

# **Does prostitution affect the well-being of its survivors?**

-A comparison of survivors of prostitution and other sexual violence-  
Summary and main conclusions of the study



Summary of the results of a study conducted by Anna Þóra Kristinsdóttir,  
psychologist and counselor at Stígamót, based on statistical data from Stígamót.

Stígamót

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# Main conclusions<sup>1</sup>:

1. 60.7% of female survivors of prostitution have attempted suicide and are much more likely than survivors of other types of sexual violence to have attempted or contemplated suicide
2. Survivors of prostitution are much more likely to struggle with self-harm, eating disorders and physical pain than survivors of other types of sexual violence
3. 92% of survivors of prostitution who have sought Stígamót's services have also been subjected to other types of sexual violence. 80% were younger than 18 years old when they first experienced sexual violence.
4. 50% of survivors of prostitution have not completed any education beyond primary school and 50% are on disability, in rehabilitation or ill. This has a significant impact on the opportunity for this group to earn an income, and it can be assumed that there is a relationship between reduced earning potential and being forced into prostitution.
5. Many survivors of prostitution have been subjected to severe sexual violence during their lives. 76% have been raped and just under 46% have been subjected to incest. Female survivors of prostitution are much more likely than survivors of other types of such violence to have been subjected to threats, bodily injury, and to have weapons used on them by perpetrators of sexual violence. Just over 25% have been gang raped and just over 26% have been drug raped.
6. Of the nine women who sought the services of Stígamót because of prostitution during the time period, but had not experienced other sexual violence, nearly all of them struggled with low self-esteem, shame, anxiety, depression, and difficult relationships with spouse and friends.
7. Prostitution survivors' cases were more likely to have become child protection cases than other sexual violence cases. Those cases do not necessarily involve prostitution itself, but rather some other form of sexual violence. Cases involving 24% of perpetrators of sexual violence against prostitution survivors have thus been referred to child protection services. This group was also more likely to have reported sexual violence to the police than other survivor groups.
8. Prostitution survivors rarely tell the people closest to them that they are engaging in prostitution, and are much less likely than survivors of other crimes to tell family members.
9. Survivors of prostitution are more likely to seek the support of a social worker and other social services than survivors of other types of sexual violence.
10. Often, survivors of prostitution have not sought other professional support before coming to Stígamót. However, it is worth noting that those who have sought the support of other professionals due to sexual violence have often not reported engaging in prostitution, which underscores the shame that prostitution survivors deal with.

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<sup>1</sup> These results refer only to female survivors.

# About the study

Here you can find a summary of the results of a study by Anna Þóra Kristinsdóttir, psychologist and counselor at Stígamót, based on statistical data from Stígamót. The study in its entirety can be found on Stígamót's home page.

## What?

This study focuses on survivors of prostitution who sought the services of Stígamót between the years of 2013 and 2021. Information from statistical data collected in the first interview is examined in order to shed light on the consequences of prostitution, the violence that this group has been subjected to and where they have sought help.

## Why?

The purpose of the study is to make visible the harmful consequences that survivors of prostitution have to deal with. Society's failure to recognise the distress that survivors of prostitution experience can cause further trauma, thus presenting an obstacle to their ability to process their distress. It is important for survivors' recovery and processing of trauma that society see and acknowledge the harm that prostitution can cause. In order to underscore this, the study refers to survivors of prostitution.

## Main objectives:

- To provide an overview of who survivors of prostitution are and their position in society.
- To compare survivors of prostitution and survivors of other types of sexual violence with respect to:
  - Background information
  - Sexual violence to which they have been subjected
  - Consequences and well-being
  - Who they have told and where they have sought help
- To provide an overview of abusers who have acted as pimps.

## What data?

When survivors of sexual violence arrive at their first counseling interview at Stígamót, they are asked to fill out two questionnaires: one regarding the sexual violence committed against them, the other regarding the perpetrators (one questionnaire is submitted for each perpetrator who has committed sexual violence against the survivor). These data have been collected since the founding of Stígamót, but the decision was taken in this study to use data collected between the years 2013 and 2021<sup>2</sup>.

During the time period under investigation, 3118 survivors of sexual violence sought help at Stígamót for the first time. Of these, 132 or 4.2% were survivors of prostitution. It should be noted that not all prostitution survivors divulge their engagement in prostitution during their first interview, and are therefore not included here. It is a recognised pattern in Stígamót's operations that a relationship of good trust must be established with the counselor before many survivors feel comfortable describing their experiences of prostitution.

All data are non-personally identifiable and answers cannot be traced to individual participants.

## Shortcomings

The extent to which the questionnaires have been completed varies due to survivors' varying degrees of willingness or ability to respond. Some did not respond while others omitted questions.

Only those prostitution survivors who have sought Stígamót's services and had the strength and will to divulge their engagement in prostitution participated in the study. It is likely that some individuals have not divulged their engagement in prostitution because they did not feel comfortable doing so, as well as others who did not believe that prostitution affected them or who do not consider it sexual violence.

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<sup>22</sup> During that period of time, the questionnaires have changed in that some questions have been added and others removed. In order to make possible the comparison of all participants, this study only uses the questions that have not changed during the specific time period.

## What is being investigated?

This study first examines the information obtainable from the questionnaires supplied by people who are survivors of prostitution, whether it be background information, information regarding the abuse, consequences of the abuse, or the perpetrators. Secondly, information from female survivors of prostitution are looked at in particular and compared with information from three other survivor groups. These groups are:

1. Women who have been raped
2. Women who have been subjected to incest
3. Women who have been both subjected to incest and raped

## Why these three groups?

Counselors' experience with individual counseling and group work at Stígamót has suggested that the consequences of prostitution are both long-lasting and serious, and generally more profound than the consequences of other types of sexual violence. A decision was therefore made to investigate what Stígamót's statistical data could reveal about this experience. Women who have experienced prostitution were compared to women who had been raped in order to study the difference in the consequences for survivors. It soon became apparent that these women would have to be compared with those who had been subjected to incest, as many women in prostitution had also experienced incest. It was therefore necessary to rule out the possibility that such consequences arose from childhood abuse alone. Abuse early in life is a known risk factor for difficulties later on. It also became apparent that a large group of women who seek the services of Stígamót have suffered both rape and incest, so it is necessary to study this group in particular and compare these women with survivors of prostitution. These are women who very often have a long history of sexual abuse, have often been subjected to violence by more abusers than the women in the other group, and who experience significant consequences of their abuse on their daily life and well-being.

Comparing these four groups (i.e. prostitution / rape / incest / rape+incest) can therefore better illuminate how prostitution in particular impacts well-being, as well as

whether something in the background variables may influence women's vulnerability to prostitution.

## Definitions

### *Incest*

We define incest as all sexual behaviour between individuals who are in a relationship of trust, whereby one party does not wish to engage in such behaviour but is subservient to and dependent upon the abuser in some way.

### *Rape*

We define rape or attempted rape as a form of sexual abuse in which someone has or attempts to engage in sexual intercourse or other sexual relations with a person against their will, thereby violating their right to self-determination and autonomy.

### *Prostitution*

We define prostitution as a form of sexual abuse in which a person or a third party receives a favour or payment in exchange for sexual activity.

## Main conclusions

This summary contains the main conclusions of the study and highlights the most interesting points. The study report itself contains more tables and conclusions than are discussed here. Tables and figures are explained in greater detail and further information is provided regarding the significant difference between the groups. It is important to note that this summary only discusses female survivors of prostitution, while the study report also includes a summary of information on male survivors of prostitution. As there are only 12 men in the study population, it is not possible to generalise over the whole group though it may provide clues.

The main conclusions are divided into:

1. Demographic information on survivors of prostitution compared to survivors of other sexual offences
2. Other forms of sexual abuse that survivors of prostitution have experienced in their lives
3. Consequences of the abuse
4. Where prostitution survivors have sought help
5. Information on pimps

# 1. Demographic information

**Table 1.** Female survivors of prostitution, and those who were not but were survivors of rape and/or incest, organised according to when they first came to Stígamót, nationality, employment status, completed education and marital status.

	Prostitution	Rape and incest	Rape only	Incest only
<b>Total</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>388</b>	<b>1,344</b>	<b>517</b>
<b>Age when first coming to Stígamót (n)</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>382</b>	<b>1,332</b>	<b>505</b>
Younger than 18 years old	0.9%	1.3%	3.2%	2.8%
18 - 29 years	60.9%	42.1%	64.6%	43.0%
30 - 39 years	22.6%	20.9%	16.8%	20.8%
40 - 49 years	9.6%	16.5%	8.3%	17.0%
50 - 59 years	6.1%	13.4%	5.3%	10.5%
60 years old or older	0%	5.8%	1.7%	5.9%
<b>Nationality</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>387</b>	<b>1,321</b>	<b>517</b>
Icelandic	86.4%	94.3%	95.8%	95.0%
Foreign	12.7%	3.6%	3.1%	3.9%
Mixed	0.8%	2.1%	1.2%	1.2%
<b>Occupation (n)</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>381</b>	<b>1,321</b>	<b>502</b>
Fully or partially employed	22.6%	43.6%	44.9%	52.6%
Student	12.2%	16.8%	30.6%	21.1%
Disabled or temporarily unable to work	47.0%	30.2%	16.4%	15.9%
Pensioner	0.0%	2.1%	0.4%	2.4%
Homemaker / on parental leave	3.5%	2.6%	2.2%	3.2%
Unemployed	7.8%	3.7%	4.4%	3.8%
Other	7.0%	1.0%	1.2%	1.0%
<b>Education (n)</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>367</b>	<b>1,293</b>	<b>489</b>
Still studying	21.9%	29.2%	41.4%	28.8%
Have not completed primary school	8.8%	3.0%	1.2%	1.8%
Have completed primary school	41.2%	24.3%	15.6%	16.6%
Have completed secondary school	20.2%	25.1%	23.4%	29.7%
Have completed university	7.9%	18.5%	18.5%	23.1%
<b>Marital status (n)</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>385</b>	<b>1,328</b>	<b>508</b>
Single	53.8%	32.5%	42.7%	30.5%
In a relationship	17.1%	16.9%	24.2%	18.3%
In a registered partnership / married	16.2%	29.1%	22.4%	41.3%
Divorced / separating	11.1%	19.5%	9.1%	7.5%
Widow	0.0%	1.0%	0.5%	0.6%
Other	1.7%	0.8%	0.8%	0.8%
Does not apply / child	0.0%	0.3%	0.4%	1.0%

(n): Number of respondents who answered the question

Most women who came to Stígamót because of prostitution are Icelandic and between the ages of 18 and 29, which is similar to survivors of other sexual abuse. It is interesting that, compared with the other survivor groups, a significantly higher proportion, i.e. 50%, of prostitution survivors have not completed any education beyond primary school. The rate was 27% among those with a long history of trauma and those who have suffered both rape and incest, and 17-18% among the other groups. It is also interesting to note the high percentage (47%) of prostitution survivors who are disabled or temporarily unable to work, which is significantly higher than the control groups. The low level of education and high rates of disability, illness or unemployment all affect earning potential and may therefore offer clues about why these women are forced to support themselves through prostitution.

## 2. Sexual abuse experienced by survivors of prostitution

**Table 2.** Female survivors of prostitution and women who were not survivors of prostitution but of rape and/or incest, according to when they first experience sexual abuse, number of abusers and the type of abuse suffered.

	Prostitution	Rape and incest	Rape only	Incest only
<b>First experienced sexual abuse</b>	(n = 114)	(n = 379)	(n = 1,308)	(n = 505)
0 - 4 years	10.5%	13.5%	0.6%	11.1%
5 - 10 years	23.7%	57.5%	4.8%	65.1%
11 - 17 years	45.6%	25.1%	48.9%	21.6%
After age 18	15.8%	1.1%	44.4%	0.2%
Not sure	4.4%	2.9%	1.3%	2.0%
<b>Average number of abusers:</b>	<b>2.43 (n = 98)</b>	<b>2.73 (n = 367)</b>	<b>1.63 (n = 1,308)</b>	<b>1.28 (n = 506)</b>

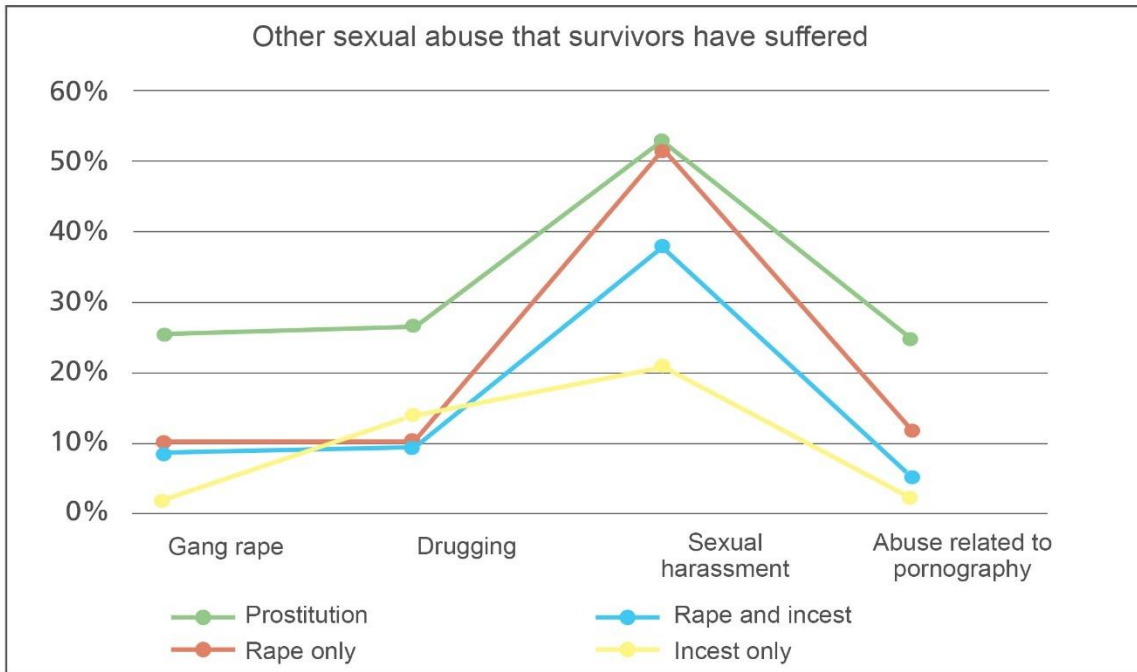
*(n): Number of respondents who answered the question*

The majority of prostitution survivors were subjected to sexual abuse early in life; around 80% were abused before the age of 18. It is also revealed that survivors of prostitution were subjected to repeated sexual abuse and the average number of abusers was 2.43<sup>3</sup>. The only group for whom the average number of abusers was higher is the group who has experienced both incest and rape. The average number of abusers was 2.73.

**Slightly more than 92% of prostitution survivors have experienced other forms of sexual abuse during their life. Most common is rape (76%), then sexual harassment (52.5%)<sup>4</sup> and finally incest (45.8%).**

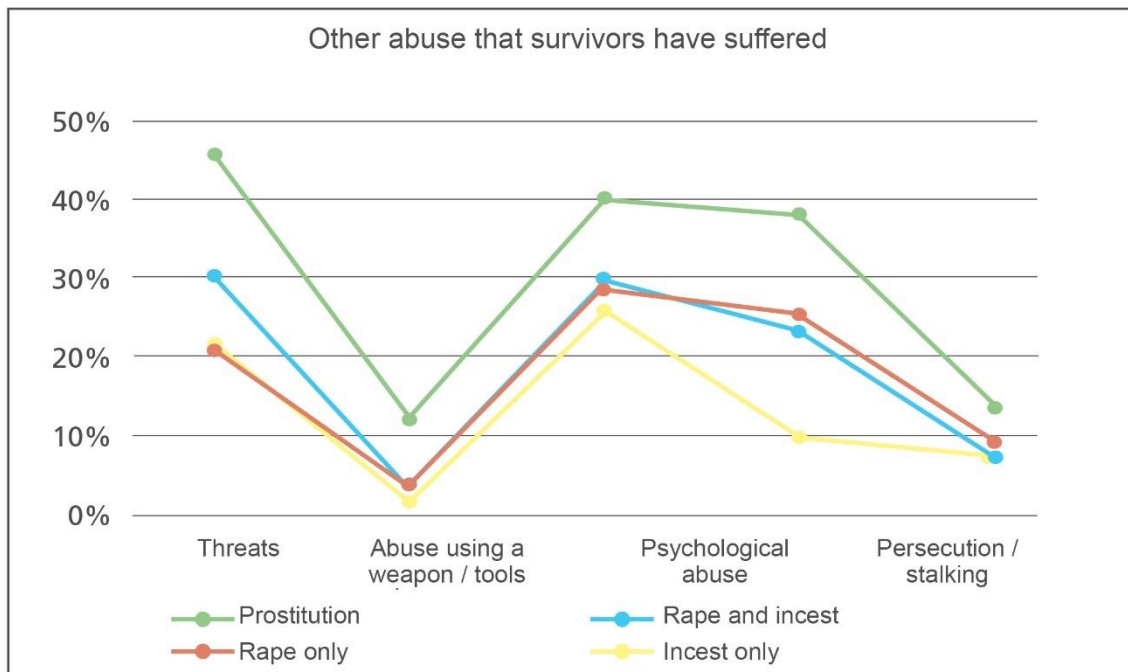
<sup>3</sup> These numbers do not include sex purchasers.

<sup>4</sup> This information was obtained from Stígamót's intake report, which asks the reason for coming to Stígamót. It is likely that many more have also experienced sexual harassment but are not necessarily seeking the services of Stígamót for that reason, and therefore do not put it down as a reason for coming.



**Figure 1.** Other sexual abuse that survivors have suffered.

Prostitution survivors are much more likely than other groups to have experienced gang rape, drug rape and abuse relating to pornography. This abuse may have occurred before, during or after prostitution.

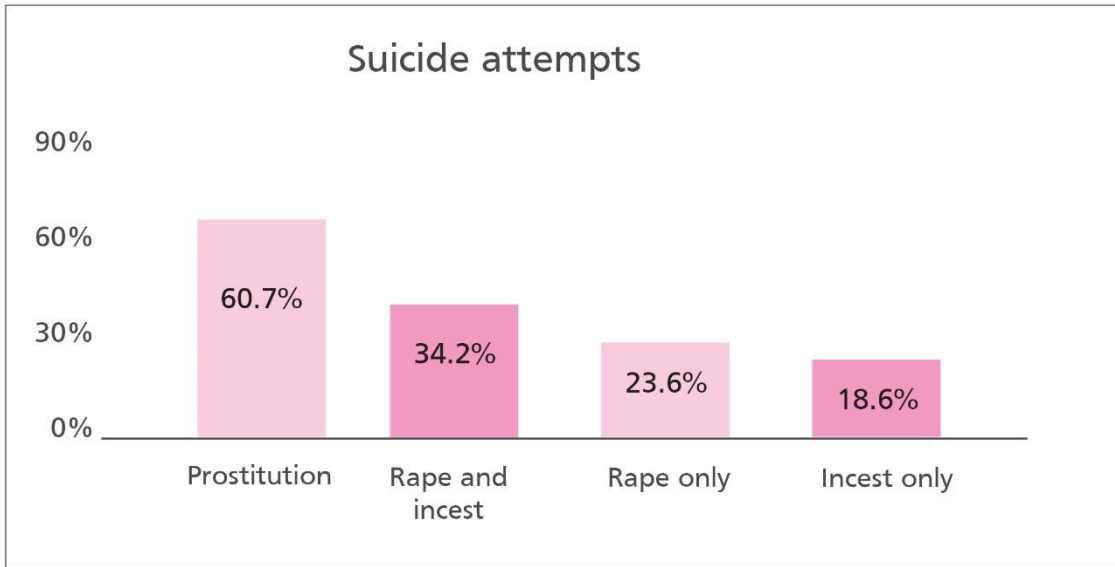


**Figure 2.** Other abuse perpetrated by the sexual abuser.

This figure shows other types of abuse perpetrated by sexual abusers. It should be noted that cases of prostitution include all abusers whose sexual abuse occurred before, during and after prostitution. The violent abuse suffered by survivors of prostitution over the course of their life is abundantly clear. These survivors are much more likely to have been threatened by their abusers, suffered abuse using weapons and endured physical injuries than the other groups.

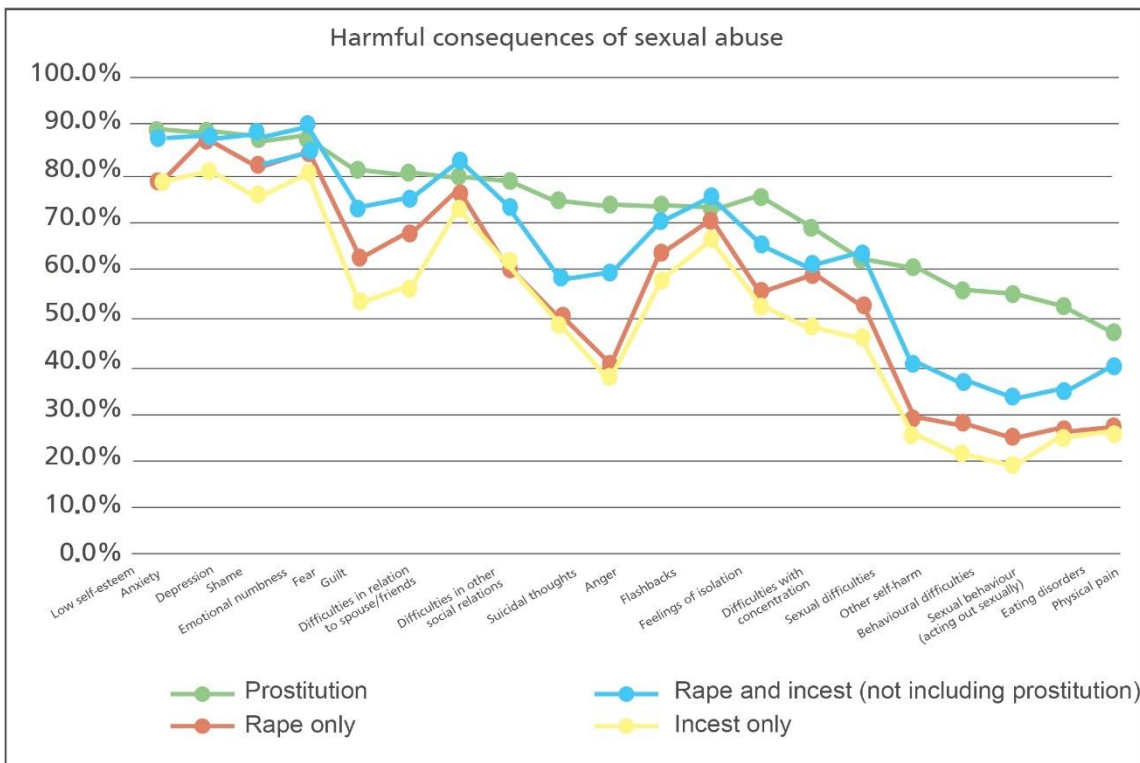


### 3. Consequences



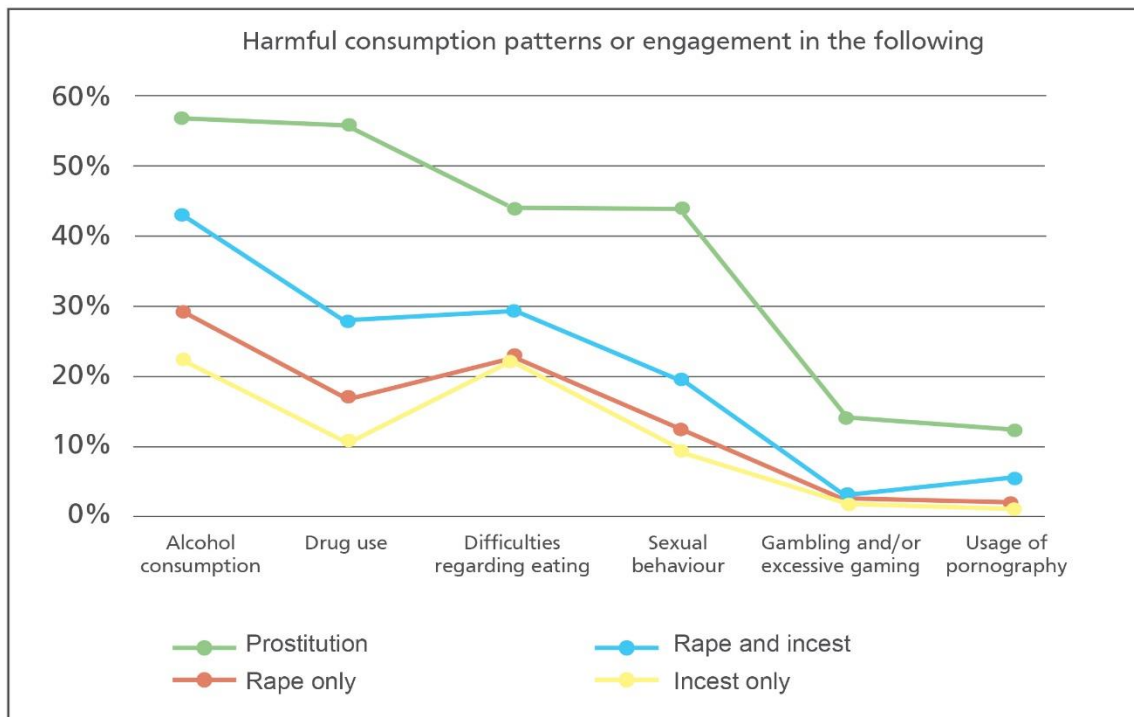
**Figure 3.** Abuse survivors who have attempted suicide.

These figures illustrate the significance and serious nature of the consequences of abuse that survivors of prostitution face. This is perhaps most obvious when regarded with respect to suicide attempts. 60% of prostitution survivors have attempted suicide, which is a significantly higher percentage than among the control groups.



**Figure 4.** Harmful consequences of sexual abuse.

Investigation of the most common consequences of sexual abuse, which are shame, guilt, depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem, reveals that there is no significant difference among groups, as the vast majority of survivors suffer the same consequences. However, a look at other serious, harmful consequences does reveal a significant difference. For example, just over 60% of prostitution survivors have attempted suicide and just over 75% have experienced suicidal thoughts. This is a much higher proportion than among the other groups. Women in prostitution are also much more likely to engage in other forms of self-harm and to experience emotional numbness, eating disorders and physical pain. Survivors of prostitution are also more likely to consume alcohol and other drugs in a way that disrupts daily life.



**Figure 5.** Consumption patterns or behaviours resulting from sexual abuse that negatively impact quality of life and disrupt daily life

It is sometimes said that survivors of prostitution experience distress as a result of other sexual abuse they have endured, but these results show that prostitution appears to have significantly more negative consequences, and in particular life-threatening ones such as suicide attempts.

**Table 3.** Negative consequences identified by prostitution survivors, who had not been subjected to other sexual violence, on their first visit to Stígamót in the years from 2013 to 2021, according to survivors' gender and whether they have experienced abuse other than prostitution.

<b>Female survivors of prostitution that have not been subjected to other sexual violence</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>Negative consequences of prostitution and other forms of sexual abuse (n = 9)</b>		
Shame	100%	9
Low self-esteem	88.9%	8
Anxiety	88.9%	8
Depression	88.9%	8
Difficulties in relation to spouse/friends	88.9%	8
Emotional numbness	77.8%	7
Guilt	77.8%	7
Difficulties in other social relations	77.8%	7
Fear	66.7%	6
Feelings of isolation	66.7%	6
Flashbacks	66.7%	6
Anger	44.4%	4
Suicidal thoughts	33.3%	3
Sexual difficulties	33.3%	3
Self-harm	33.3%	3
Behavioural difficulties	33.3%	3
Sexual behaviour (acting out sexually)	33.3%	3
Difficulties with concentration	22.2%	2
Eating disorders	22.2%	2
Physical pain	11.1%	1
Other consequences	11.1%	1
No consequences	0.0%	0
<b>Consumption of or engagement in the following as a consequence of prostitution and other forms of sexual abuse that negatively impact quality of life and disrupt daily life (n = 9)</b>		
Other drugs	66.7%	6
Alcohol	33.3%	3
Sexual behaviours	33.3%	3
Food	22.2%	2
Pornography	11.1%	1
No consumption patterns or activities that negatively impact quality of life and disrupt daily life	11.1%	1
Gambling/excessive gaming	0.0%	0
Other	0.0%	0
<b>Suicide attempts among prostitution survivors (n = 9)</b>		
Have attempted suicide	22.2%	2
Have not attempted suicide	77.8%	7

The study sample included nine women who came to Stígamót because of prostitution but claimed not to have experienced other forms of sexual abuse. The sample is too small to be able to generalise but may offer clues about the harmful consequences of prostitution. The table shows that almost all of the women surveyed struggle with low self-esteem, shame, anxiety, depression and difficulties in relation to spouse and friends that cannot be attributed to other forms of sexual abuse.

## 4. Help sought

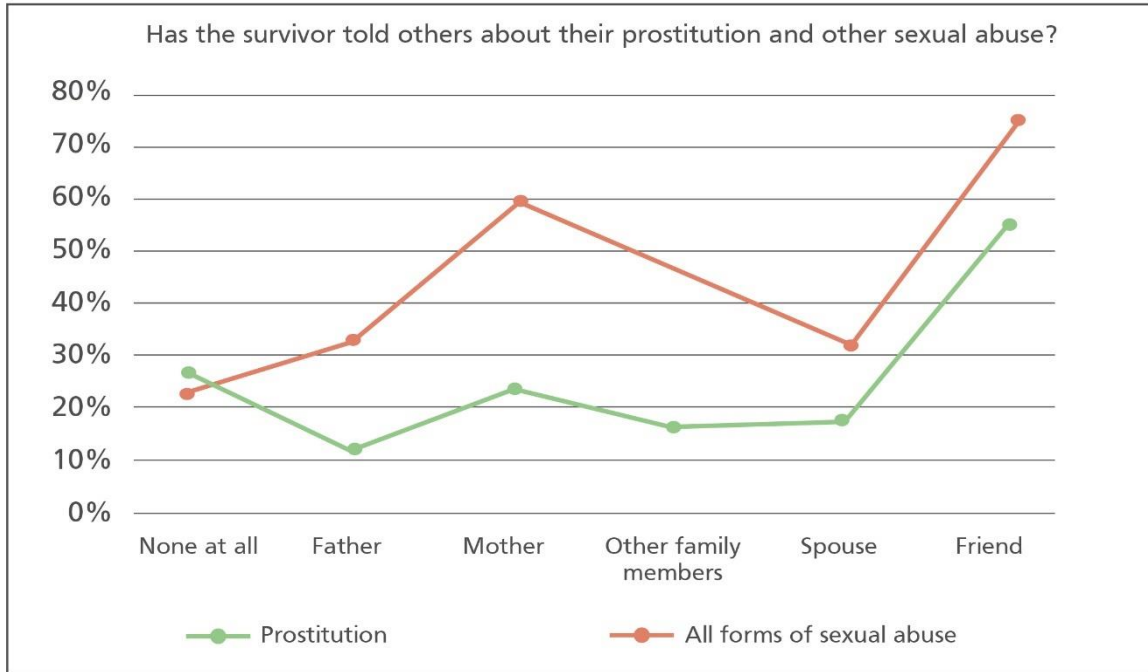
**Table 4.** Abusers of prostitution survivors and survivors of rape and/ or incest but not prostitution, according to whether or not the case was referred to child protection services or reported to the police.

	Prostitution	Rape and incest	Rape only	Incest only
<b>Total</b>	<b>238</b>	<b>1,003</b>	<b>2,137</b>	<b>648</b>
<b>Was the case referred to child protection services? (n)</b>				
Referred to child protection services	120 24.2%	584 8.7%	864 13.0%	561 11.1%
Not referred to child protection services	75.8%	91.3%	87.0%	88.9%
<b>Was the issue reported to the police?</b>				
Reported to police	218 19.3%	929 9.1%	1,968 12.7%	607 11.0%
Not reported to police	80.7%	90.9%	87.3%	89.0%

(n): Number of respondents who answered the question

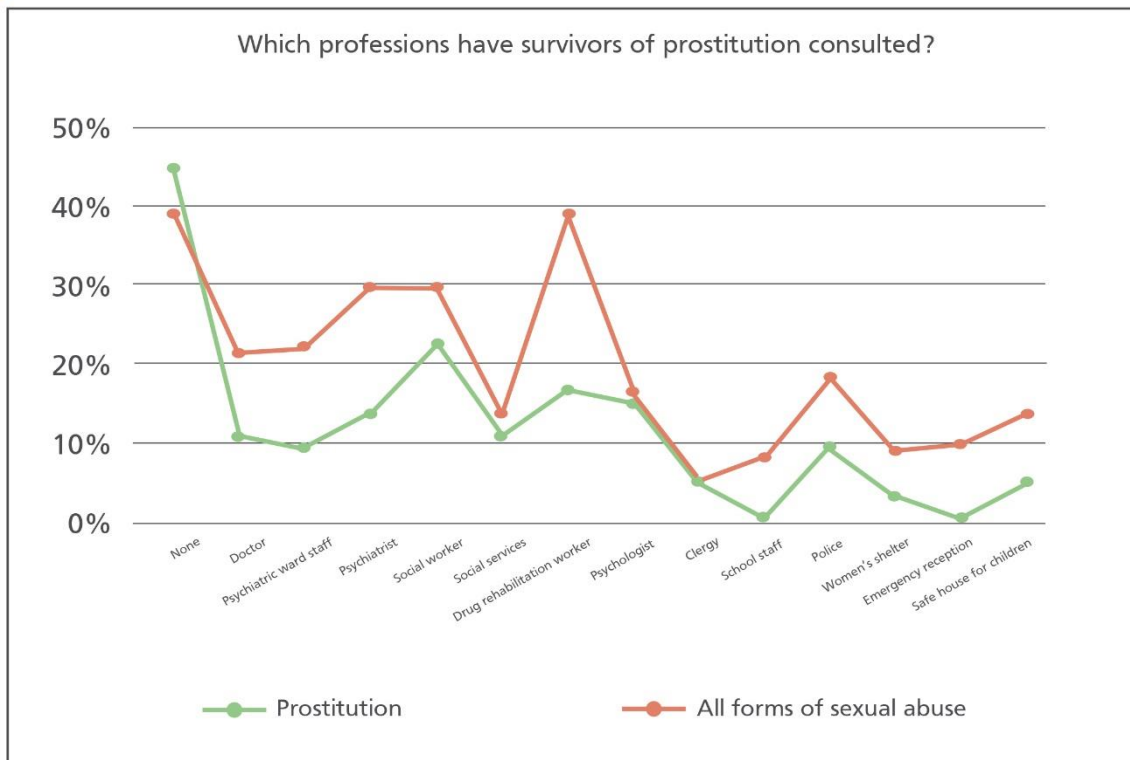
It is interesting to note that sexual offences against women who have experienced prostitution are more likely to have been referred to child protection services and the police than offences against survivors of other forms of abuse. It should be noted that this applies to all sexual abuse the women have endured in their lives, not just prostitution. In most cases, this is likely to involve abuse suffered in childhood before entering prostitution. It can therefore be concluded that many of the women received child protection services at some point, and if they had received the appropriate treatment and support, it may have been possible to prevent them from entering prostitution later in life.

It is also interesting to note that of the 218 abusers of prostitution survivors, just over 19% were reported to the police. This is a higher percentage than among survivors of other forms of abuse. This might suggest that the abuse was exceptionally violent, and likely also relates to the fact that many of these cases were handled by child protection services. These women thus have significant experience with the justice system.



**Figure 6.** Who have survivors told about their prostitution and who have they told about other forms of sexual abuse they have suffered?

Survivors of prostitution often experience significant shame and rarely inform the people closest to them. The results support this and reveal that only between 15 and 22% have told parents or other family members about the fact that they are in prostitution. However, the fact that half of survivors surveyed have told a friend is encouraging. It is interesting to compare this with whether survivors of prostitution have informed family members of other forms of sexual abuse suffered. 32-58% responded in the affirmative. Survivors are thus more likely to confide in family members about other forms of sexual abuse than prostitution, which underscores just how hidden prostitution is and how difficult it is for survivors to talk about it.



**Figure 7.** Which professions have survivors of prostitution consulted and which professions have they discussed other sexual abuse with?

In many cases, prostitution survivors have not sought the help of other professionals before coming to Stígamót. Results thus show that 39-44% of women in all groups surveyed have not consulted a professional about their sexual abuse<sup>5</sup>. It is worth noting that survivors of prostitution appear to consult psychologists just as frequently as the women in the control groups. 34-38% of the women in all of the groups have informed a psychologist of their sexual abuse. However, upon examining whether prostitution survivors in particular have told a psychologist, the rate drops to 16%. This suggests that prostitution survivors often seek the help of a professional and report sexual abuse, but leave out prostitution<sup>6</sup>. It is interesting to note that prostitution survivors have informed social workers and social services of their prostitution and other sexual abuse to a greater extent than the control groups<sup>7</sup> (i.e. reported incest/rape). This suggests that these women frequently seek social and financial support, and likely experience financial difficulties.

<sup>5</sup> Refer to the study report.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that some women surveyed may have consulted a psychologist before they experienced prostitution and therefore did not inform the psychologist.

<sup>7</sup> Refer to the study report.

## 5. Pimps

**Table 5.** Abusers who have acted as pimps, according to gender, nationality, age and relationship to the survivor.

Abusers who have acted as pimps	%	N
<b>Abuser's gender (n = 28)</b>		
Male	89.3%	25
Female	10.7%	3
<b>Abuser's nationality (n = 22)</b>		
Icelandic	72.7%	16
Other	27.3%	6
<b>Abuser's age when prostitution first occurred (n = 21)</b>		
18 - 29 years	14.3%	3
30 - 39 years	42.9%	9
40 - 49 years	23.8%	5
50 - 59 years	14.3%	3
60 - 69 years	4.8%	1
<b>Abuser's relationship to the survivor (n = 26)</b>		
Spouse or former spouse	15.4%	4
Father/stepfather	7.7%	2
Family friend	7.7%	2
Friend/acquaintance	38.5%	10
Coworker	3.8%	1
Other	3.8%	1
Stranger	23.1%	6

Stígamót has information about a total of 28 abusers who have acted as pimps. Due to the low number it is difficult to generalise from these results, but they provide some clues about this group. The overwhelming majority of pimps in the cases reported to Stígamót are Icelandic males. Most are between the ages of 30 and 39, followed by 40 to 49. This is a significantly higher average age than other abusers. It is interesting to note that most pimps have some relationship to the survivor. 38.5% are friends or acquaintances and 15.4% are the survivor's spouse. This is consistent with Stígamót's knowledge of other forms of sexual abuse, as perpetrators most often have a close relationship to their survivors.

**Table 6.** Abusers who have acted as pimps, according to type of abuse other than prostitution and whether they have abused other survivors.

<b>Abusers who have acted as pimps</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>Other forms of sexual abuse (n = 28)</b>		
Rape	50.0%	14
Attempted rape	3.6%	1
Sexual harassment	28.6%	8
Abuse related to pornography	21.4%	6
Incest	10.7%	3
No other sexual abuse	39.3%	11
<b>Coercive measures taken during sexual abuse (n = 25)</b>		
Threats	80.0%	20
Psychological abuse	72.0%	18
Physical injury	56.0%	14
Persecution / stalking	40.0%	10
Use of a weapon/tools	32.0%	8

It can be seen here that pimps often perform other acts of abuse against their survivors in addition to brokering prostitution. 50% have raped their survivors, 21.4% have involved their survivors in some form of pornography, and just under 11% have committed acts of incest against their survivors. Other coercive measures are common. 80% have threatened their survivors, 56% have used physical violence, and 32% have used weapons. This underscores just how much abuse women in prostitution suffer.