

## Violence Against Women and Girls: protecting female victims of modern slavery

- **Modern slavery and human trafficking is one of the most severe forms of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG). Across the UK and in our communities, women and girls are being trafficked into sexual exploitation, with criminals profiting off a culture of impunity and acceptance around VAWG. This must change now.**
- **That is why we must act to prevent exploitation and protect the women and girl victims of modern slavery. Professionals need clearer guidance on how to identify victims, greater protections are needed in the online world, and legislation must act as a deterrent to tackle demand for sexual exploitation. Criminal gangs and serious organised crime networks behind the exploitation of women and girls should be held to account and perpetrators should be prosecuted.**
- **Tackling the exploitation of women and girl victims of modern slavery is a priority of the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner (IASC) who, drawing on the voices of survivors, is working to address vulnerabilities that put women at risk of modern slavery and human trafficking and ensure appropriate support can be accessed.**

### Women and girls are increasingly victims of modern slavery and sexual exploitation:<sup>1</sup>

- The number of women and girls referred into the National Referral Mechanism, the framework for identifying potential victims of modern slavery in the UK, has been rising every year. The number of women and girls referred increased by 40% between 2021- 2023.
- Sexual exploitation has long been the most reported form of exploitation by women and girls.
- Over the last 3 years, the number of UK nationals that reported experiencing child sexual exploitation as girls grew 43%.
- Referrals for UK-based exploitation were at their highest on record in 2023 and the reporting levels of UK-based sexual exploitation increased by 9% from 2022 to 2023.

### What must change to protect women and girl victims of modern slavery:

- **Law enforcement, Government and society all have a role to play in tackling violence against women and girls – this is critical to prevent exploitation and identify victims.** The rising number of women and girls identified as victims of modern slavery in the UK is likely to be an underreporting of the true scale of the issue. There must be a holistic approach to tackling this issue, with an across-Government approach to tackle the root causes of this violence and to prevent exploitation, protect all victims, and increase prosecutions of criminals.
- **Government guidance on child sexual exploitation (CSE) must be updated to clearly define sexual exploitation – so that professionals can better identify victims.** The current guidance does not align with international definitions of sexual exploitation. It also fails to

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<sup>1</sup> *National Referral Mechanism Statistics*, Home Office, 2023, [link](#).

outline that CSE victims are entitled to use section 45 of the Modern Slavery Act which provides a statutory defence that can prevent criminal convictions on crimes committed under duress while in exploitation.<sup>2</sup> Survivors of CSE who have criminal convictions due to their exploitation should have these convictions expunged.

- **Demand for sexual exploitation must be tackled – the current legislation is not deterring sex buyers.** The Sexual Offences Act 2003 is failing to deter sex buyers, partly due to a lack of enforcement. There is an under-utilisation of section 53A (paying for sexual services of a prostitute subjected to force).<sup>3</sup> The legislation should be looked at afresh to ensure that it is fit for-purpose and applied correctly to tackle the demand for sexual exploitation.
- **More must be done to protect women and girls online – the internet is acting as a facilitator of trafficking for sexual exploitation.** 75% of victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation are advertised online, often on Adult Service Websites (ASWs).<sup>4</sup> ASWs need to be regulated. The Online Safety Act 2023 made modern slavery and human trafficking a priority offence, this legislation must be implemented urgently. Any new legislation of the online world should include measures to protect women and girls and prevent trafficking.
- **Women and girl victims must be supported through the criminal justice system – only then can their perpetrators be brought to justice.** The criminal justice system can be complex to navigate especially after the trauma victims have encountered. Independent Modern Slavery Advocates (IMSAs) are trauma-informed to improve the safety, resilience, and empowerment of each survivor and should be formally recognised. Victim Navigators should be embedded in every local police force to support victims through the criminal justice system.
- **Action needs to be taken against the criminal gangs exploiting women and girls – modern slavery is a form of serious and organised crime and needs to be tackled through this lens.** Across the UK the prosecution and conviction rates for modern slavery are far too low. To end violence against women and girls the Government needs to identify how impunity for such a heinous and societally damaging crime has been allowed to prevail and design the necessary reforms and resourcing structures in policing and the judicial system to put an end to it. Every part of law enforcement must act to identify perpetrators and support victims.
- **We must listen to the voices of survivors of sexual exploitation – so that policymakers can act to prevent more women and girls being exploited now and in the future.** Listening and responding to survivors of sexual exploitation is critical to understanding how we can better identify and support them. Policymakers must incorporate survivor expertise into policy development to ensure lessons are learnt and more victims can be reached and supported.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Child Sexual Exploitation Definition and a Guide for practitioners, Local Leaders and Decision Makers Working to Protect Children from Child Sexual Exploitation*, Department for Education (2017), [link](#). *Modern Slavery Act*, 2015, [link](#).

<sup>3</sup> *Human Trafficking Inquiry*, Home Affairs Select Committee, 2023, [link](#).

<sup>4</sup> *Oral evidence to the Home Affairs Committee: Human Trafficking HC 1142*, House of Commons, 2023, [link](#)

<sup>5</sup> *Example of survivor-led work: Independent Inquiry – Telford Child Sexual Exploitation*, July 2024, [link](#).