



# INQUIRY INTO HOMELESSNESS IN VICTORIA

Project Respect Submission

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Contents

- Acknowledgments..... 2
- About Project Respect ..... 2
- A profile of the sex industry in Victoria ..... 2
- Executive Summary..... 3
  - A note on gendered terminology..... 3
  - A note on case studies ..... 3
- Recommendations: ..... 4
- When everything fails: the reality for women whom Project Respect supports ..... 5
- 1. Overview of homelessness and housing issues amongst women in the sex industry in Victoria ..... 6
- 2. Barriers to Accessing Housing Support and Services ..... 8
  - 2.1 Visa status ..... 9
  - 2.2 Discrimination ..... 10
  - 2.3 Practical Barriers ..... 10
- 3. Impacts of the housing instability and homelessness on women in the sex industry..... 11
  - 3.1 Sleeping in a brothel: ..... 11
  - 3.2 Mental health:..... 12
- 4. Other intersections: ..... 12
  - 4.1 Family Violence ..... 12
  - 4.2 Mature Age ..... 13
  - 4.3 Survival Sex ..... 13
- 5. Transitioning from the sex industry ..... 14
- Conclusion..... 14

## Acknowledgments

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## About Project Respect

Project Respect is a specialised women's service working from a feminist and intersectional framework, which positions women at the centre of our work and recognises the structural systems which underpin and perpetuate gender inequality. We are the only service of this kind in Victoria.

We are a support and referral service for women in the sex industry and women trafficked for sexual exploitation. We undertake outreach to 88 licensed brothels across the Greater Melbourne Region to provide information to women should they require it, provide case-coordination for women in the sex industry, and intensive case-management for women trafficked for sexual exploitation. We also support women who indicate they would like to reduce their hours or make a sustainable transition out of the sex industry. We deliver capacity-building workshops to a broad range of social, community and welfare services, which includes sections on human trafficking indicators, support and referral pathways. We run a peer-led Women's Advisory Group consisting of women with experience of the sex industry who provide information, guidance and input on strategic direction for the organisation. We also create a safe space for women, including a monthly peer-led community lunch.

## A profile of the sex industry in Victoria

The licensed sex industry in Victoria is regulated by Consumer Affairs Victoria through the Sex Work Act 1994. And Sex Work Regulations 2016. There are limited WH&S and social protections afforded to women in the industry, despite it being a high-risk space. There are currently 89 licensed brothels and more than 600 owner-operated licensed sex industry businesses in Victoria. Further, there is an estimate of 500 massage parlours offering unregistered sexual services, and an unknown quantity of women involved in informal (illegal) spaces such as street based and provision of sexual services from private spaces such as apartments and motels.

Data on people involved in the sex industry is very difficult to obtain, due to the stigma, discrimination and criminality of the industry. Research which is available generally focuses on the licensed/regulated space. However, from the limited data available, and based on our own data from our 20-year history of outreaching to licensed brothels in Victoria, we observe that the sex industry is comprised of a majority migrant workforce population.

## Executive Summary

Homelessness and housing insecurity for women with experience of the sex industry, including women trafficked is pervasive and prevalent. Women with experience of the industry experience a broad range of social and structural issues which place them at risk of homelessness and create barriers to accessing and sustaining secure housing. Furthermore, due to the intense stigma and discrimination women in the sex industry face, they are often confronted with additional barriers to accessing safe and secure housing. In addition, the lack of secure housing for women trafficked and women on temporary visas can place them at greater risk of physical and emotional harm.

### A note on gendered terminology

Project Respect works with women who identify as women. As such, we use primarily use gendered language in this submission. Project Respect submits to this inquiry the particular vulnerabilities, trauma and complex needs of women engaging in the sex industry and who have been trafficked for the purposes of sexual exploitation, and the impact housing insecurity can have on them.

### A note on case studies

All names have been changed in case studies and identifying detail removed or changed. However, these are real examples from women Project Respect supports.

## Recommendations:

1. Women in the sex industry be recognised and included as a vulnerable community with increased possibility of 'sleeping rough' in government strategies;
2. That the Victorian government provide specific transitional housing for:
  - a. women with experience of the sex industry to ensure they are not further stigmatised and the housing is appropriate to their needs and circumstances;
  - b. women who have been trafficked who are unable to access the Commonwealth funded Support for Trafficked People program, so they are provided with the relevant supports to address their experiences of trauma and become active participants in the Victorian community;
  - c. women on temporary visas experiencing housing instability and/or violence;
  - d. women wishing to make a transition from the sex industry to ensure they are able to make a sustainable transition, reducing the likelihood of oscillating in and out of the industry as an outcome of housing insecurity.
3. That the next National Census to be held in 2021 collects data on women sleeping in licensed brothels and includes this data in homelessness statistics;
4. That the social, community and welfare sector undertake capacity-building training on supporting women with experience of the sex industry and the unique barriers they experience when accessing support;
5. That the social, community and welfare sector, particularly the housing sector undertake capacity-building training on
  - a. the risks and indicators of human trafficking, as they are often exposed to women who have experienced modern slavery: and,
  - b. supporting women trafficked and the unique barriers they experience when accessing support.
6. Ensure migration rules and eligibility requirements for support services do not disempower women on temporary visas;
7. Work with service providers to improve access of women who are on temporary visas to be able to access support services.

## When everything fails: the reality for women whom Project Respect supports

*Ava\*, a woman in her late twenties, from central Asia experienced trafficking and sexual exploitation in her country of origin and was forced into the sex industry by her parents at a very early age. She left her country of origin to remove herself from this exploitation.*

*Ava came to Australia on a student visa. Due to a lack of options available, and because she was familiar with it, Ava worked in the sex industry in Australia while studying.*

*Ava struggled to obtain private rental but was able to obtain share house accommodation. However, whilst living in the share house Ava was sexually exploited by multiple perpetrators.*

*She was involuntarily hospitalized due to trauma induced psychosis.*

*Services, including police and family violence services expressed doubts relating to her story due to her involvement in the sex industry and the number of sexual assaults she had experienced. They had no understanding of the normalisation of violence women with experience of the sex industry sometimes experience, nor any awareness of human trafficking indicators.*

*During the hospital admission Ava met another perpetrator who befriended her. He offered her accommodation, which, given she had nowhere to go when she was discharged, and due to previous difficulties in securing private accommodation, she accepted.*

*This perpetrator domestically trafficked Ava for sexual exploitation. Given previous poor responses by services, Ava was too scared to report the situation as she didn't know what would happen to her, or where she would go.*

*Finally, she reported the exploitation to Project Respect but she did not want to report to the police. Due to existing relationships, Project Respect was able to support Ava into family violence crisis accommodation.*

*However, as an outcome of ongoing sexual exploitation, Ava exhibited sexualised behavior. Staff did not apply an intersectional lens and judged her as being unsafe around children due to her involvement in the sex industry and did not want her in the shared crisis accommodation with other women and children.*

*Ava was moved between different motels and crisis sites which exposed her to a third perpetrator.*

*Ava's temporary visa status means she is not eligible for government housing or any type of government support and it limits her ability to access services.*

*With the support of Project Respect, Ava has been accepted into medium term housing where she is also provided a financial allowance and meals. This is assisting Ava to recover safely, while also not forcing her to return to the sex industry while she recovers from the sexual trauma.*

*This housing arrangement has been fostered outside of usual eligibility requirements.*

*Ava currently has an application for a protection visa submitted, however it could be years until Ava receives an outcome of her visa status, until this point Ava will remain in medium term/transitional housing.*

## 1. Overview of homelessness and housing issues amongst women in the sex industry in Victoria

Research indicates that women who are experiencing homelessness generally stay with friends or family, in their car, extremely crowded dwellings or are physically 'hiding'.<sup>1</sup> This reflects the experiences of women in the sex industry, including women who have experienced human trafficking. Housing is a significant issue for women in the sex industry, and is one of the most common issues women present with when seeking support from the organisation, and one of the most frequent topics discussed with women when we are outreaching to licensed brothels.

Many of the women Project Respect support are impacted by homelessness, housing instability, insecure interim and short-term forms of housing, or housing which does not adequately meet their needs. Access to housing is impacted by a range of factors including visa status, economic disadvantage, stigma and discrimination and experiences of violence which all impacts on women's health, safety and wellbeing. Further to this, there is evidence that the sex industry creates an additional layer of invisibility in understanding the size and scope of homelessness impacting on women in Victoria.

For the purpose of this submission, 100 case files of women supported by Project Respect over a 4-year period were reviewed and categorised, based on their housing circumstances at the time of presenting, or re-presenting to the organisation for support.

Of the 100 case files reviewed, 62 women were not born in Australia with 30 women not citizens or permanent residents and 24 women experienced trafficking. 37 of the women had 1 or more dependent children at the time of intake. As per Table 1. the majority of women supported were aged between 36-45 years.

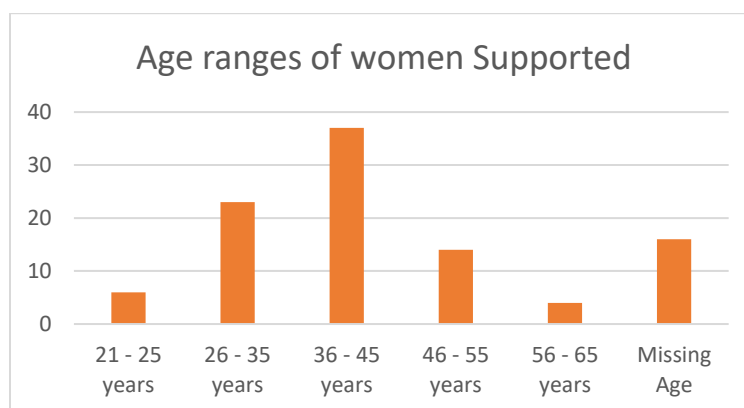


Table 1: Age Ranges of Women of audited files

<sup>1</sup> Maree Petersen and Cameron Parsell, 'Older Women's Pathways out of Homelessness in Australia' (Report, Mercy Foundation, 2014) 18.

As indicated in Figure A. the data revealed that 55% of women were in private accommodation, however, 18% of the women in private housing were in insecure, inappropriate or housing that posed a risk to their safety. 21% of women were homeless at the time of intake, and the remainder of women lived in various public, community, transitional or supported housing.

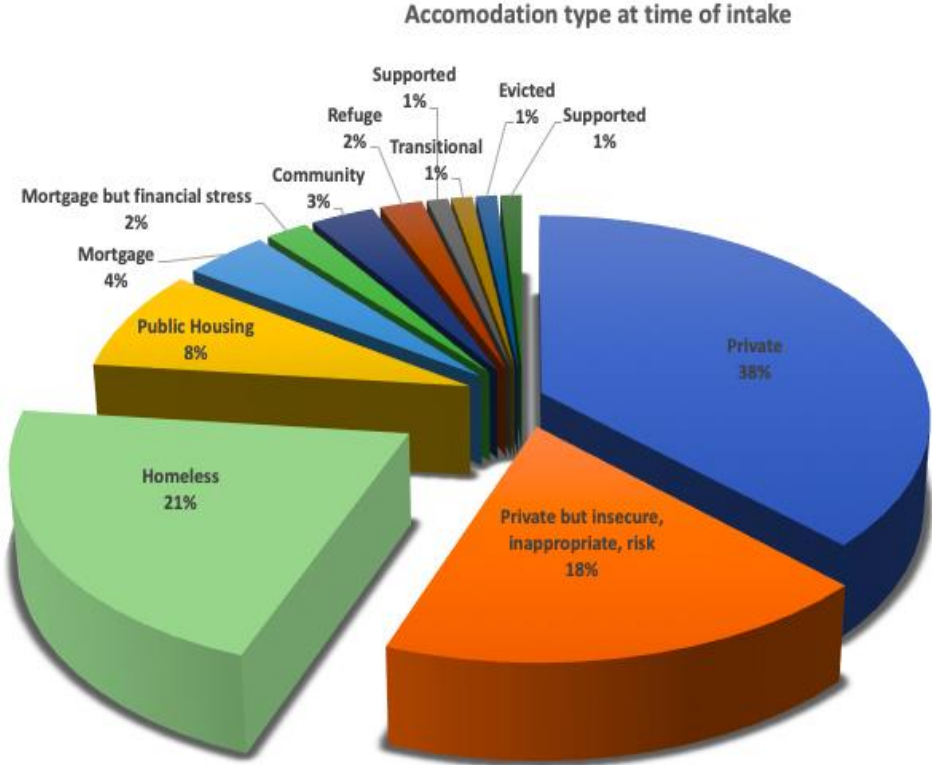


Figure A. Accommodation type at time of intake

As per Figure B, of the women who were homeless, the majority (31%) were sleeping in a brothel. **Project Respect considers this an invisible form of homelessness, not recognised or counted in any homelessness statistics.** Other women were sleeping on a couch at friends or acquaintances or in hostels or motels. Women were also sleeping in their cars (with their children), on the street, or had been involuntarily admitted to psychiatric facilities.



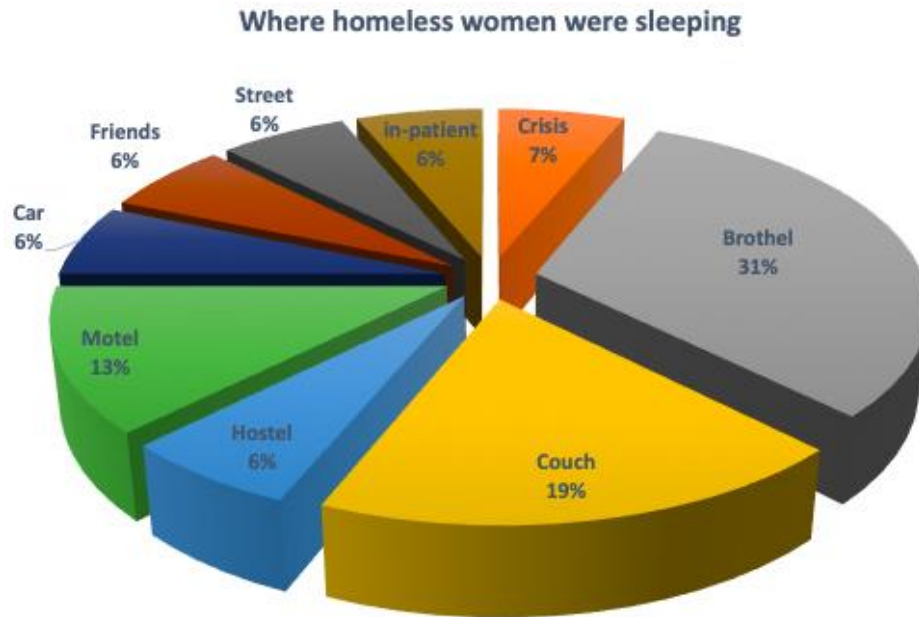


Figure B. Where homeless women were sleeping

In the 2018/2019 year, 21% (n=48) of women met during outreach discussed housing issues, and 12% (n=28) disclosed to outreach teams that they were sleeping at the brothel as they had nowhere else to sleep.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Barriers to Accessing Housing Support and Services

Women in the sex industry face barriers such as temporary visa status and stigma and discrimination in accessing the broad range of housing options, including public, community, temporary, emergency and private housing. Often, these barriers intersect leading to situations of increased vulnerability.

Further to this, Project Respect supports women who have been trafficked who are unable to access the government funded support for trafficked people program. When trafficked women are unable to access the government funded support program, they lose access to housing supports.

<sup>2</sup> Project Respect Annual Report 2019

## 2.1 Visa status

Over the past 4 years, Project Respect has supported 26 women who were trafficked. 13 women were on temporary visas, and some of the visa conditions stipulated that they were unable to work and not able to access government funded support services, including housing support services. Approximately 80% of the women we meet during brothel outreach identify as migrant workers, most likely on temporary visas.

Due to visa status, many women involved in the industry are only able to access private rentals and can often experience increased discrimination due to their short term visa status as well different cultural backgrounds, with cultural and language barriers also reducing their access to private rentals.

Women on temporary visas experiencing crisis are at a high risk of experiencing homelessness. The status of their visa limits the housing support services available to them which can then increase the likelihood of women rough sleeping, sleeping in brothels or returning to violent partners. Recent research relating to women on temporary visas experiencing violence found that around a quarter (24%) of women were living in crisis accommodation and around one in ten (11%) were living in temporary accommodation.<sup>3</sup> Many crisis accommodation services limit the number of women on temporary visas and make difficult decision to turn away women and children on temporary visas as they tend to stay for longer periods of time.

This is supported by the findings of the 2015 Royal Commission into Family Violence that identified women without permanent residency as particularly vulnerable due to their very limited access to support, and greater risk of coercion and control by sponsoring spouses and other family members. The report went further to call out women without permanent residency as a cohort most likely to experience additional barriers to gaining access to refuge, crisis accommodation and other forms of housing.<sup>4</sup>

Often, the only housing option available for women in crisis on a temporary visa is a rooming house. However, women trafficked and women who have experienced violence are extremely vulnerable, have complex trauma, distrust authorities, have significant mental health issues, are often socially isolated, and can require additional measures to ensure they are safe. For these reasons, Project Respect does not consider rooming housing suitable accommodation due to the volatile nature of these environments.

Women who have experienced complex trauma are some of the most vulnerable, most marginalised and most at risk, and therefore most in need of individualised services, intensive case management and ongoing housing support which is not available in rooming houses. This

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.homelessnessnsw.org.au/sites/homelessnessnsw/files/2018-12/Path%20to%20Nowhere\\_0.pdf](https://www.homelessnessnsw.org.au/sites/homelessnessnsw/files/2018-12/Path%20to%20Nowhere_0.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Royal Commission into Family Violence 2015

places already at-risk women at greater risk, and further disadvantages them as they are not appropriately assessed for social housing/transitional housing.

## 2.2 Discrimination

Women involved in the sex industry experience significant stigma and discrimination. This prevents women from disclosing their involvement, which can impact on being able to access services to meet their needs. We have supported women who have remained homeless, including sleeping in their car, rather than disclosing their involvement in the sex industry.

Women who do disclose their involvement in the sex industry as a way of confirming their income often experience significant discrimination and stigma. This can include the assumption that women will bring clients into their home and that they are unsafe to be around other women and children, particularly in shared accommodation. These forms of discrimination are particularly harmful for women in the sex industry as they curtail their capacity to fight for the basic human right of obtaining safe and secure housing.

It is also not uncommon for landlords to demand sexual acts in place of rent and/or utilities, or as a form of control by threatening to “out” them to family and friends. This form of harassment and violence often goes unrecognized.

*Jennifer\*, a mature aged Australian woman, was living in an inadequate dwelling for a number of years until her tenancy was terminated suddenly. With this news, Jennifer was eager to obtain a private rental but was unsuccessful in the numerous applications she made. Jennifer’s work history in the sex industry, low Centrelink income, and the requirement to provide pay slips from her employer prevented her from being able to secure a private rental.*

*With the support and strong advocacy of Project Respect Jennifer was able to apply for transitional housing. During the application process the housing provider argued that due to Jennifer’s work history in the sex industry she may not be a suitable tenant. The housing provider expressed concerns to Project Respect that Jennifer would bring clients to the property. Project Respect fought hard for against the stigma and discrimination Jennifer was facing and she was eventually approved for the property.*

*After several years, Jennifer remains in transitional housing where she shares a confined space with another resident who misuses substances. Jennifer remains on the public housing waiting list.*

## 2.3 Practical Barriers

There are many barriers to accessing housing and housing services for women in the sex industry. While there exists a significant licensed sex industry in Melbourne, overwhelmingly, the industry is a cash economy, and many women lack the necessary documentation such as payslips to confirm employment. As indicated above, women are reluctant to disclose their

involvement in the industry, which means they cannot rely on confirmation of employment through reference letters or verbal references from their employer. This can create barriers to accessing housing and housing services, but also to accessing government payments, where eligible.

Additional practical barriers relating to accessing support services also exist. Appointment times at services that operate between 9-5pm can also act as a barrier to accessing housing support. Women in the sex industry often work late nights, sometimes finishing at 4am, so attending morning appointments can be difficult. Similarly, crisis accommodation services generally operate with 10pm lock out times and so women who are in the sex industry are likely to finish their bookings later than that and then be unable to re-enter crisis accommodation.

### 3. Impacts of the housing instability and homelessness on women in the sex industry

#### 3.1 Sleeping in a brothel:

During outreach to licensed brothels and during individual case-work support, women inform Project Respect that they sleep in brothels due to lack of other housing options. This is an invisible form of homelessness that is likely to have a detrimental impact on the woman's mental and physical health. Sleeping in brothels also leads to reduced sleep, increased work hours, lack of personal or social space and lack of sunlight for long periods of time contribute to negative mental health outcomes.

A number of women disclosed that they stay inside the brothel for weeks at a time without leaving the building at all. When women sleep at brothels, they are more likely to work extended hours, as they must be awake when the brothel opens and are unable to go to bed until the brothel closes. Thus, some women are getting only a couple of hours sleep a night and working extensive shifts for the remainder of their day. They are also less likely to take days off as they must be at the brothel to have a place to sleep. Women sleeping in brothels are also more likely to perform sexual services they are not wanting to provide to please management for fear of being evicted from the brothel.

*Adriana\*, an Australian woman, experienced homelessness on and off for several years as a consequence of severe family violence and a lack of suitable housing options. During one period of homelessness Adriana was working in a brothel and management allowed Adriana to live at the brothel. Management forced Adriana to work night and day to the point where Adriana had not seen day light in 8 months.*

*During this time Adriana was coerced to use drugs in order to cope with the long working hours. As a result, Adriana developed a dependency to substances. Adriana's substance use made her more vulnerable to harm on many levels as it impacted her judgement and decision-making capacity. These exploitative conditions also exposed Adriana to increased work-based violence, as well as taking a huge toll on her emotional, psychological and physical wellbeing.*

### 3.2 Mental health:

Women's experiences of exploitation, combined by the uncertainty created by pending visa applications which intersects with housing insecurity, social isolation, history of trauma and financial hardship, is detrimental to women's mental health. In the 2017-2018 financial year, 89% of women from the sex industry individually supported experienced mental health issues, and 100% of the women trafficked individually supported experienced mental health issues. All of the women trafficked experienced homelessness or housing instability.<sup>5</sup>

17% of the women individually supported were involuntarily admitted to psychiatric facilities due to mental health decline. While involuntary in-patient hospital admissions provide the opportunity for women to stabilise their mental health, it often means they lose whatever housing they had in place due to non-payment of rent, placing them back in at-risk and vulnerable situations upon discharge.

## 4. Other intersections:

### 4.1 Family Violence

Experiencing family violence increases the risk of homelessness for women. Project Respect has worked with many women in the sex industry and women trafficked who have disclosed their situation of insecure housing or homelessness as a direct result of family violence. This can be due to leaving a violent relationship, or as a form of control as an outcome of family violence. In addition to this, women with experience of the sex industry experience specific forms of family violence which often go unrecognised by the service system, preventing women from accessing the services they require. This includes intimate partners forcing and/or controlling women in to the sex industry to earn an income and forcing them to perform sexual activities in their home.

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<sup>5</sup> PR annual report 2019

Family violence, temporary visa status, experiences of trafficking and lack of structural supports all compound in overwhelmingly negative ways on women's health, safety and wellbeing. This leads to many women staying in or return to violent and unsafe relationships so as to not experience homelessness.

Jai-Woo\* was trafficked. She assisted the AFP with her trafficking case for 6 months, however, the AFP ceased the investigation as there was insufficient evidence to take the case further. As a result of this, Jai-Woo was exited from the government funded Support for Trafficked People Program, which provides wrap around support, including access to secure housing and the human trafficking visa pathway.

Jai-Woo was forced to apply for a protection visa as she has no alternative visa pathway, despite being trafficked in to the licensed sex industry in Victoria. She did not have working rights.

Jai-Woo had an extremely violent partner whom she was living with. At one point, she was hospitalised for 12 days as an outcome of violence he perpetrated on her. Despite this, she returned to him, as she had limited other options available to her due to her visa status and lack of employment.

#### 4.2 Mature Age

Homelessness among older women is expected to increase with many structural and cultural factors leading to their economic disadvantage.<sup>6</sup> Mature-aged women are specifically vulnerable to homelessness with women over 55 spending an average 68 weeks to find work.<sup>7</sup> This is leaving many mature-aged women with little to no superannuation and struggling with their lack of confidence and skills to re-enter the workforce.<sup>8</sup> Project Respect has spoken to many women in the sex industry that have either entered or re-entered the sex industry as a mature-aged woman due to other work not being available to them.

#### 4.3 Survival Sex

Some women are also particularly vulnerable to 'survival sex' which is where sex is exchanged for money, as well as food, clothing or shelter in an effort to stay off the street. This can leave vulnerable women (and others) in unsafe housing arrangements with no security. Survival sex especially impacts younger people, specifically women as these are the main 'requirements' in order to participate in the arrangement. Survival sex is a symptom of the structural failings of social services where young women would rather face this reality than live on the streets.

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<sup>6</sup> Older Women's Risk of Homelessness: Background Paper

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/disability-rights/publications/willing-work-national-inquiry-employment-discrimination>

<sup>8</sup> Fitted for work

## 5. Transitioning from the sex industry.

Research indicates that many women wish to leave the sex industry, however, face significant barriers to doing so. In 2017, Project Respect was funded by the Department of Treasury and Finance Community Support Fund for a period of two years to support women with experience of the sex industry to transition out or reduce their hours. An evaluation of the *Breaking Barriers: Enhancing Employment Pathways* program found that while many women expressed a desire to transition to other forms of employment, those that were experiencing housing distress or at risk of homelessness were less likely to be able to engage with the program. While Project Respect wanted to be able to support women to find alternative forms of employment, there was a recognition the transition was less likely to be successful while other areas of their lives, particularly housing were unstable.

There were 12 women engaged in the program whose ability to successfully engage in the program and maintain a transition from the industry was marred by housing insecurity, risk of homelessness and unaffordable housing. Compounding this were structural barriers which prevented women from being able to access Centrelink payments, housing and other support services. This impeded their ability to transition from the industry or maintain the transition for two main reasons: Insecure housing meant women were unable to engage in the program properly as they needed to focus their attention on securing housing for themselves, and often their children as well and, insecure housing often acted as a pull factor for women to enter back in to the industry to earn an income to pay for rent, household products or bond. Having access to secure housing for a short period of time, such as 6 months would allow women to focus on the transition process, which would likely increase the likelihood of maintaining the transition from the industry.

## Conclusion

The longer that women and children remain homeless or in temporary accommodation the more likely it is that the crisis will extend and repeat. This can trap a victim in a cycle of violence, homelessness and, for women who perceive they have no other choice, a return to a violent partner, and the sex industry.