

# EVALUATION REPORT: THE ANITA PROJECT

JULIE BINDEL, JANUARY 2023



## Author Biography

Julie Bindel is a journalist, author, broadcaster and journalist, primarily concerned with human rights abuses towards women and girls. She is the author of several books on this topic. One of these is based on a UK-wide study on the opportunities and barriers for women to exit prostitution, the largest study of its kind (*Exiting Prostitution: A Study in Female Desistance* by Bindel et al, Palgrave, 2014). Her substantive work relevant to this project examines the global sex trade, and is based on research spanning almost 40 countries, cities and states around the world and on 250 face-to-face interviews (*The Pimping of Prostitution: Abolishing the Sex Work Myth*, Palgrave, 2017).

Julie has investigated the harms and realities of the sex trade in dozens of countries around the world for both academic research and journalistic long-form articles. Julie has been active in research, grassroots campaigning, advocacy and governmental consultation since 1999. During this time, she has sat on many advisory boards and consultation panels alongside governmental officials, parliamentarians, policy advisors and UN organisations.

To date, Julie has trained in excess of 1,000 individuals in issues relating to the sexual exploitation of women in more than 20 countries. Julie has also conducted more than 200 face-to-face interviews with female victims and survivors of prostitution.

Over the past 25 years, Julie has provided support to a number of NGOs, IGOs and state agencies in their efforts to prevent commercial sexual exploitation, improve the effectiveness of prosecution of perpetrators, protect victims, and build international counter-trafficking partnerships.

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### What we know about exiting

**Nia** has a strong track record delivering exiting prostitution and trafficking work and is a leader in developing services targeting women living with multiple disadvantages. It launched the Emma Project, one of the country's first refuge and outreach services for women with problematic substance use in 2008. Since then, **nia** has developed a further two refuges for women who have been commercially sexually exploited, and/or are using drugs and alcohol. **Nia** is the only secular organisation in London that provides both holistic outreach support and housing provision for women to exit prostitution.

Julie Bindel was the coordinator of what remains the largest and most comprehensive research project in the UK and beyond on barriers and opportunities for women to exit the sex trade (*Exiting Prostitution: A Study in Female Desistance* (Palgrave, 2014), hereafter referred to as 'the 2014 project'). The manager of the research project, Heather Harvey, was subsequently employed by **nia** and brought with her the expertise gained from the 2014 project. Harvey then developed, with other **nia** staff, a toolkit focussing on the barriers and opportunities involved in exiting prostitution which served as an invaluable training tool for professionals that may have contact with women in both street and off-street prostitution, such as police, social services, voluntary sector organisations.

The 2014 study included interviews with 114 women, 55 of whom had exited prostitution. The women were involved in various aspects of the sex trade, including street work/prostitution, brothel and escorting. Seven women had been trafficked across international borders, and three sold from sex clubs. Service providers from sexual health-focused projects were also interviewed.

One key finding of the research was that women entrenched in prostitution find it difficult to envisage a future for themselves, with many "living hour to hour".

The absence of an imagined future is key: a significant number of the women interviewed told researchers that none of the support services they had accessed over the years had ever posed the question of leaving prostitution or finding a new way to earn money or live their lives. “I have no idea I could ever be anything but a prostitute”, one woman said. “When you asked me about exiting, I had no idea what that meant, because why would anyone want to help me get out when I have no other skills or anything to offer?”

The barriers to exiting were fairly obvious, including violent pimps, lack of safe and secure housing, problems with childcare, or children having been removed by social services, drug, and alcohol misuse, low self-esteem and physical and mental health problems. All of the women interviewed had experienced one or more of these barriers.

In terms of opportunities and best practice, it was found throughout the 2014 project that many of the women spoke about long-term support, therapy, and general advocacy. “After about five years, I realised that [the support worker] was not giving up on me and was going nowhere. I got out in the sixth year, and I’ll never forget her patience. I would’ve given up on me a long time ago.”

The Anita Project takes precisely this approach. Support workers ensure the women know that they will not be abandoned, and that they will not be rejected from the project, whatever difficulties ensue.

The women are not rushed through the system or expected to exit in a linear or hasty form. Given their own time and being encouraged and enabled to move at their own pace, it provides the confidence and opportunity for women who desperately need to begin to reframe their lives and imagine a different future.

The Anita Project is unique in that it does not follow a set model of exiting, but rather develops a bespoke and holistic way of working with each individual woman, dependent on her needs. There is a general approach and set of skills and experience developed by the team that can be applied to all women coming through their services. But for each woman beginning the arduous and often painful journey of extracting herself from the sex trade, there needs to be tailored support and intervention, developed on a case-by-case basis.

The Anita Project is in the midst of learning invaluable lessons and developing crucial skills in working with women with the most complex needs. The team is highly experienced in working with complexity, and the realities and traumatic effects of men’s violence. The team has also had an opportunity to learn from working through adverse conditions, such as Covid lockdowns, and dealing with the challenges of staff turnover.

The evaluator has worked on and evaluated a number of projects that involve exiting, from a Balkan-based project in 1999, to this one, and has found a common thread running through all successful interventions: adaptability, flexibility, and longevity. An ability to work with women throughout their “one step forward, two steps back” process of exiting is crucial.

It is known that the best practice when it comes to exiting is to begin with a viable set of skills, and then to adapt throughout the process. This is because each woman accessing the services will have a unique set of issues. Therefore, the opportunities and barriers experienced by each individual will be unique to her.

Of the 114 women interviewed for the 2014 project, more than 90 said that exiting prostitution was never raised as an issue by health-focused support projects. This was in spite of the fact that many of the women said that the idea of escaping the sex trade was, as one woman put it, “really scary”. This particular interviewee said: “What would my life be like? If I relapsed back on the drugs, where would I get them from? And if I’m not living on a knife edge, as you have to be when you are in this life, would that mean my head would explode with me thinking about all the horrible things that happened to me throughout my life?”

One of the best practice examples when it comes to exiting women from prostitution is building trusting relationships. This can take considerable time, and has to be on the terms of the service user, notwithstanding the project’s limitations and capacity.

A time-restricted project of under three years can limit the opportunities for many women to fully exit the sex trade and build a new life. It can also mean that women that fall back into the sex trade having been exited for some time might soon become entrenched yet again. This might only be because of the absence of a support worker to help her in what would very likely be a temporary setback that could be remedied with some immediate short-term counselling and guidance.

Another example of good practice is a staged approach to exiting. This, as has been earlier explained, is not necessarily linear, but there are, however, stages that the majority of the women will go through in order to exit. This process must provide the possibility of long term support, either continuous or intermittent. Many women will cease to access support during the time they are accessing drug or alcohol rehabilitation treatment, whereas others will need time out from intensive engagement and will be preparing themselves to face the reality of the difficult process further down the line.

Short-term projects, by which is meant anything under five years, are generally unable to fulfil the requirements of longer-term exiting.

There are also often issues occurring in the lives of prostituted women over which they have limited control, such as childcare proceedings, addiction services, housing, crises, benefits, and financial issues. It is not unusual for women going through the exiting process to require crisis intervention for serious mental health issues, which would have to be dealt with externally.

If a woman going through a crisis does not have the reassurance or the safety net of returning to the exiting and support service, this could undo all of the good work that has been conducted previously.

Women do not move in a linear fashion from one stage to another. Rather, many will skip stages or relapse temporarily before re-entering the process. In order to move forward, women will need to deal with past and current trauma. This can also mean breaking away from toxic and harmful relationships and associations, changing living arrangements/accommodation, spells in hospital, or reuniting with children.

Many women going through the exiting process will have no experience of healthy relationships or friendships, which makes the possibility of developing trust between support worker and client more complex and long-term. Whilst practical support for this is essential for women to be able to even consider the possibility of moving on, there are also long-term strategies that need to be at least suggested if not begun, such as education, training, and the possibility of future employment or volunteer roles. Imagining a life outside of prostitution requires imagining what that life might consist of.

It is well documented, both by the Anita Project and in academic research, that a distinct lack of hope for the future in women's lives was a huge barrier to acquiring motivation to begin the process of exiting. Therefore, a significant opportunity would surely be realised if hope could be introduced within the context of support.

Interventions with a core goal of exiting will fail without the presence of hope. This takes time to build, bearing in mind that women in prostitution routinely face emotional issues, such as low self-esteem, self-hatred, shame, and guilt. Interpersonal connection is crucial in the building of trust between support worker and client. What must be borne in mind are the chaotic lifestyles of women in prostitution, and the myriad of issues that stand in the way of a regular life, punctuality, and the ability to self-organise.

During the 2014 project, one interviewee disclosed that she had been responding positively to therapeutic intervention and general support in her exiting journey when she was sent to prison for six months due to outstanding fines and benefit fraud. On being released, she contacted one of the researchers and said that, "If I hadn't known you were here to talk to you when I got out, I would've been back on the gear [heroin] and would've chucked in the towel with getting out of prostitution."

There are a number of circumstances which can lead women in projects to disappear off the radar, such as having a baby, being temporarily homeless, or escaping a violent pimp. Knowing that the service is there for them if they choose to re-engage further down the line can be a lifeline.

Similarly, many women choose to exit after a life-threatening incident. This is a common occurrence for women in the sex trade. One woman disclosed that she had decided "enough is enough" after she was raped at knifepoint. Another said that she had almost died when a violent punter tried to run her over, following an argument about money. The immediate trauma can take some time to dissipate, and to allow the woman to be strong enough to re-approach services.

For many women in prostitution, physical as well as mental health can be very poor, which, in and of itself acts as a barrier to accessing support. During the 2014 project, a number of women were in and out of hospital and other primary healthcare settings for a period of time. This adds further weight to the argument that exiting projects should be long-term.

### **Tackling male violence towards women in general**

The current MOPAC poster and public awareness campaign [to stamp out sexual harassment](#) is a perfect example of the connections between all forms of men's violence and abuse directed towards women and girls. The set of behaviours that are rightly condemned in the campaign correlate with those carried out by sex buyers, in particular those attempting to access women on-street. 'Staring', 'cyberflashing', 'catcalling' and 'exposing' are all types of harassment witnessed and experienced by *all* women, perpetrated by punters in known prostitution areas of the capital.

Makeda Hunte, advocate at Anita, makes a point about the connection between men's attitudes and behaviour towards women, and the normalisation of prostitution:

"If men think women are here to be bought and sold, says Hunte, this will influence the way other men think they can treat us, and it will mean that some will blame the victim because of *her* decisions and lifestyle, rather than the perpetrator."

Any campaign that targets sexually abusive male behaviour is commendable, but will be limited in its potential if particular groups of women (those in prostitution, for example) are considered to be unworthy of protection, support and justice.

### **Methodology**

During the initial development of the project, in early 2020, the evaluator was in discussion with senior management regarding its development and implementation. During the project, regular Zoom and email updates continued, including the attendance a project team meeting.

Additionally, documentation and data relating to the project and its progress was disseminated, and consultations and briefing sessions on issues regarding implementation made available to the evaluator.

In order to prepare this report, interviews took place with:

- All Anita staff members, and
- One service user

Attempts were made to contact a number of other service users that had enthusiastically agreed to participate, but who were, for practical reasons, were unable to speak with the evaluator prior to the deadline.

The evaluator also had access to the following:

- Service user feedback forms (all of whom rated that they were either 'satisfied' or, as in the majority, very satisfied) with the service
- Case studies used for reflective practice for staff, of which a sample are made available to MOPAC
- Recruitment materials
- Job descriptions
- Details of project development

### **Outline of the Anita Project**

In 2019 the Anita Project, a programme to help women leave prostitution, was awarded a grant for £500,000 by the London Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC). The project had a lifespan of just under two years. It had a particular focus on women who were felt to be slipping through the gaps of existing services and needed a more targeted approach.

The initial bid was led by **nia**, a long-established, East London-based Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) service, together with partners, North London-based Solace Women's Aid, West London-based Women and Girls Network and South London-based Rape And Sexual Abuse Support Centre (RASASC).

Each partner had core offerings including working from a woman-centred, trauma informed perspective, advocacy, counselling, helplines, web, email and text support and Independent Sexual Violence Adviser (ISVA) provision. They also offer other services or have particular specialisms including young women's advocacy, housing and refuge provision, work with older women and Black and minority ethnic (BME) communities.

Nia were unsuccessful in this initial application for funding, however MOPAC invited **nia** to apply for funding for a smaller pilot project for **nia** to work on solely.

**Nia** and MOPAC jointly agreed to concentrate on developing support to women using drug and alcohol services, who are abused through 'survival sex' including those who may not see themselves as being involved in prostitution; Romanian women who are significantly overrepresented amongst women accessing on-street outreach services; and women involved in off-street prostitution.

In addition, **nia** deliver a mix of other services including Rape Crisis, support to women with no recourse to public funds, training on countering male violence against women and girls, Play Therapy, Independent Domestic Violence Advocates (IDVA) and Identification and Referral to Improve Safety (IRIS). **Nia** currently hold an exiting prostitution contract for the borough of Brent, and supports those exploited in prostitution through the Ascent partnership. In the year 2021- 2022 **nia** provided one-to-one support to **1,485** women, girls and children subjected to sexual and domestic violence and abuse, including prostitution and supported a further **9,490** people through helpline, group work, workshops, school assemblies and training.

**Nia** has had some positive experiences of training in exiting prostitution, research and service delivery being specially commissioned by individual boroughs. Ideally, local authorities seeing the beneficial outcomes and potential long-term cost-savings of this exiting prostitution service would realise both the invest-to-save nature of financing this work and their obligation to invest in, and support, some of the most marginalised, exploited and vulnerable women in their borough.

The Anita Project provided individual, needs-led, wrap around support addressing women with multiple disadvantages. It was designed to reduce the complexity women face in navigating multiple barriers and services such as insecure immigration status, including 'no recourse to public funds'. These are barriers to exiting prostitution.

The initial timelines were for the project to start in May 2020 with a mobilisation period ready for the service to launch in August 2020. The finalised contract was received in September 2020 and advertisements placed for a service manager prior to receiving the finalised contract. However, Anita was not in a position to take a risk with recruiting more roles than that for a brand-new project prior to receiving the final contract. The length of the initial contract was until April 2022. The life span of the project was intended to be just under two years.

The advance of Covid-19 and imposition of lockdowns from March 2020 posed a significant challenge and disrupted the project's delivery. These challenges are discussed below. "Covid set back the service hugely, but there's also been some really interesting developments and lessons learned within the project." (Dawn Bonnett Miller, exiting prostitution advocate, The Anita Project).

The project recognised exiting prostitution is neither straightforward nor swift and used a **flexible five stage model** which addressed the main barriers women face to exiting. The Five Stage Supported Exiting Model was woman-centred, trauma informed and relational. It underpinned the project and was used to develop a Service Operating Model.

### **The Five Stage Model**

#### **Stage One – Readiness and engagement**

The woman is likely to feel unsure about exiting but has begun to express the idea that this is what she would like to do. At points of crisis women can begin to recognise the harms of prostitution. The advocates will respond quickly and effectively to immediate needs surrounding safety, housing, benefits etc. **Nia** made available a crisis fund for travel costs and supplying items such as phones to be able to meet practical access needs. The building of initial trust and rapport – achieved in part by not placing any expectations on an individual - is important to achieve longer term engagement.

#### **Stage Two – Support and treatment and goal Identification**

The woman has made a conscious decision to access support and realises that previous interventions are not enough, and her engagement needs to be more intensive. At this point, key workers work with women to devise an exit plan, focussing on stabilisation and



identifying her barriers to exit and how to address them. They facilitate engagement with services and address her immediate/practical needs. Women who are also experiencing domestic violence will be supported with recognising risk in their intimate relationships and this will be taken into consideration when formulating exit plans. At this stage the specialist drug and alcohol and housing advocates provide additional expertise in complex cases. **Nia** had specialist refuges including one for women affected by sexual exploitation, some women who have accessed The Anita Project have been referred to **nia's** refuges and vice versa.

### **Stage Three – Strategising Exit**

Having addressed key practical needs, women have begun to reassess their pasts and continue to deal with the barriers/multiple disadvantages that they face. At this stage women may have reduced involvement in prostitution. In addition to ongoing support from her advocate, the woman will be able to access therapeutic support groups and one-to-one counselling. If a woman is using substances, detox and rehabilitation options will be explored.

### **Stage Four – Initial Exit – Stabilisation and rebuilding**

The woman is constructing a new identity and life for herself. She is committed and working towards exit. She has broken away from damaging peer groups and coercive relationships. To sustain exit, the advocates will work with women through and beyond this stage; supporting women to build positive networks, explore training and employment opportunities and discussing triggers that could result in re-entry.

### **Stage Five – Final/Permanent Exit**

Women at this stage feel increasingly positive about their lives. They have engaged in new training, employment or education and have new goals, to further develop their lives beyond prostitution. At this stage, depending on the woman, there will be a staged-down approach to support. Women were able to access the women's/rape crisis centre groups and drop-ins and keep in touch with advocates but with less formal support.

### **Additional Outcomes:**

#### **Multi-agency approach/Increased awareness among staff and partners**

**Nia** advocates focussed on significant areas of disadvantage: housing and drugs/alcohol.

#### **Improved engagement with the criminal justice system**

Stigma and poor or inconsistent police responses deter women in prostitution from accessing the CJS system. Advocates supported women to understand and access their rights, supporting them throughout the process. All project workers delivered services based on understanding the impacts of violence, including trauma and the survival mechanisms adopted by the women supported. Interventions were tailored to the stages of exit.

#### **Availability and promotion of flexible support**

This was key to the success of the service.

## Identifying and engaging women involved in prostitution in the community

Before exiting, a woman's life may be centred around prostitution and dealing with its associated multiple disadvantages.

### Night-time van service

The project used a night-time van service to identify and engage with women. The van provided outreach to women - both late at night to on-street women and, in mobile delivery, in early evenings to off-street women. In some instances, it combined with external agencies that also offered services supporting women to exit.

Benefits of the van included reaching some of the most marginalised women; getting information from the women about 'hot spots' and areas that should be targeted, thereby increasing the reach further; building trust through the provision of harm minimisation and brief 'light touch' interventions such as introducing other services, making a warm drink, and providing clothes donations.

Initial support on the outreach van was as an access point to the service and into a woman's exiting journey.

### Challenges

The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic in the first quarter of 2020 and subsequent imposition of lockdowns from March 2020 onwards posed unprecedented challenges for the Anita Project that could not have been foreseen by anyone. "COVID was huge. Not being to get the indoor part of the work off the ground because of Covid." (Vicki Bothwell, advocate and acting team leader for the exiting service).

As the pandemic disorientated people's lives, the project found recruitment far more difficult with many unsuccessful recruiting rounds. Jodie Woodward, senior manager for sexual violence services, said: "But particularly we noticed, and other women's sector organisations also noticed, that Covid threw everything up in the air in terms of people's own stability and kind of place in the world. For all of our posts, we were receiving fewer applications than we had in the past...that was a huge stumbling block because we didn't have someone in post right from the beginning."

### Recruitment

To address the fact that **nia** were getting fewer applications for posts to work with women in prostitution they changed their job adverts to include *We have recently noticed that we receive fewer applications for our posts supporting women involved in prostitution. If you think you have what it takes to do this work but you're worried that you might not have the right experience, please call us – let's talk about it. We may be able to consider training and additional support for you.* Subsequently, applications for posts within The Anita project increased and staff were successfully recruited. **Nia** took a skills and values approach to recruitment and this proved successful. Half of the existing team had previous experience in the women's sector, the other staff had experience working with young people and supporting individuals with their mental health.

There continued to be challenges recruiting in three areas: Drug and Alcohol Advocate, Service Manager, and recruiting a worker who spoke Romanian.

Recruiting a new Service Manager when the postholder left in March 2021 was a challenge. This may have been down to the short term nature of the contract, and also, during Covid experienced service managers within the VAWG sector were potentially less likely to leave secure posts. All staff within the service expressed concerns about job security and that this would impact their decision making regarding applying for new jobs.

The Drug and Alcohol Advocate post was advertised on four separate occasions and either very few and/or no suitable applications were received. One possible solution would be to increase the salary of this post if it was to exist in a new formation of the project. This would require some consideration/review by **nia** of their salary scales. Currently all advocate posts are considered as specialist posts, with the next level up being for senior workers, who usually have line management responsibility.

One desirable criterion for all of the advocate posts is to have Romanian as a language. **Nia** received two applications from Romanian-speaking women, who unfortunately did not meet any of the other shortlisting criteria. If funding allowed, it might be of benefit to consider a potential trainee-type programme for women from under-represented groups to support them to develop the relevant experience to take on advocate posts. Interestingly, of the service users that have accessed the service the most common primary language other than English is Albanian.

### **Covid**

As Covid restrictions bit, one of the project's most important features, the outreach van, had to be paused, too. Woodward continued: "We had to make a sort of difficult decision around pausing the van outreach for a while as the staff weren't happy to go out during covid."

But when the van restarted the project met with another problem. "When we subsequently did re-start the van outreach, all the women had moved, and it was kind of going back to square one. Had the women moved indoors?" Important intelligence gained by the project over years and months was wiped out during the pandemic.

Woodward commented: "Is it that they've been moved on by the police? Is there another area we need to look at? And, you know, we've gained that intelligence over the years of work. When we then had to almost go back to the beginning, we were in a very different place to where we had been. When we submitted the application and chose which areas we were focused on, we had all of that information. And so that was kind of lost. It was also difficult because so many other services weren't operating."

Lockdowns were imposed, then they were eased, then tightened back up again and again over two years. The uncertainty of the situation posed another set of challenges for the project.

Woodward said: "Because the restrictions were on and off, we, it didn't ever feel like things properly got into the swing of being anywhere near normal until 2022. It just felt like there was a lot of missed opportunities and the idea of focusing on the indoor scene then became particularly challenging because again, even once we restarted the van outreach, that felt a bit different because of the fact that actually, you know, you're still, you are in the van, the women are outdoors. There's still an element of risk assessment there."

As the project prepared to develop work with women in indoor settings, it proved extremely difficult in the time period pre-vaccine in particular. There was a real and perceived risk to the staff in entering any such off-street setting. Therefore, the time restriction of two years given to develop such work made it impossible to achieve. A further obstacle was the recruitment of a service manager who turned out to not be suitable to the role.

"It then did become quite really highly pressurised because then all that we are then thinking about is, 'okay, have we got three months left?' Have we got six months left? And what we wanted to do was to be able to reach as many women as possible," says Woodward, "and make sure that as many women could access from the service, that then looking at lots of different methods around testing different things. We were getting referrals, so the women needed to be worked with."

Jodie Woodward remarked: "I do think having the fact that it was always less than two years, this project meant that you are also cutting down the number of applicants you're going to get because someone to leave a more secure job and then face the threat of redundancy is unlikely anyway."

An ever-present problem the project encountered was the watchful, indeed intimidatory presence of pimps, which would deter engagement between advocates and women.

As Vicky Bothwell said: "Romanian women are minded and watched by men. You notice there's more of a kind of overall exploitative type of presence. And we engage with those women, but it is more difficult. We've done things like use Language Line, and we'll order mobile phones and be able to hand them out on the outreach van if women don't have a phone so that we can contact them. We can offer practical things to make our service as accessible as possible."

Molly Hanson, acting service manager of the Exiting Prostitution Services, observed: "Some women think we would deny access to our service because they are not ready to exit, even though we explain so explicitly that it's not a condition of accessing our service, but just that we are set up to remove any barriers to exit. But it's completely their choice and we're completely non-judgmental on what they choose to do."

She continued: "It's definitely a deterrent for women accessing the service. Many have told me. Some might not even see themselves as involved in prostitution. We support women that speak about survival sex, but some women that are kind of having to do survival sex

wouldn't view themselves as being involved in prostitution. That can make women feel like they don't think our service is right for them.

“When we speak to other services, we'll call ourselves women's advocates and things like that, but obviously in terms of the bigger picture they know that we're an exiting prostitution service and it almost 'outs' (exposes) the women that we work with.”

A key ingredient in exiting prostitution strategies is time and that was limited by the lifespan of the Anita Project.

Vicki Bothwell said: “With a three-year project, it's hard to embed yourselves in the community within that time. I think something being longer term, so an extension on the funding, the referrals will come in more.”

A problem not limited to but exacerbated by the pandemic was that of the pro-prostitution lobby - those that call for the blanket decriminalisation of all aspects of the sex trade - which would weaken the focus on exit strategies in public debate. Bothwell said: “It was dominated by the noise coming from the pro prostitution lobby talking about unionisation and blanket decriminalisation and so-called 'safety in the workplace'.

“At Anita, we clearly know and understand that women in prostitution are so desperate and so coerced, and that obviously there through lack of choice.”

Each of the team members raised the issue of what one succinctly described as “a lost opportunity”.

“If we can't get women out of prostitution during a global pandemic that has a serious additional impact on their health and wellbeing then that shows that there is barely any impetus to help women exit prostitution.”

“But sometimes it feels like other women's organisations are saying that, 'Oh, sexual violence is fine as long as it's in the context of prostitution.'”

The successes and shortcomings of the Anita Project must be evaluated within the context as having operated during one of the most challenging periods in recent history. As Bothwell said: “That three-year project was partly dominated by Covid and lockdown and working from home and doing virtual work with the women. That had a significant impact on the work, and on the team delivering the work.”

## **Successes, lessons learned, and recommendations**

### **Successes**

At the very least, 22 women have exited prostitution as a direct result of intervention and support from the project. A further 17 women have accessed daytime advocacy and have been identified by support workers as being involved in various stages of the process that

will hopefully lead to exiting. As one of the only street-based drop-in facilities for this group of women, it has become clear to support workers that some of the women see this particular facility not just as an opportunity for a hot drink, food and a friendly face, but also an important step in evaluating their circumstances in a safe space.

Outreach extends to the provision of warm and practical clothing, as well as access to information about, for example, Black History Month (and other significant cultural events) which provides an opportunity to temporarily escape their day-to-day struggles in the sex trade.

To date, 158 women involved in street prostitution have accessed support via the van.

In order to promote the project across the target boroughs, **nia** has reached at least 300 professionals and agencies through a combination of awareness raising and training, far exceeding target numbers. Through this engagement **nia** have ensured referrals have steadily increased across the lifetime of the project. A further benefit to this work has been educating other professionals about the harms of prostitution.

As the only pan-London exiting prostitution project managed and staffed by professionals with demonstrable expertise and experience in the field, the Anita Project provided an invaluable service to vulnerable women in the capital.

Jodie Woodward is clear about the importance of the project. She said: "I think it has a huge value. There's a lot of focus on things to do with antisocial behaviour, and I think we recognize that it's not the women themselves who are responsible for so-called anti-social behaviour in the community."

Woodward added "[There are] particular areas in London where it is known that there are women in prostitution, We know that being able to support women in those circumstances also then has a wider impact on women's safety in general."

One of the Anita Project's strengths was its specialisation. It brought a laser-like focus to exiting prostitution, which meant women got the kind of support that was simply not available anywhere else.

Woodward explained: "That does also then mean the difference of having a specialist service means we can focus on the level of support that women need in a specialist service in a way that it can't really be done in some of the other services.

There are 300 women waiting to access counselling and 90 women waiting to access support to go through the criminal justice process in the Rape Crisis service at **nia**.

Therefore, for women who have been involved in, or are involved in prostitution, there will a waiting time, which means that they are not going to be able to access crisis intervention as quickly as needed.

Woodward pointed out that there are fairly strict restrictions on supporting women specifically with the criminal justice process, many of whom have additional and complex issues to deal with that relate to the issue of prostitution and the process of exiting.

“If they have lots of other needs within the rape crisis service, we may have to say, ‘Maybe there are other agencies that can do this bit’. Because each advocate may be working with 50 women at a time.”

“They can't do everything. The same happens in our other services. When we get referrals for women involved in prostitution, we would always accept them, but they aren't going to be able to get that level of support. There is a wider impact when women who are experiencing the kind of level of violence and trauma that we see are then pigeonholed as being difficult or problematic or with too high needs.”

In other words, women in prostitution would not get the support to begin the process of exiting that they need within those generic services.

Key to the success of the project has been the empathy, flexibility and patience of the Advocates, as a service user describes ‘ I went AWOL, and I didn’t answer my phone to them, but they still tried getting hold of me until they found where I was. I find it really hard to trust people cause of how I've been treated with other key workers, drug workers, and projects in general. But they gained my trust. They showed me they care. Some workers you could tell they are not that bothered, but this lot seem to give a damn, and not cos they are getting a wage for it. These people really care about us. Whatever crisis you might be having, if I feel like I can't face the world, that when they're there for me”.

All staff members have described the support they provided to women who have been enabled to exit prostitution. Key themes emerging from the interviews mirror that of the service users. As Hunte describes, “I think that the encouragement is really important and just really reiterating into them, that you know, they’re important, and, they deserve to be treated accordingly and not to be, you know, abused.”

As Hanson says, “Her wishes and feelings are the most important thing as well. Making the woman feel in control of her own journey and allowing whatever form that woman needs it to take.”

A significant number of women who have accessed the service have needed support across multiple areas, with the most common being: immigration, housing, and drug and alcohol support, and benefits/finances. In addition to supporting women to exit prostitution the team have advocated for women, securing settled status and accommodation for those women who have been repeatedly let down by other services. The team also described supporting women to report sexual violence to the police for the first time, supporting them through a process that they were extremely fearful of, due to previous experiences with the police.

The team expressed feelings of pride when clients managed to achieve things that were before unthinkable to them like applying for jobs, Hanson describes, “So you know, when there’s so many occasions where we’ve had women applying for interviews for jobs and there’ve been such big successes.”

### **Lessons learned and experience gained**

The Anita Project was operating under the exceptionally challenging circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic, but staff saw this an opportunity continually to learn, to improve, and to refine the service they were delivering.

Dawn Bonnett-Miller said: “Covid set back the service hugely, but there's also been some really interesting developments and lessons learned within the project.”

Bonnet-Miller explains that lessons learned from developing the protocols have provided the building bricks of an exiting project that has grown and developed in wholly positive ways.

“Maybe they need to be in temporary accommodation. Maybe there's issues with the landlord or issues with the property itself, or support with housing benefits. Obviously, practical help is essential if women are going to even think about taking the step to exit.”

**Necessity is the mother of invention** and so it was with the Anita Project. Staff had very high levels of commitment to their roles and when confronted with challenges would try to find ways of meeting them.

Molly Hanson said: “One of the things that we've done recently is buy some lip balm with our number hidden in the barcode so that we can give those out on indoor visits so that the woman are able to keep our phone numbers, and contact us if they need to.”

Partnerships were valued. Local authorities that take exiting prostitution projects seriously can make all the difference to outcomes and the Anita Project developed a good, effective partnership with Redbridge Council in particular.

Vicki Bothwell said: “I have interacted with police since I've been in this role, during indoor visits with the police, with the local council, and that was in Redbridge Council. Redbridge has been, really good actually. They've really engaged with us. With the police, what I found with them is they don't seem to care about the men buying sex, unless there's something really explicit, like they suspect these men have trafficked these women into this country from Romania, for example.”

Nevertheless, there were issues of ignorance and ideological hostility among council workers. Proactively countering hostility and ignorance by giving presentations proved to be effective.



Vicki Bothwell noted: “Another barrier was that a number of the boroughs or the professionals that would refer to us don't hold the same perspective on prostitution being harmful.

“I've found that going out and speaking to them and delivering presentations to a lot of them has really, really worked, because you can't really argue with the facts when you see them. People try, but it's harder to argue with the facts when you see them laid out on a slide and a PowerPoint.”

### **Recommendations**

- Longer term funding to enable service users to achieve sustained exit, and to enable the project to continue to test new approaches and respond to emerging needs (particularly as the UK deals with the cost of living crisis).
- Exploration of the benefit of a non-exiting specific role, addressing the barrier of women not accessing the service because they do not see themselves as being involved in prostitution (of particular relevance for those involved in ‘survival sex’). There is robust evidence within case notes and staff interviews that some women are not ‘ready to exit’. Recruiting a dedicated post or posts to address immediate needs as per stage one of the exiting model would increase referrals to the project. Service users could subsequently be supported by an Exiting Advocate.
- Revisiting the role of Drug and Alcohol Advocate. This post could provide value to the service, however previous recruitment rounds have been unsuccessful. The post could be pitched at a senior level with a higher salary and longer contract length recruitment. This could be more effective in recruiting those with specific expertise, including women within the existing staff team pool that are interested in developing this particular specialism.
- Development of the approach to accessing women indoors. This is the area of the project that was identified from the outset as being the most challenging, as it has been with other prostitution-focussed projects (Bindel, et al, 2014). The challenges brought about by Covid-19 further exacerbated these challenges and it is within the final eight months of the project that progress began in earnest. It is suggested that the relationships built with the police and council in both Redbridge and Walthamstow can be expanded to other boroughs. Through strong partnership working the project could be enabled to access indoor venues with the police ‘in the background’ as opposed to the current method of police accessing venues first. One option regarding indoor work would be for the service to focus on one borough specifically rather than run the risk of being spread ‘too thin’.
- One challenge that the project has faced is the ‘ambition’ of the project within a relatively short time-frame; balancing promoting the service, supporting women (including those from other London boroughs not able to access other exiting support), focusing on developing indoor support and support to those women involved in survival sex. The existing project has built a strong foundation, with a dedicated and skilled staff team who display enthusiasm for growing and developing the service to meet all of the identified areas. Depending on options regarding funding it would be useful for MOPAC to consider whether there needs to be prioritisation to any specific group of women/setting.
- Due to the lack of provision across other London boroughs **nia** have accepted referrals for women outside of the target boroughs, it is felt that in whatever future

provision is available this should continue because for those women seeking support the project is, as many have described it, “a lifeline”.

- Access to therapeutic support was an emerging theme through the interviews, this was in **nia**’s original bid to MOPAC and should be considered in any future extensions/iterations of the project.
- A pan London prostitution strategy that is shared across both policing and local authorities, following which named individuals to be identified as leads in each borough.

The project needs to increase its number of staff **in order to deal with the wide range of disparate issues involved.**

Dawn Bonnett-Miller said: “Drug misuse or problematic use, maybe with a social work background, but then you can learn on the job as well. With Romanian women, you have to look at the immigration status, and again, if they’re entitled to anything. Housing, drug and alcohol, rehabilitation and support are the essential things. Maybe sometimes emotional support. We might signpost them to counselling services if they’re available. A lot of times they’re not.”

The problem of women involved in ‘survival sex’, who do not accept that they are working in prostitution, must be addressed with recruitment of more staff. Bonnett-Miller added: “We need a general support worker that does not only focus on exiting.”

Most of all, women who rely on the Anita Project and women who will need it in the future urgently need it to be extended.

Vicki Bothwell explained: “An extension of the project is, is vital really. It’s long, long work There’s women that worked with Eaves that are coming back 10 years later. What’s so brilliant about Anita service is that we keep cases open for a long time.”

“I’ve got two clients that have exited,” continues Bothwell, “but I’ve still got the cases open with them because it feels precarious. Some of those women from that time are coming over to the Anita project, still negotiating that process of exiting. I see it as a positive that they haven’t given up on that process, but they probably have been let down by all the other agencies, which is why we are needed.”

“One woman came back to Anita and she’d recently gone back into prostitution and she was saying, ‘I need help to get out.’ They see that they want something different for themselves and then they know that they deserve it.”

## **Conclusion**

Despite the unprecedented challenges faced, the project is now thriving, with skilled and committed staff supporting some of the most marginalised women to make positive change. As a service user highlighted ‘without them, I wouldn’t have been where I am now’.

In addition to the significant work carried out directly with service users the project has taken great strides in intelligence gathering and partnership working. It is this area of work, in particular working with police in off street settings, that has presented the most challenges. The team has tried and tested approaches to working with the police and local councils to mixed results. One of the challenges on a practical level has been the changing of both policy/practice and of key personnel since the service inception. When the team have encountered individuals within the police or at a local authority level who understand prostitution as a form of Violence Against Women this has made a positive difference to intelligence gathering and partnership working. In boroughs where the focus was solely on anti-social behaviour this contradicted any commitment to addressing Violence Against Women. Overall the project encountered difficulties identifying which teams within local authorities were responsible for the response to prostitution. Exacerbating this challenge is the occasional tension between a local authority approach and a police approach and/or when neighbouring boroughs have different approaches.

As highlighted throughout the report, significant time was lost at the earlier stages of the project due to Covid- 19, with London being in and out of restrictions until February 2022. As there were significant unknowns and potential risks regarding entering off street premises, this work was delayed. Management and staff were keen to get this work off the ground and make up for lost time and took the difficult, but pragmatic, decision that if agreement could be made with the police regarding a welfare-based approach that they would be involved in joint visits.

Staff have had mixed experiences with the police as part of these visits, as one worker said, “the women are victims, they are being exploited. But I think some [police officers] see it as antisocial behaviour. So that can be a bit difficult.”

Another staff member adds: “Conversations with police about how they deal with women and deal with the demand side, the exploitation side, have been a crucial part of the project. In one of the flats that we went into, there were two women and two men. And the men were clearly pimps. They were all telling different stories. The police weren't really talking to each other about the stories that they were telling. One of the young women was saying that she's here on holiday from Romania, and that it was her brother's house. But one of the men was saying it was his sister's house. The police weren't talking to each other. And I heard these two conversations and I said to the, one of the police officers, and I said, ‘I'm not going to do your job for you, but I think I've cracked the case.’”

The staff have been resilient and creative in their approach to this work, offering training to the police and designing lib balms with project contact details hidden within that are distributed to women during indoor visits. It is clear that this aspect of the work requires a long-term approach. Staff will need to continue to be assertive in their approach as this requires almost constant contact with the police including following up offers to deliver training and keeping up with ever changing personnel. Now that links have been established (in Waltham Forest and Redbridge in particular), this opens the door to the team exploring visits with the police presence much more ‘in the background’ than they have been.

However, some of the success of this will be incumbent on the police forces themselves and their approach regarding prostitution.

I have been involved in the areas of men's violence towards women and girls for more than four decades and in particular the issue of prostitution and the associated harms. Having interviewed staff at 20 organisations that advocate for prostituted women, and been involved in the evaluation of five such projects (aside from this one), I am impressed with the Anita Project and its achievements, particularly given the set of adverse circumstances it faced during its operation to date. Not only has the team shown commitment and expertise, I have also been struck by the ethos behind the project: that women in prostitution deserve to live lives free of prostitution, and that they deserve whatever amount of support that this process may demand.

Whilst taking into consideration the shortfalls and difficulties in meeting all targets as well as implementation of certain aspects of the project (in relation to MOPAC targets) I have no doubt whatsoever that given more time and resources, the Anita Project will achieve its potential in achieving its initial targets and, given the opportunity, significantly more.

### **Author CV**

#### **Julie Bindel**

##### HONORARY POSITIONS

BRUNEL UNIVERSITY, LONDON, Visiting journalist (2012-13).

LINCOLN UNIVERSITY, Visiting fellow ((2014-15)

Reading University Law School, Visiting Fellow (2022 – current)

##### **Work History**

2017-2018: Nigeria Market Development in the Niger Delta,  
Specialist Expert Adviser

Julie was the specialist expert adviser on human trafficking to support the design of an extension to the MADE programme addressing modern slavery. She conducted intensive research on the causes, consequences and political economy of the trafficking of women and girls from Edo State. The report has been used by the government's Department for International Development to design the programme 'Stamping Out Slavery in Nigeria'. This consultancy involved travel to Abuja and Benin, Nigeria and conducting face-to-face interviews with returned trafficking victims, NGOs, state agencies and other stakeholders.

2004-2015: EAVES FOR WOMEN, RESEARCH CONSULTANT

Julie was involved with researching prostitution and trafficking in London on behalf of the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime and delivering a report based on the research findings. Results directly influenced the development of the Mayoral Strategy on Violence towards Women and Girls (VAWG).

In addition, she co-managed a Big Lottery-funded research project about exiting prostitution;

Conducted research into the UK sex industry, including the trafficking of women and children, street prostitution, off-street prostitution, and men who pay for sex;

Conducted general research on trafficking and preparing analyses of law and practice relating to the needs of trafficked women;  
Prepared analyses of legislation, policy and service provision in a variety of countries, such as the Republic of Ireland, Australia, Sweden and the Balkans/Eastern Europe; and  
Contributed to a number of local governments' VAWG strategies.

#### EXPERIENCE IN THE FIELD OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN INCLUDES:

- Developing and coordinating a Department for International Development-funded training for trainers' multi-agency course about the trafficking of women into prostitution, which was delivered in Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia and Montenegro. This course was adapted for delivery in a number of destination countries, including the UK, and funded by the EU. Both courses included a module on the health needs of trafficked women.
- Assisting with the organisation of the first-ever UK conference about the trafficking of women in 2000.
- Consultancy with state officials about the trafficking of women in Bulgaria, Turkey, India, Albania and the UK.
- Council of Europe-led seminar on domestic violence and sexual assault in Turkey.
- Researching the off-street sex industry in Glasgow, with particular reference to trafficked and migrant women in the sex industry, on behalf of Glasgow City Council.
- Lead researcher on a Coalition against Trafficking of Women and European Women's Lobby project, focusing on legislative frameworks and initiatives to assist trafficked women in 14 source countries.
- Editor of the book *Sex in the City: Mapping Commercial Sex Across London* (Poppy Project, 2004).
- Conducted a survey of street prostitution in London (*No Escape*, 2007).
- Named researcher on the *Health Needs of Trafficked Women*.
- Provided assistance with the evaluation of the *Maze Marigold Project* (*Worth More or Worth Less?* 2001).
- Researched and published a number of articles, including investigative reportage for the *Guardian* newspaper and others, about violence against women and girls.
- Lead researcher and author of report on legislative frameworks and effects on violence against women and girls from and to Australia, Republic of Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden commissioned by the Scottish Executive.
- Conducted seminal research into the links between lap dancing venues and the trafficking of women.
- Delivery of numerous keynote speeches about violence against women and girls around the world including across the UK and Europe, Russia, Middle East, US, Canada, South Korea and Asia, East, West, South Africa, Cambodia, Australia and New Zealand.
- Selected publications
- *A Critical Examination of Responses to Prostitution in Four Countries: Victoria, Australia; Ireland; the Netherlands; and Sweden*, Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit of London Metropolitan University, 2003, Bindel, J & Kelly, L.
- *Profitable Exploits: Lap Dancing in the UK*, London, Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit of Metropolitan University, 2004, Bindel, J.

- Out of Sight?: An Examination of the Off-street Sex Industry in Glasgow, with Additional Information on Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Sterling, Bindel, J and Holmes, P, 2005
- No Escape? An Investigation into London's Service Provision for Women Involved in the Commercial Sex Industry, Bindel, J, 2006
- Press for Change: A Guide for Journalists Reporting on the Trafficking of Women, Bindel, J. CATW, 2006
- Big Brothel - A Survey of the Off-Street Sex Industry in London, Bindel, J; Atkins, H, Poppy Project, 2008
- Slavery: Enfield's 21st Century ATM, Atkins, H and Bindel, J, 2008
- Who Buy Sex: Who They Buy and What They Know. A research study of 103 men who describe their use of trafficked and non-trafficked women in prostitution, and their awareness of coercion and violence. Bindel, J. Farley, M, and Golding, J, 2009.
- Breaking Down the Barriers: A Study of How Women Exit Prostitution. Bindel, J et al, Eaves and London South Bank University, 2012
- Capital Exploits: A Study of Prostitution and Trafficking in London. Prepared by Eaves for the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime, 2012
- Reframing Reporting of Childhood Sexual Exploitation, Journalism Practice. Sarah Niblock & Julie Bindel, Taylor and Francis online, 2017

#### **BOOKS**

The Map of My Life: The Story of Emma Humphreys, Astraia Press, 2003  
 Straight Expectations, Guardian Faber, 2014  
 Exiting Prostitution, editor, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014  
 The Pimping of Prostitution, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017  
 Feminism for Women, Little Brown, 2021

#### **Geographical areas covered in her work**

Australia, Balkans, Bulgaria, Cambodia, Dubai, most EU countries, Israel, Jamaica, Jordan, Kenya, Kurdistan, Latvia, Lebanon, New Zealand, Nigeria, North Africa East Africa, Palestine, Romania, Russia, Scandinavia, South Korea, Turkey, South Africa and Uganda.

## Appendix 1.

### Figures relating to the Anita Project to date

|   | Project Target | Overall numbers for project   |
|---|----------------|---|
| Women to engage with advocacy and intensive support | 50             | <p><b>39</b></p> <p>Contract started August 2020</p> <p>First advocate started in October 2020</p> <p>Service Manager started in November 2020 and left in February 2022</p> <p>All frontline posts filled in February 2022</p>   |
| Women engaged in short term interventions           | 125            | <b>158</b>  |
| Delivery of trauma informed workshops               | 48             | <p><b>8</b></p> <p>This is the area that has been most significantly impacted by Covid- for obvious reasons women involved in prostitution were not able to access online workshops. Since restrictions were removed and we have had a full staff team we have been delivering workshops within supported accommodation services and this has worked well, but we have been unable to account for the time lost. We carried out one to one as soon as we were able but to have delivered group work when covid was rampant and before the vaccines were widely available would not been safe.</p> |

|  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| Night- time outreach service                           | 21  | <b>66</b><br>We have over delivered on this target in order to ensure women have access to crisis support- however the van has had various mechanical issues over the last 2 quarters and we need a new van.      |
| Learning/developing service delivery                   | n/a   |   |
| Referrals to service                                   |   | <b>39</b> agency referrals from services<br><br><b>158</b> self-referrals for the van (with the caveat some women could be double counted due to the difficulties of recording women who access the van)          |
| Crisis Support   | 75% of women who require crisis support receive it                | <b>100% = 25</b> women total.   |
| Number of exit plans created                           | 75% of women ready to exit have plans created                     | <b>100% of women ready</b> to exit have had plans created = <b>27 women</b> out of 39.  |
| Number of women engaged with Drug and Alcohol Advocate | 75% of women with identified with drug/alcohol needs engaged with | <b>80%</b><br>We had several unsuccessful recruitment rounds and this post was never filled. However, 20 women engaged in specialist support re drug and alcohol use <b>80% of those with drug/alcohol needs)</b> |



|  |                                 |  |
|--|---------------------------------|--|
|  | specialist support              |  |
| Number of women engaged with support re housing and/or housed in Nia's specialist refuges                        | 75% of those with housing needs | <b>100%</b><br>20 women supported with housing   |
| Women will be able to access the women's/rape crisis centre groups and drop-ins and keep in touch with advocates | 75%                             | 100% offered but no women took up this offer   |
| Number of training sessions delivered  | 8                               | <b>16</b> Training sessions delivered  |
| Number of Women provided with advice and support to be positive members of the local community                   | 50                              | <b>20</b><br>Advocates continue to explore any opportunities for women receiving ongoing advocacy support to become positive members of the local community, in order to reduce isolation and increase independence. |

## Appendix 2.

### Interview with a current service user.

I went AWOL, and I didn't answer my phone to them, but they still tried getting hold of me until they found where I was.

I find it really hard to trust people cause of how I've been treated with other key workers, drug workers, and projects in general.

But they gained my trust. They showed me they care. Some workers you could tell they are not that bothered, but this lot seem to give a damn, and not cos they are getting a wage for it.

These people really care about us. Whatever crisis you might be having, if I feel like I can't face the world, that when they're there for me.

When I've got appointments they come with me. They even book them for me. I'm very forgetful.

They call me to make sure I'm okay. They come to see me, make the arrangements to meet up I know I can ring them when I need to talk. I know I can trust them.

Without then, I wouldn't have been where I am now. I would probably have relapsed by now. I'm reducing my, my methadone, and my appointments are getting better.

I've got someone that I could talk to when I'm down or when I'm getting in trouble with the kids. I know I could talk to them and. They don't judge.

They say the right things and when, I ask them advice, it's the right advice. It's good advice. If they weren't around that would be a nightmare for me and the other girls. I would love to be able to volunteer to go on the street and help other girls get off the street.

Other people look down on us. They don't.

My future doesn't involve prostitution or drugs. I want my life back. I want to try and find me, because I lost me years ago.

I've stopped taking drugs but I'm going through other problems in my life. But I know I have the project to turn to again.

They've been a lifeline because they're there, and I know I can pick up the phone and they'd always answer it. Or I know I'll get a text back or a call later.