

‘I help women escape from the sex industry’

Miriam Hargreaves has launched a Portsmouth project to help women escape from sexual exploitation and abuse

IF you are a woman who feels defined by men paying to use you for sex, it's hard to feel truly valued. Some people might describe prostitution as a career or lifestyle choice, but the reality for many women working in the sex industry involves being exploited and abused, as well as feeling trapped.

Breaking away from the sex industry is difficult. You may have no other income, face drink and drug addiction issues, and have no home other than the one you share with an abusive partner. It can be hard to find alternative employment or to enrol on a training course when your CV has obvious gaps.

Miriam Hargreaves feels so strongly about this that she's devoted much of the past 20 years to supporting women. Now the mum-of-three from Harbour Church, Portsmouth, has launched a project to help women from the city to escape the sex industry.

Vista was launched in January 2021 as one of Harbour Church's social action ministries, alongside the Foodbank in Portsea, the debt centre and Spa 61, which runs regular, free pamper events where women in the city can experience acceptance and support.

“At Vista, we're training up a team

to visit women face-to-face in massage parlours, or lap-dancing clubs,” she said. “We're offering them our support, someone who will listen to them, and we'll take gift bags with information to show women that they are valued. We want to be there for women when they are looking for change and alternative routes to employment and wellbeing.”

‘We'll be there for women when they are looking for change’

Many of the women Miriam has supported started working in the sex industry as teenagers or in their early 20s but have reached a point where they feel they no longer have many other options in life. They are now experiencing exploitation and violence, feel trapped, and it has affected their sense of identity and self-worth.

“What we do is walk alongside women, helping them to take small steps that may help them to leave this industry. That might involve helping them to find local addiction recovery groups, giving access to debt advice and support through our CAP centre or helping them to find appropriate housing or training.

“We also have plans with Spa 61 to start a social enterprise that can offer women alternative employment. It's all about showing people God's love, acceptance and the feeling of being valued that encourages us all to seek good paths for ourselves in life.”

Before taking on this role, Miriam worked for seven years with the Southampton-based organisation Beyond the Streets. Inspired by Christian values, they also helped those seeking to leave the sex industry. Miriam was part of a small team who supported scores of women through regular phone calls, through which they could talk through what they were facing and plan their next steps.

“Most of this work is about showing women that they are heard by someone who believes in them, who can help them to break a long journey down into smaller steps, and then check how they are getting on with each step,” she said. “We all need to feel motivated to find change, and to have someone by our side can make a big difference.”

She had initially got involved in this area of work after working with the Door of Hope project in London 20 years ago. This works directly and face-to-face with women selling sex on the streets



Miriam Hargreaves (second from right) with Liz Wood, Emma Taylor and Beth Charman from the Vista team based at Harbour Church, Portsmouth; right: the Vista logo



in East London. Both the Door of Hope and Vista in Portsmouth are part of a network of similar organisations across the country co-ordinated by Beyond the Streets.

After taking time out of work to have children and study for a counselling diploma, Miriam returned to this challenging area of work in 2013. The telephone support line, called Beyond Support, involved women being referred by agencies such as housing or social services but women often referred themselves, or were told about it by friends.

“This issue is important to me because I do believe in the transformative love of Jesus. In John 10:10, he offers us life in all its fullness,” she said.

“I'm also guided by the moment in Matthew where Jesus heals the woman with the issue of blood. She has experienced shame for years, but the Bible says that he saw her. God calls us to do that with people who aren't normally seen. We may not understand

exactly what a woman is going through, but we can say ‘I hear you.’

“We may respond to any questions people have about faith, but we don't initiate them. Our conversation is about the fact that their lives matter, that they have hope and value. Some women have asked me to pray for them, or asked if I believe in God, just because they happen to be asking big questions about life.”

One woman who Miriam supported had been in the sex industry for a number of years and was about to throw away her work phone. She felt shame and anger, but described the work as addictive, in the sense that she felt needed in some way by those who paid to be with her. Through speaking about it, she saw that those pseudo-relationships would never satisfy, and she was able to talk through similar controlling relationships in her past.

“Women describe a lot of trauma,” said Miriam. “So it's important for us to care for ourselves, as

we are talking regularly about very traumatic situations. My prayer life is very important, and I have to keep the mentality that I'm not the ‘rescuer’ in this situation.

“The Covid lockdowns made some women even more dependent on the abusive partners who they depend on for day-to-day living. Perhaps their income has disappeared because the men who would have paid them aren't around.

“For others, that break from work has given a chance to reassess their situation. But equally the alternative employment or training courses also disappeared during those lockdowns. So it makes whatever we can offer as an alternative even more important.”

For more information about Vista see www.harbourchurchuk.org. For more information about Beyond the Streets, see: www.beyondthestreets.org.uk