and 4 percent for more than two years.

There is a correlation between visas and length of involvement with the sex industry in Australia. For women that have been working in the sex industry for less than three months, 90 percent are on either a student or tourist visa. For women working in the sex industry, between 6 months to one year, over 80 percent were on a student or bridging visa. When women have worked between 1-2 years, 60 percent are either on partner visas, or working visas, or are permanent residents.

We have found a higher movement of workers around brothels in different suburbs, and back and forth overseas, than originally expected. This is due to the visa status of many of the women being temporary, or women moving between brothels by their own choice or due to direction from management.

## Stigma

There is no denying that there are many women who have worked or work in the sex industry who have experienced social stigma and judgement by society. Research shows that the presence and impact of stigma on sex workers is highly influenced by the legal context<sup>10</sup>. In most Asian countries, sex work is illegal, and many of the women that access our service reflect on the fear they feel if family, friends or their community found out they were engaged in sex work. In Australia, the majority of Sydney brothels are staffed by Asian migrant women working on a variety of visas<sup>11</sup>; this is also reflected in our work at HopeStreet Women's Services, with over 90 percent of the women we see being from CALD backgrounds.

The impact of stigma on mental health is well documented. For example, Hong et al (2012) found that sex workers with high levels of perceived stigma were more likely to have elevated depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation or a suicide attempt within the past 6 months<sup>12</sup>.

As well as being corrosive to mental health, stigma acts as a barrier to reporting experiences of violence or assault, as sex workers often fear the nature of their work will be made public, or their claims will not be taken seriously or addressed professionally.<sup>13</sup>



*I was assaulted once. It wasn't while I was working though. But when I went to the police they didn't believe me, and I think that's because they knew I did sex work and they knew I did drugs." – Client*

For brothel-based workers, stigma is also associated with burnout, role conflict, poor worker-support and experiences of violence.<sup>14</sup>

Sex work is decriminalised in New South Wales, but many women that work in the sex industry still experience constant stigma. When asked if they would feel comfortable disclosing their job to their family and friends, only 5 percent of women responded that they would. This is reflective of previous academic studies, which found that most Chinese sex workers don't disclose their job to their families and are worried about their families discovering their job<sup>15</sup>.

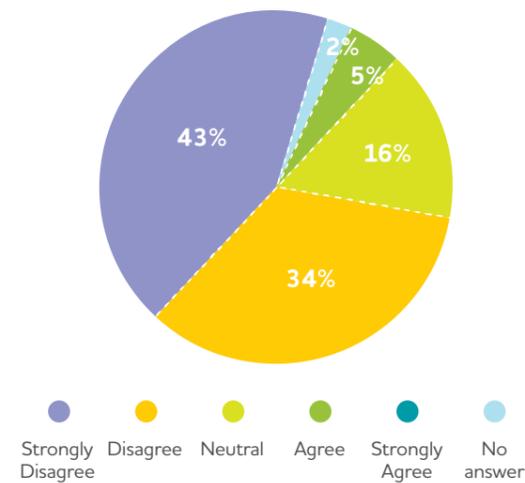
Significantly, only 2 percent of women believed that their family would support them if they knew they were a sex worker.



*I told my daughter I am a cleaner, and I don't want her to find out my occupation." – Client*

Only 27 percent of the surveyed women believed that society had a positive viewpoint on being a sex worker. There was a relationship between stigma and work enjoyment; 30 percent of the respondents said they did not like anything about their job, and 70 percent believed that society looks down on sex workers.

**I am comfortable disclosing my work to my family and friends**



This is reflected in staff observations from working with women involved in the sex industry. Many women verbalise a fear in disclosing what they do for work, and some women talk about experiencing feelings of shame.

Despite the stigma they face, some women enjoy aspects of their job including the financial compensation and freedom that comes with the job. They also enjoyed chatting with customers, having good clients, providing services well, their level of job satisfaction, and the sex; as one woman put it, "There are too many things I like."

When asked whether they love their job, 46 percent of women were neutral, 18 percent loved it and 36 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "I love my job".

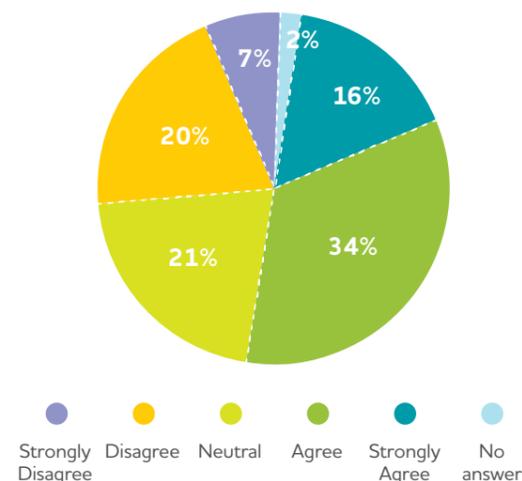


*Women's Services makes me feel they are even better than my family. I don't have family and good friends." – Client*

### Diminished Choice

HopeStreet Women's Services often focuses on the factors that diminish choice, and seeks to work with women to increase choice, safety and belonging. We recognise that many women, particularly women involved with street-based sex work, and women from migrant backgrounds working in lower-end brothels, do so due to diminished choice. This can be factors such as economic disadvantage, mental health, social isolation, language barriers or the desire to work short term in the sex industry in order to support family in their homeland or gain financial stability.

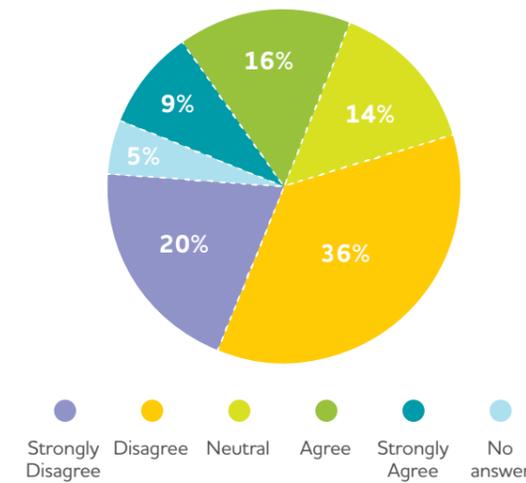
**I think people in society look down on sex workers**



*"I wanted to work in a restaurant at the beginning, I then chose to be a sex worker because the high salary paid off my family's debt quicker. I will stop working after I earn enough money." – Client*

Of the women surveyed, 56 percent stated that if they had other opportunities or choices they would not still be involved in sex work. We believe that this reflects that many women are working in the industry due to diminished choice. It also reflects the limited extent to which these women can exercise personal agency in navigating systems that limit their access to resources.

**If there are other choices and opportunities, I would still be involved in sex work**



However, 25 percent of the surveyed women stated that even if they had other choices or opportunities, they would still be involved with sex work. Of these women, 66 percent had been in Australia for more than one year, perhaps indicating the positive effects of increased social support networks and resources.

Our work has also shown us that when women know how to get support when experiencing difficulties (30 percent of women), they are more likely to enjoy their job than those who don't know how to get support. Of the women that stated they enjoy their job, 86 percent also stated that they felt the clients they met were easy to work with.

Just one interviewee was comfortable disclosing her work to family and friends; she is a permanent resident and had been in Australia for more than two years. She stated that she loved her job, and she knew her family would support her if they found out she was a sex worker. If there were other choices and opportunities available to her, she would still choose to be involved in sex work. She doesn't think people in society look down on sex work; she finds it easy to relax and wind down; she is neutral that her stress is related to her work; and she knows how to get support when she has difficulties. It's possible that other women working in the industry share this woman's view, but don't feel the need to access support services and so were not included in our survey.

Overall, the results show us that of the 26 percent of women who strongly agree or agree that their stress is work related, 89 percent also strongly agree or agree with the statement: "I think people in society look down on sex workers." This reflects a strong association between stress and stigma.

# Mental Health and Stress

As previously highlighted, stigma plays a large impact on an individual's mental health. Existing academic literature indicates sex workers have higher rates of depressive symptoms and psychological distress than the general population, and experience significantly lower overall mental health.<sup>16</sup> These symptoms have been found to be highly influenced by sex workers' experiences of stigma, discrimination, lack of support and the lack of autonomy experienced by brothel-based workers.

As the majority of women who participated in our research are from China, it should be noted that existing research from China demonstrates Chinese sex workers have higher rates of depression and suicidal behaviours.<sup>17</sup> Risk factors for these poor mental health outcomes included being a member of an ethnic minority, working at lower-income level or lower-tier establishments, belonging to a younger age group, or being involved in street-based work.<sup>18</sup>

We determined it would be inappropriate to ask specific questions around depression, anxiety and PTSD in this project as the survey was not conducted in a therapeutic setting. In addition, we found many women from migrant backgrounds have a poor understanding of mental health concepts.

Women often use the term 'stress' to articulate lower mental health. This might be the case as the term may carry less stigma, or alternatively may be a reflection of language or cultural differences between Mandarin and English in describing mental health concepts. We determined to incorporate

questions around experiences of stress in our survey to discuss mental health.

When asked how much they agree with the statement "I find it easy to relax and wind down", 39 percent of the surveyed women agreed; however, 21 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. In addition, 38 percent of women stated they get agitated easily. It is clear from these responses, and from our experiences working with women, that many CALD women in the sex industry experience high levels of stress on a regular basis.

50 percent of sex workers responded that they had sometimes felt stress in the past month, and 52 percent stated they sometimes felt unable to cope with the stress. This highlights the need for more support, education and resources for women from CALD backgrounds around mental health and coping skills.

Only 26 percent of women strongly agree or agree that their stress is related to work. It's likely that there may be many factors influencing stress, including feeling isolated from friends and family, not being able to speak the language or not knowing how to access support. It also highlights that there are often numerous factors that impact an individual and their mental health, and the complexity involved in addressing the needs of sex workers.

While most women experience stress, many experience higher levels than they are able to cope with stress. 61 percent of women indicated they don't know how to get support when they have difficulties, which is likely to increase their distress.

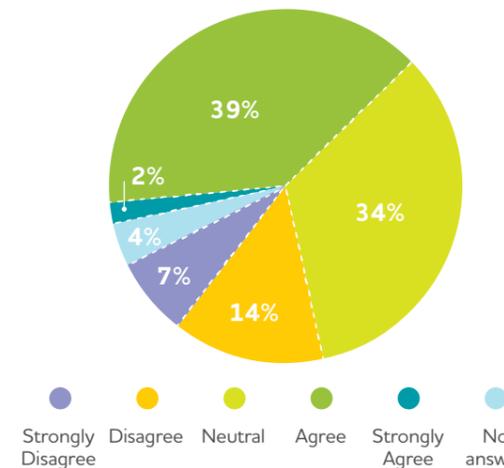
In addition, HopeStreet Women's Services staff have noted that a significant amount of time is spent assisting women in both understanding the different support options available in Australia, and translating those resources so that women can know what and how to access them. With 60 percent of women not knowing how to access support when they have difficulties, the need to continue programs such as Women's Services is clear.

Staff also observed that being from the same cultural background tends to create a strong sense of community in the

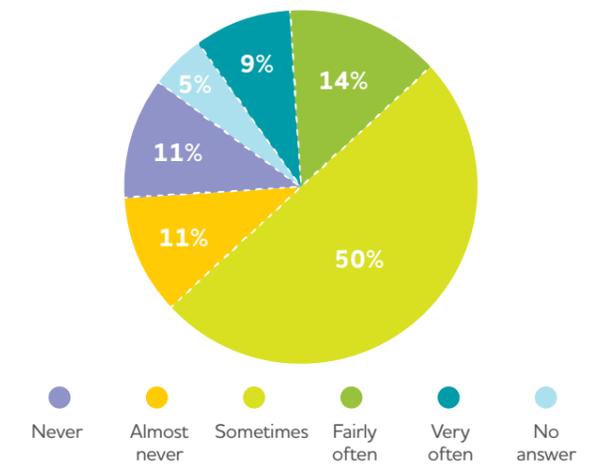
brothel. However, if (for example) there is one woman from a Thai background and everyone else is Chinese, the Thai woman is likely to feel very isolated. This observation has reinforced the importance of creating community and opportunities for cultivating community within our programs.

A large proportion of the women surveyed (40 percent), indicate they find it easy to wind down and relax after work but the rest are neutral or disagree with this statement, indicating that more resources and education around stress would benefit women.

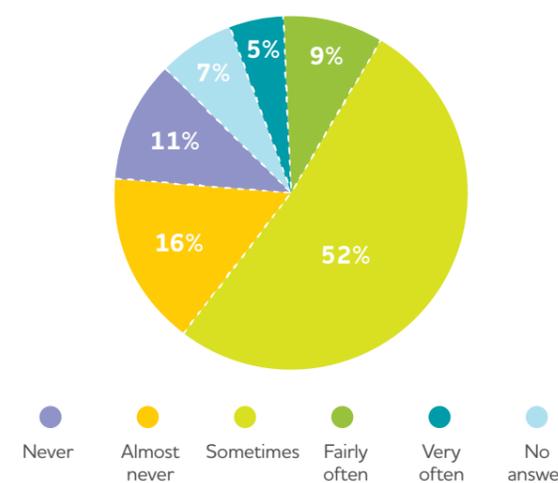
**I find it easy to relax and wind down**



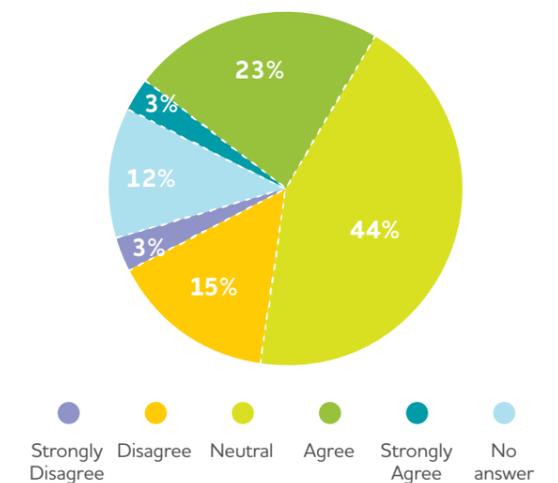
**In the past month, how often have you felt stressed?**



**In the past month, how often have you felt unable to cope with the stress?**



**My stress is related to my work**



# Safety and Violence

Within society, we know that many women frequently experience violence and threats to their safety. Violence takes many forms, including physical, emotional, social, psychological, economic, spiritual and sexual violence. There are conflicting reports about the levels of violence experienced by women in the sex industry; however, existing research has concluded that work in managed brothels is the safest type sex work in Western nations<sup>19</sup>.

Supported by other research and by our own observations, Pell et al. conclude that “at present, in spite of investigations by state and federal authorities there is little evidence of large scale trafficking in Australia” (2006: 157). Accordingly, much of the focus on brothel-based sex workers’ experiences of violence is centred on individual experiences. Previous research has identified that brothel-based sex workers can increase safety by employing prevention strategies aimed at negating or reducing their risk, including discussing service provision with clients pre-engagement.<sup>20</sup> The employment of security at the premises and the support of management in shaping the work environment are also crucial factors identified as impacting on the level of risk experienced by brothel-based sex workers.<sup>21</sup>

The ability to choose clients also strongly impacts sex workers’ safety at work. Only 23 percent of respondents were always given the option to choose clients, 40 percent were sometimes able to choose clients. Troublingly, 25 percent of women were never able to choose their clients.

When asked about their past experiences,

42 percent of women had dealt with difficult or violent clients in brothels. Importantly, if women had experienced violence in the workplace, only 6 percent of women felt that management didn’t intervene, support or care for them. Our experiences have found that management often want to create safe environments for women but do not always have the resources or education of how to do this well. Only 30 percent of women agreed with the statement that clients they met were easy to work with; 43 percent felt neutral about their clients.

Of those surveyed, 54 percent of women had experienced violence in the home from a partner or family member, with verbal or emotional violence being the most frequent form of abuse. From our experience working with clients in case management and counselling, there is a strong trend of having experienced domestic violence in past relationships. We have seen that for some women, working in the sex industry is a way to establish financial independence from a violent partner.

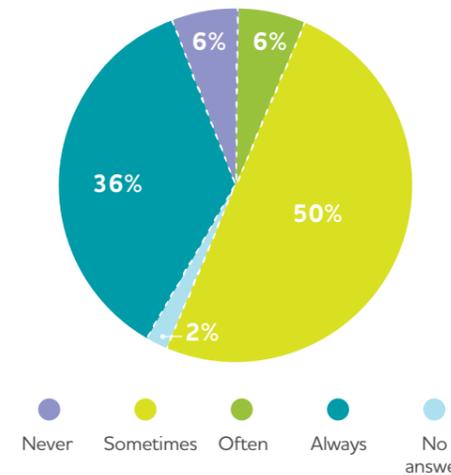
We have found that there is little shared recognition of what constitutes domestic violence between certain diverse cultural backgrounds of the women we work with, and generally little to no understanding of where they can find support from domestic violence-related services. It is also important to state that there may be additional cultural factors to consider. In China, culturally you would normally never tell anyone about family business, including domestic violence as that would bring shame on the family.



*I once had a Chinese client who was experiencing domestic violence and was told by her Chinese solicitor that domestic violence is normal in China and therefore she shouldn’t leave her partner.” – Staff Member*

Only 36 percent of the women surveyed stated that they always felt safe at work, compared with 81 percent saying they always feel safe at home.

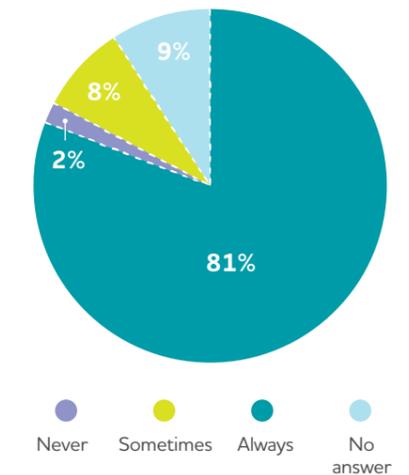
How often I feel safe at work



Unsurprisingly, interviewees who are unable to choose their clients are more likely to feel unsafe at work. 25 percent of these women answered that they never felt safe at work, and 58 percent sometimes feel safe at work. Amongst workers who are always able to choose clients, 45 percent stated they always feel safe at work, and none of them indicated that they never felt safe at work.

We strongly believe that a greater sense of safety could be cultivated if women had the ability to choose their own clients. We also believe that brothel managers would benefit from education about the different forms of violence and how they could better support the women that they work with.

How often I feel safe at home



Of the interviewees who worked in the sex industry for less than 12 months, 36 percent of them answered they were never able to choose clients, and just 14 percent answered they are always able to choose clients. Compared to workers who have worked for more than 12 months in the sex industry, just 6 percent answered they are never able to choose clients, but 41 percent answered they are always able to choose clients.

# Sexual Health

Sexual health is a key area of work at HopeStreet Women’s Services. Our work in this space includes providing education around sexual health, assistance in accessing health services and distributing free sexual health products such as condoms, lubrication and dams.



*“If you didn’t come to my brothel, I didn’t know where I could go for sexual health check, which is very important to us.” – Client*

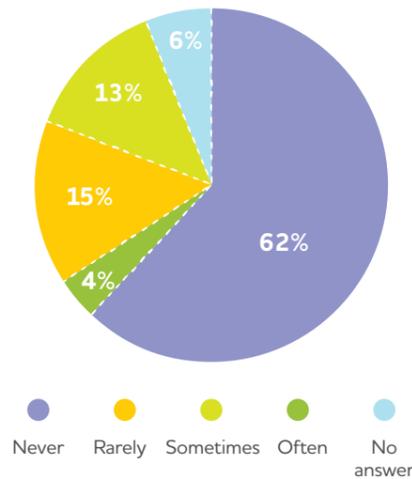
Overall, within the Sydney sex industry, there is relatively good knowledge and practise of sexual health<sup>22</sup>. Historically, sexual health outcomes for brothel-based sex workers are significantly shaped by the legislative context, with significantly better sexual health outcomes in a decriminalised legal context.<sup>23</sup> However, within this trend, Chinese workers were not as well-informed as English and Thai workers.<sup>24</sup>

Using condoms for sexual services is mandatory in New South Wales. It is the obligation of brothel management to ensure sufficient condoms are available for staff to use. Most women appeared to be aware that condom use was required, with 90 percent of women acknowledging their place of work require it. However, when asked about condom use, only 67 percent of women stated that they always use condoms with clients. This may be impacted by the fact that only 23 percent of workplaces provided free condoms for staff use. Both staff and clients have reflected that it is

more common for lower-end brothels to not provide free condoms than higher-end brothels.

Removing a condom without consent or knowledge is a form of sexual assault. Regardless, 4 percent of women stated this often happened, and another 28 percent indicated that it sometimes or rarely happened.

**How often a client has attempted or removed a condom without your consent or knowledge**



Most of the women surveyed (88 percent) stated they were aware of how to get a free sexual health check. However, a significant part of our support service includes assisting women to access sexual health checks, particularly for those who are new to Australia. Sexual health checks are recommended every six months, and 75 percent of women indicated that they maintain this schedule.

It should also be noted that many women completed this survey during a sexual health appointment, which may have skewed the results towards a disproportionately high awareness of sexual health.



*“Their first language isn’t English and they normally don’t know how to access these services. I once met a client who wanted to take a flight from Sydney to Perth for a sexual health check because she didn’t know she could get one in Sydney.” – Staff Member*

# Other Areas

## Working Rights and Management

Sex work is not a crime in New South Wales. Being a sex worker or working in brothels is legal in NSW, Australia, and the industry is regulated by the state. Like all business, brothels are subject to state and local council licensing conditions. Perhaps surprisingly to the general public, there is no indication of widespread sex trafficking amongst sex worker populations<sup>25</sup>; this has been reflected in our on the ground experience. However, women who are from countries other than Australia are more likely to be at higher risk of sexual and labour exploitation.

As per any workplace, brothels are subject to workplace rights and employment law. However, most of the women surveyed (88 percent) did not have a signed contract. This is a significant red flag, indicating that these women are likely to be vulnerable to labour exploitation.

15 percent of the women surveyed knew that they were working in an unlicensed premise (i.e. in a brothel with no council approval to operate in the premises). This is a significant problem, as if these women are aware that they are working in an unlicensed premise, they may be less likely to access support for fear of drawing attention to the facility.

Existing research has shown that when sex workers have good relationships with brothel management, they report fewer experiences of violence from both partners and clients, lower rates of depression, and lower levels of

loneliness and less perceived stigma.<sup>26</sup> We have often seen that when brothel management seek support and resources from support services and engage in support from external organisations, sex workers were more likely to seek support themselves. This is an encouraging indicator that providing support services to brothel management has positive flow-on effects.

## Work Hours

Half of the women surveyed confirmed that they work 3-5 days a week, 27 percent indicated that they work 1-2 days a week, and the rest (17 percent) said they work most days. We know that these responses may have been impacted by the restrictions of the visas held by the respondent, with student visas limiting legal work to 20 hours per week.

Based on our interviews and broader staff observations, many women appear to be “on call” for long periods of time – that is, more than eight hours – on the days they are rostered for work. These long working hours have been cited by women as a barrier to accessing our services; other barriers include remote locations and limited access to public transport.

For our service, this has highlighted the need of online support options, including a dedicated CALD phone number so that women can still connect to support.

## Accommodation

Most of the women surveyed (45 percent) live in share-house accommodation, with a further 23 percent living in private rentals. While there were a number of women who didn't identify their accommodation arrangements (18 percent), a significant number of women (19 percent) identified they live onsite at the brothel. Many women stay at the brothel when they work consecutive days.

From staff observation, when women are living onsite (whether temporary or through permanent arrangements) they are often subjected to cramped conditions. There are usually multiple beds in one room; often there are no separate cooking facilities available. The majority of women who lived onsite

at the brothel had also been living in Australia for less than a year, indicating it may be a first (and hopefully temporary) step for women new to the country. Staff observed that the lack of affordable housing in New South Wales is a barrier for women who want to leave the sex industry but currently reside onsite at the brothel.



*Women don't always know about their work and legal rights. And because the laws in Australia are different than their home country, they are often afraid they will get in trouble if they go to police or seek legal assistance.” – Staff member*



## Education

In terms of educational accomplishments, 11 percent of the women surveyed stated their highest education was completing primary school. 54 percent had completed secondary school, and 47 percent of women stated they are currently enrolled in further study, which also reflects that high number of sex workers on student visas, or – to put it another way – the high number of students working in the sex industry.

## Substance Use and Gambling

Within the survey results, a very low number of women (less than 7 percent) indicated that they use drugs, and an even smaller number indicated that they use drugs in the workplace. 90 percent of interviewees stated that gambling is not a part of their lifestyle.

However, staff observations from client engagement and case management has revealed gambling and drug use more commonly occurs in the workplace than was indicated in our survey results.

## Racism

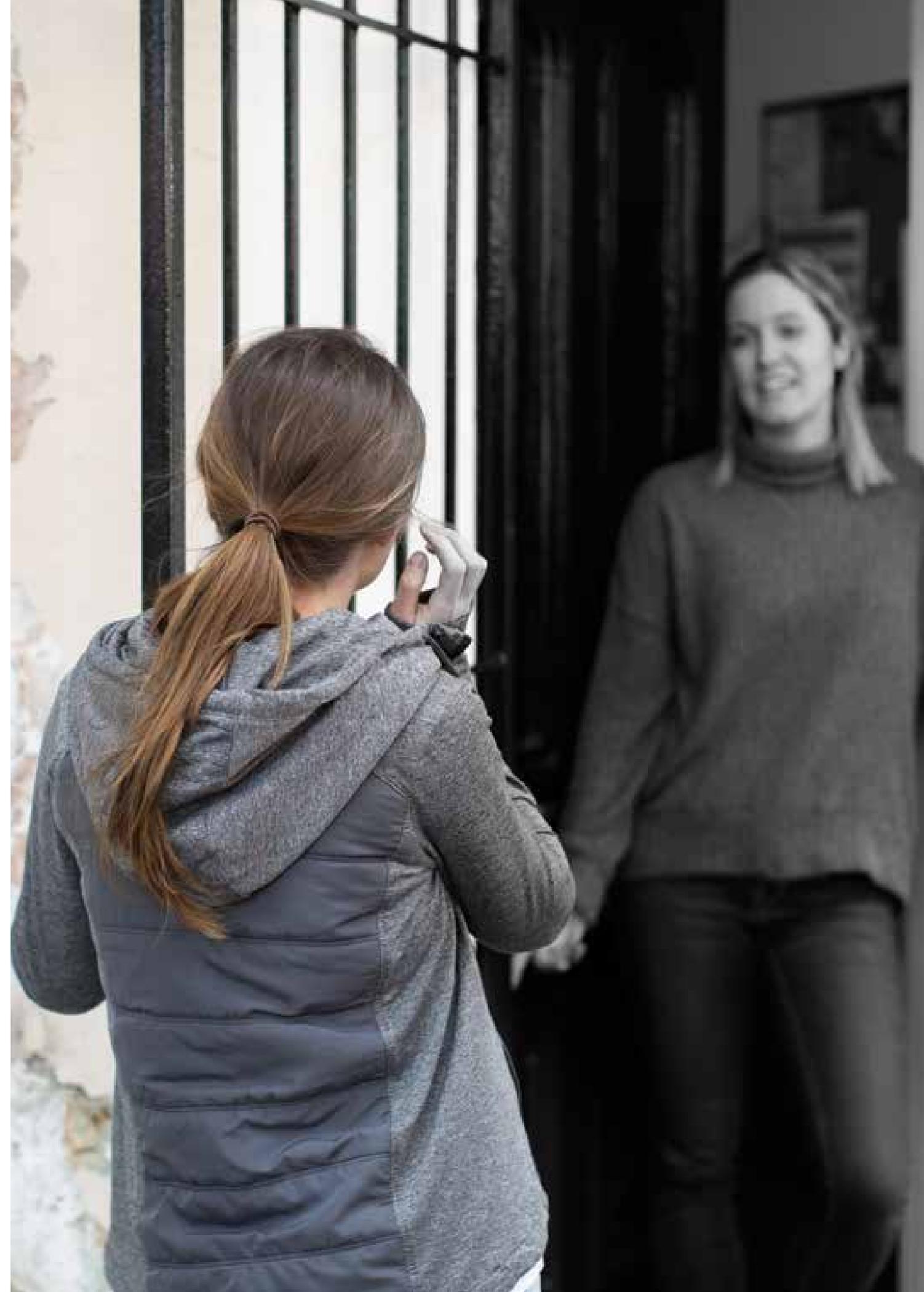
The surveys underpinning this research did not ask any explicit questions around racism, but it is important to recognise that broader societal structures such as institutional racism impact women, their choices, and how they access services. In Western culture, stereotypes about Asian women are widespread, including particular preconceptions around Asian women in the sex industry. They are regularly viewed as subservient, with no voice and no power. Many Australians appear to suspect that almost all women

from Asian backgrounds working in the sex industry are victims of human trafficking. These perceptions are incorrect, and may worsen many sex workers' experiences of stigma and marginalisation in Australia.

We have also seen racism reflected in the different rates of pay for Asian versus Anglo Australian women in some brothels, with cheaper rates displayed for women from CALD backgrounds. Some women have also commented that they feel they get treated differently because English isn't their first language.



*I feel like people don't listen to me and treat me as others because my first language isn't English.” – Client*



# Recommendations

This report provides insight into the lived experience of over 100 culturally and linguistically diverse Asian women working in Sydney's lower end brothels, as a result of a pilot project completed by BaptistCare HopeStreet Women's Services in 2018.

Responses were collected over a 10 month period exploring topics of demographics, overall involvement with the sex industry, experiences of stigma, stress, violence, substance use, sexual health, education and working rights. This research project originated from a desire to understand the needs and concerns of this group of women, and to develop our service in a way that would be useful in meeting their needs and decreasing their marginalisation.

We have used these findings to guide us in developing three key recommendations to improve our service provision and guide our efforts to meet the needs of the CALD sex worker community.

We believe every woman has the right to make her own choices. We recognise that New South Wales is a state where sex work is decriminalised, and for some women, it can be a choice that gives them access to opportunity. We work with women to address barriers they identify, to increase their choice and opportunity they can access.

We also believe that women should be made aware that exploitation can happen in the sex industry, and is more likely to occur to women from a CALD background. We recognise that every woman has the right to personal agency, but we also work with brothel

management and other organisations to reduce exploitation and exploitative practices.

The following three recommendations reflect new commitments from HopeStreet Women's Services that have arisen out of this report, which will enable us to continue combating the challenges that this report has identified.

**Recommendation 1:** Strongly advocate for women in the sex industry and use language and stories that break down stereotypes and stigma.

This report and existing literature has demonstrated that women in the sex industry experience high levels of stigma and in turn there has been an increase in negative health outcomes. We recommend that as an organisation, we continue to use language and stories that decrease stigma and stereotypes.

**Initial action to be taken by BaptistCare to fulfill recommendation:**

- Release a second issue of Hope Narratives

**Recommendation 2:** Ramp up education about the sex industry among the general public to reduce and, ultimately seek to remove stigma and feelings of isolation for these women.

This report detailed the effects on mental health that stigma can have on the women working in the sex industry. Seventy percent of respondents to the surveys believed this stigma was created by society looking down on and negatively judging sex workers.

**Initial action to be taken by BaptistCare to fulfill recommendation:**

- HopeStreet Women's Services aims to reduce this stigma through education, including broad distribution of research to both media and directly to partners and financial donors.

**Recommendation 3:** Create resources around stress and stress management for women.

Our report confirms high rates of stress among sex workers from CALD backgrounds and a lack of knowledge of where to get support when they are experiencing difficulties. We recommend the development of resources and education around stress and stress management that can be distributed in brothels.

**Initial action to be taken by BaptistCare to fulfill recommendation:**

- Have existing resources and educational materials translated into a variety of languages
- Continue employing staff that speak languages including Mandarin, Thai and Korean

*Partial funding has been received from Women NSW Grant 2019 to commence this activity.*

## A broader commitment

Beyond these recommendations, BaptistCare HopeStreet Women's Services will continue to identify new avenues to assist sex workers living and working in Sydney, from direct outreach to new initiatives with brothel management and partnerships with other organisations working in this space in Sydney.

The findings of this report have found that the stigmatisation of sex workers amongst broader society is at the heart of many of the challenges they face. Isolation, marginalisation and feelings of shame and loneliness are causing and exacerbating many of the individual issues identified in our research.

Beyond HopeStreet Women's Services, there is a role for all of us to play in lifting the stigma of sex work and creating a social environment in which sex workers can lead lives of greater health, safety and happiness.

Many Sydneysiders can play a part in various ways throughout their day-to-day life to help create this environment – small things as simple as changing the language used to refer to sex workers and the sex industry, donating to not-for-profit organisations supporting and sex workers and marginalised women, and educating oneself on the presence of different types of sex work in Sydney (see reference list below) all go a long way towards lifting stigma and creating a fairer, less dangerous social environment for sex workers in Sydney.

HopeStreet Women's Services remains committed to working with CALD women in the sex industry in Sydney. For more information, please visit our website.



# Appendix

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Harcourt & Donovan (2005), *The Many Faces of Sex Work*

<sup>2</sup>Anti-Slavery Australia, *What is Slavery?* (2017)

<sup>3</sup>Commonwealth of Australia, *Hidden in Plain Sight, Inquiry into Establishing a Modern Slavery Act in Australia* (2017)

<sup>4</sup>What is Human Trafficking, *Anti Slavery Australia, UTS, (2017)*

<sup>5</sup>The sex industry in New South Wales: a report to the NSW Ministry of Health, University of New South Wales (2012)

<sup>6</sup>The sex industry in New South Wales: a report to the NSW Ministry of Health. Kirby Institute, University of New South Wales, (2012)

<sup>7</sup>The sex industry in New South Wales: a report to the NSW Ministry of Health. Kirby Institute, University of New South Wales, (2012)

<sup>8</sup><http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-09-01/sexual-slavery-on-the-rise-in-nsw-brothels/6741012>

<sup>9</sup>Rekart, (2006) Sex-work harm reduction. *The Lancet*

<sup>10</sup>Hong et al (2010) Self-perceived stigma, depressive symptoms, and suicidal behaviours among female sex workers in China.

<sup>11</sup>Pell, et al. (2006) 'Demographic migration status, and work-related changes in Asian female sex workers surveyed in Sydney; Donovan, et al (2010). Improving the health of sex workers in NSW: Maintaining success. *NSW Public Health Bulletin*,

<sup>12</sup>Hong et al (2010). Self-perceived stigma, depressive symptoms, and suicidal behaviours among female sex workers in China. *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*

<sup>13</sup>Abel, G. and L. Fitzgerald (2010) 'Risk and risk management in sex work post-Prostitution Reform Act: a public health perspective',

<sup>14</sup>Zhang, et al. (2015). Psychological stressors in the context of commercial sex among female sex workers in China. *Healthcare for Women International*,

<sup>15</sup>Hong, et al. (2009). HIV/AIDS-related sexual risks and migratory status among female sex workers in a rural Chinese county, *AIDS Care*

<sup>16</sup>Hong et al (2010). Self-perceived stigma, depressive symptoms, and suicidal behaviours among female sex workers in China. *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*; Abel, G. and L. Fitzgerald (2010) 'Risk and risk management in sex work post-Prostitution Reform Act: a public health perspective',

<sup>17</sup>Hong et al (2010). Self-perceived stigma, depressive symptoms, and suicidal behaviours among female sex workers in China. *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*

<sup>18</sup>Abel, G. and L. Fitzgerald (2010) 'Risk and risk management in sex work post-Prostitution Reform Act: a public health perspective',

<sup>19</sup>Abel, G., & Fitzgerald, L. (2010). Risk and risk management in sex work post-prostitution reform act: A public health perspective.

Abel, G., & Fitzgerald, L. (2010). Risk and risk management in sex work post-prostitution reform act: A public health perspective.

<sup>21</sup>Abel & Fitzgerald, 2010

<sup>22</sup>Abel, G., & Fitzgerald, L. (2010). Risk and risk management in sex work post-prostitution reform act: A public health perspective; Pell et al (2006) 'Demographic migration status, and work-related changes in Asian female sex workers surveyed in Sydney, Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health

<sup>23</sup>Jeffreys, et al (2010) 'HIV Criminalisation and Sex Work in Australia', *Reproductive Health Matters*

<sup>24</sup>Pell et al (2006) 'Demographic migration status, and work-related changes in Asian female sex workers surveyed in Sydney, Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health

<sup>25</sup>The sex industry in New South Wales: a report to the NSW Ministry of Health. Kirby Institute, University of New South Wales, (2012)

<sup>26</sup>Zhang et al (2014b). Relationship between female sex workers and gatekeeper: The impact on female sex worker's mental health in China. *Psychology, Health & Medicine*

## References

Anti-Slavery Australia, *What is Slavery?* (2017) <http://www.antislavery.org.au/home/what-is-slavery.html>

Abel, G., & Fitzgerald, L. (2010). Risk and risk management in sex work post-prostitution reform act: A public health perspective. In G. Abel & L. Fitzgerald (Eds.), *Taking the crime out of sex work* (pp. 217-237). Bristol: Policy Press.

Commonwealth of Australia, *Hidden in Plain Sight, Inquiry into Establishing a Modern Slavery Act in Australia* (2017)

Donovan, B., Harcourt, C., Egger, S., & Fairley, C. K. (2010). Improving the health of sex workers in NSW: Maintaining success. *NSW Public Health Bulletin*, 21(3-4), 74-77.

Donovan, B., Harcourt, C., Egger, S., Watchirs Smith, L., Schneider, K., Kaldor, J.M., Chen, M.Y., Fairley, C.K., Tabrizi, S., (2012). *The Sex Industry in New South Wales: a Report to the NSW Ministry of Health*, Sydney: Kirby Institute, University of New South Wales, NSW.

Harcourt, C. Donovan, B. (2005) *The Many Faces of Sex Work*, Sydney Sexual Health Centre, Sydney Hospital, Sydney, NSW.

Hong, Y., Fang, X., Li, X., Liu, Y., Li, M., & Tai-Seale, T. (2010). Self-perceived stigma,

depressive symptoms, and suicidal behaviors among female sex workers in China. *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*, 21 (1), 29-34.

Jeffreys, E., Matthews, K. and A. Thomas (2010) 'HIV Criminalisation and Sex Work in Australia', *Reproductive Health Matters* 18(35): 129-136.

Pell, C., Dabhadatta, C., Tribe, K. and C. O'Connor (2006) 'Demographic migration status, and work-related changes in Asian female sex workers surveyed in Sydney, 1993 and 2003', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* 30(2): 157-162.

Raper, A (2015) Sexual slavery, forced drug-taking in NSW brothels on the rise <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-09-01/sexual-slavery-on-the-rise-in-nsw-brothels/6741012>

Rekart, M. L Sex-work harm reduction. *The Lancet*, (2006)

What is Human Trafficking, *Anti Slavery Australia, UTS, (2017)* <https://www.antislavery.org.au/component/rokdownloads/fact-sheets/fact-sheets-2017/99-5-human-trafficking-fact-sheet/download.html>

Zhang, C., Li, X., Hong, Y., Su, S., & Zhou, Y. (2014b). Relationship between female sex workers and gatekeeper: The impact on female sex worker's mental health in China. *Psychology, Health & Medicine*, 19 (6), 656-666.

Zhang, C., Hong, Y., Li, X., Qiao, S., Zhou, Y., & Su, S. (2015). Psychological stressors in the context of commercial sex among female sex workers in China. *Healthcare for Women International*, 36, 753-767.

**For more information or to support  
BaptistCare HopeStreet Women's Services:**

 [womensservices@baptistcare.org.au](mailto:womensservices@baptistcare.org.au)

 **(02) 8061 1555**

 [hopestreet.org.au/sex-industry](http://hopestreet.org.au/sex-industry)