

# What's a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Job Like This?

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*A comparison between sex work and other  
jobs commonly done by women*



**ENGLISH  
COLLECTIVE  
OF PROSTITUTES**

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This survey was launched in Parliament in February 2019. Selma James, founder of the Wages for Housework Campaign and the English Collective of Prostitutes' first spokeswoman, opened the event. This is the transcript of her speech with a few necessary edits.

## Selma James' speech

First of all, this survey reminds me that when the women's movement began and for some time after -- I think it continues up to today -- we were told that our liberation was dependent on taking a job outside the home. Now we know from our own experience what these jobs are. Sex work was not included as one of the options. The other omission was how low the pay is. In fact, sex work is very often part of the work even if you are not a sex worker. I know as a waitress, there was nothing like a smile to get the tip you deserved, that should have been ours in the first place.

I remember that when the liberation through work argument was made, one woman said, "You can't tell my mother that, she's been out there for 20 years and she's exhausted." Her mother had raised children while doing this "liberating" work. This reminds us that many working-class women have always had to work outside the home because the man's pay (if there is a man) barely covered the family's expenses.

This survey gives us, not merely a comparison between different areas of work, but it also tells us what work women are spending their lives doing and how little we earn for it. I think that's vital information which we have to thank the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) for gathering.

Secondly, we have to remember that a lot of the work women do, as many people have commented, is an extension of work we do at home without wages. People have noticed that, but they haven't noticed that sex work is much the same.

We are sex workers, we women, a little bit, or maybe sometimes, in how we relate to men. We have always used our sex because there is no equality, we are the socially weaker sex. Because there is a power relation between ourselves and men, let alone the class relations, that we confront; and therefore we use what is available to us when we have little or nothing else. We have our sexuality and we bargain with it when we have to. Some politicians and media are now calling sex work "survival sex". Are they really telling us that they didn't know that sex work was always for survival?

I want to briefly describe what happened when women who formed the ECP came out in the Wages for Housework Campaign and said, "*Well actually you know, we work as prostitutes.*" And we said, "*We are interested.*" We were interested first of all in how much money they made, and it was a lot more than most of us were making and certainly much more than we got on benefits as single mothers. And it was terribly important to us that the sex workers had money. We didn't benefit financially from it. They didn't fund us. But it was really important that we had women among us who had money and even so wanted Wages for Housework to acknowledge their work. We used to say: does good money make women bad? And in fact, it does. People know that and some of them don't like the idea of working-class women having too many choices and more time than an 8-5 job gives us. And I think part of the reaction to prostitution, part of the reaction to women increasingly using this as a way of getting

money, has upset such people because they feel we are out of their control. That's a very serious question for women and for men, and it always has been considered fundamental to the women in the Wages for Housework Campaign. And when the government said that they didn't have money for this or money for that, there were some well-paid hookers who were members of the ECP and they would get up and say, "*We have seen the money they say doesn't exist, in the casinos.*" It was a pleasure and a strength. It was terribly important for us and for our determination not to be poor and dependent.

When the ECP asked me to be their spokeswoman because they couldn't be public, I didn't hesitate. It seemed to be the most natural thing in the world for me, a respectable married woman, to speak for sex workers. I had one condition, that they educate me so that I could represent them.

In the Campaign there was one woman, a personal friend of mine, an academic; she was very upset by her sisters doing that work and sat down with them trying to convince them to give it up. She didn't succeed. The rest of the women had no problem at all and did absolutely understand. Sex workers in our organisation, who were part of us in every way, really contributed to our clarity about our own sexuality and made us more aware of what we were doing with our lives and why we had so little and how wrong it was that we didn't have much. They gave us a standard: women could have money. They could be working class, only they had money. It was of great benefit to know that.

I think that now we have to look again at what this Swedish model (to criminalise the clients of sex workers) is about. We have to know that it is proposing that all of us have no choice but to do the work that's expected of us and under the conditions that were described tonight. We have to remember, those of us who are sex workers, that if we give up sex work this is what awaits us. I remember the Thai women saying that in Thailand, Empower, their organisation very powerful and very brilliant, said, "*Well we have two other choices if we're not on the game: we can be in sweatshops -- what a thrill! -- or we can live hand to mouth doing farm work on the countryside.*" So to the people who criticize the way we work, those of us who are sex workers, the way we earn our living, we ask that they acknowledge how limited our choices are. And we wonder why they never noticed! That is terribly important.

Finally, thinking about the fact that 87% of the austerity cuts have fallen on women (and that means children also suffer) at the same time that the Swedish model is being put forward with more urgency, we have to wonder how they are connected. We have to wonder why, at this moment in time, when women are in the worst position we have been in for many a day, somebody would come and try to interfere with a few of us at least, and many of us probably, using another way of feeding ourselves and feeding our families. Prostitution, sex for money, has been the way that women traditionally, when we had nothing else, have used. It's got us out of a lot of scrapes. It doesn't mean that we won, it means we haven't lost.

What the women here tonight are making clear, is that the jobs they have had to do, whatever those jobs are and however we feel about them, they are also about survival, about not losing. And this is what unites us. There is power for all of us in accepting each other and anything we have had to do to survive.

# Introduction

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Sex work is often characterised as inherently exploitative.<sup>1 2</sup> In this research, we compare pay and conditions between sex work and other jobs disproportionately done by women. In doing so, we uncover many similarities and some crucial differences and throw light on the oft asked question: “Why do women become sex workers?”

We began this research after the Home Affairs Select Committee in 2016/7 recommended<sup>3</sup> the decriminalisation of sex workers on the street and in premises, specifically that: “*. . . the Home Office change existing legislation so that soliciting is no longer an offence and so that brothel-keeping provisions allow sex workers to share premises*” and that legislation should be drafted to provide for the “*deletion of previous convictions and cautions for prostitution from the record of sex workers.*”

The government's response was that it was concerned about the exploitative nature of sex work. Even the chair of the Home Affairs Committee, whilst highlighting how the current brothel-keeping laws mean “*sex-workers can be too afraid of prosecution to work together at the same premises, which can often compromise their safety*” said: “*there must however be zero tolerance of the organised criminal exploitation of sex workers, and changes to legislation should not lessen the Home Office's ability to prosecute those engaged in exploitation.*”<sup>4</sup>

By looking at sex work in the context of other “women's work” we hope to break through the mystification and break down the divisions between sex workers and other women and other workers. Doing so would enable exploitation to be judged and addressed similarly across the range of jobs done by women.

## Research method

We conducted semi-structured face-to-face and telephone interviews with 16 women and one non-binary person (who performs her job in the capacity of a woman) about various aspects of their work. They span the **working age** range (18 to 65 years old) and include **five migrant workers, three women of colour and women with a variety of physical and mental disabilities**. All the migrant women have status in the UK. Just under half of the interviewees are mothers. One woman is not formally employed but is a single mother looking after her very young son.

The jobs we chose are those known to be dominated by women and we were guided by the ONS report *Women in the labour market, 2013* which showed that women are disproportionately represented in ‘caring and leisure services’, ‘administrative and secretarial’ and ‘sales and customer service’ jobs. There were various differences between the women interviewed depending on the kind of contract they had, whether they worked full-time or part-time and the geographical area – most were in or around London.

Specifically, the jobs of those we interviewed were:

- **Bartender** in a pub open late
- **Child care worker** in a nursery
- **Cleaner** for a private company
- **Hairdresser** in a salon
- **Home care worker** (live-in) for elderly clients
- **Housing support worker** (senior) for adults with addiction
- **Midwife** working for the NHS
- **Nurse** who is deputy manager in a mental health crisis house
- **Personal assistant** in an office of a charity
- **Retail worker** for a fashion brand
- **School playground monitor**
- **Sex worker** in a brothel
- **Sex worker** on the street
- **Single mother** of a young child on benefits
- **Teacher** in SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities)
- **Teacher** in a state school
- **Waitress** with some supervisory responsibilities

We interviewed two women working in the sex industry; one working on the street and one working in premises as sex workers' experience can vary according to where they work.

Everyone was asked set questions so that we could directly compare aspects of their work such as pay and hours, but the interviews were largely semi-structured so that the women could add what they wished about their experiences.

For the purposes of this research we use the definition of exploitation given in *Tackling Exploitation in the Labour Market* (BIS, 2015) that “*workers suffer exploitation through poor conditions at work, intimidation and wilful disregard of employment law*”. We are also mindful of the idea that:

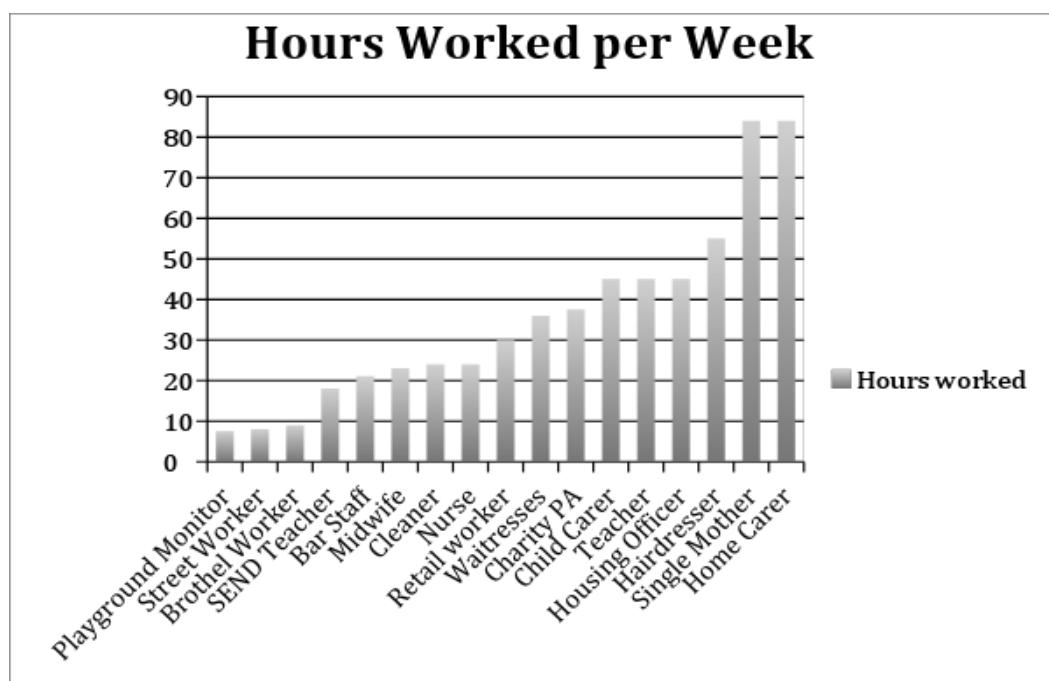
“...for working people there is a continuum of experiences ranging from decent work through minor and major labour law violations, to extreme exploitation in the form of forced labour.”<sup>5</sup>

This is a small-scale community research project which was conducted with limited resources. We invite any researchers who would like to expand on our work - comparing sex work with other jobs disproportionately done by women - to get in contact with the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) about working collaboratively to do a larger scale study.

# Findings

## 1. Hours worked

The maximum number of hours most people can legally work a week without agreeing to an 'opt out' is 48 hours. This is set down in legislation.<sup>6</sup>



A third of the women interviewed worked a different set of hours each week so they were asked for their minimum and maximum hours in order to find an average so we could directly compare jobs on the basis of the average number of hours worked each week.

**The following results were clear:**

- Three women worked more than 48 hours a week.**
- The single mother and the home care worker had the longest working week** of approximately 80 hours a week. (We note that the other mothers we interviewed might have been working just as long hours as the single mother, but we didn't ask them about their unpaid work caring for children). We asked the single mother to count how many hours she worked over a couple of weeks and average it out. We felt confident in this measure as her weekly work consisted largely of caring for her son and her household and didn't vary much whilst her son was at a particular age. The home care worker lived in for two weeks at a time and described her working day as "*when you are on the job it's 24/7*".

- c) **Some workers were pushed to work longer hours than they wanted.** The hairdresser worked 50-60 hours a week when her “ideal” was 40. Others worked longer hours because they were expected or even pushed to do overtime for free. This was especially true of workers on a salary and a fixed contract in the caring professions (home care worker, child care worker, SEND and state school teacher).

*“It’s understood that most people will do unpaid overtime and they’ll work holidays. It’s more an act of goodwill”* – State school teacher

*“I work five days a week for seven and a half hours each day, but I do a lot of overtime because there is no one else there to take my place and I am working with people in crisis who are highly vulnerable adults.”* – Housing support worker

- d) **Some women said that they couldn’t get enough hours to give them an income they could live on.**
- The retail worker, for example, said she could only “just about” cover her basic essentials such as rent, food, toiletries and clothes.
  - The waitress said she had a contract specifying that she should be given 20 hours a week but that was 15 hours a week below her ideal number.
- e) **Zero hours** (that is where someone is on call to work, but the employer is under no obligation to give them any work) **and variable hours contracts caused distress to workers because of the precarity of the work.**

Three of the women (bartender, retail worker, cleaner) were on zero-hour contracts and because their contract did not specify a sufficient minimum number of hours, the worker was dependent on maintaining a good relationship with management for a stable working life and enough money to live on. This was a significant factor in increasing stress and made it harder for women to insist on good working conditions.

*“In this industry the manager is arranging the shifts, so they have a lot of power. So, a job with a good manager is very important because as a casual worker there’s not a lot I can do if I get on the bad side of the manager. They can just not give me the days off I request, they cannot give me my holidays. That’s perfectly within their rights and it does happen.”*  
– Waitress

*“It makes you feel insecure not knowing you’re going to have those hours . . . it does put pressure on me to be the perfect employee else I don’t have a leg to stand on if she wants to take me down to 10 hours.”* – Cleaner

*“My hours varied from 15 to 40 hours a week. If the shifts came up, you would take them because you needed the hours -- if you can’t work you can’t get paid. I was constantly tired, constantly stressed, I didn’t know whether I was going to get money or not. Even if I didn’t have shifts, I wouldn’t arrange anything socially just in case the boss posted on Facebook “Oh we’ve got hours going call the store” . . . I did 50 hours in one week and instead of paying me the overtime I deserved they put ten hours onto the next week, so I got paid the flat rate.”* – Retail worker

*“I called in to say that I was running a bit late and because she [the manager] was in such a bad mood she said, ‘just don’t even bother coming in’ and hung up on me. That means I don’t get paid that day.”* – Bartender

- f) **Some employers deliberately kept hours low to prevent workers claiming employment rights** like statutory sick pay, maternity leave and protection against unfair dismissal.

*“You are technically entitled to sick pay, but you have to work a certain amount of hours consistently for six weeks for you to get it. But obviously you don’t get to pick whether you work those hours or not. So, if they only give you 10 hours a week and you end up being sick, you don’t get anything.” – Retail worker*

- g) **Other women had an informal agreement** that they would be given a minimum number of hours to ensure an adequate income, but in every case, because this isn’t legally binding, it was not always maintained.

Neither of the sex workers had formally agreed minimum hours but both described having considerable autonomy and control over when and for how long they worked.

- The sex worker on the street said: “*I can choose which days I work. The pattern is that I go out when I need to, when the bills come in.*” She was effectively self-employed so set her own hours. No direct comparison on this aspect of her work could be made with other workers as no-one else was self-employed.
- The brothel worker said: “*I don’t work if I don’t want to, but of course if I take too many days off, I would eventually get the sack.*” Her wages were topped up to a minimum amount by the owner if weekly demand had been low – she was alone in having this advantageous arrangement.

However, the woman working in a brothel added that in other places she had worked it was hard to get the shifts you wanted.

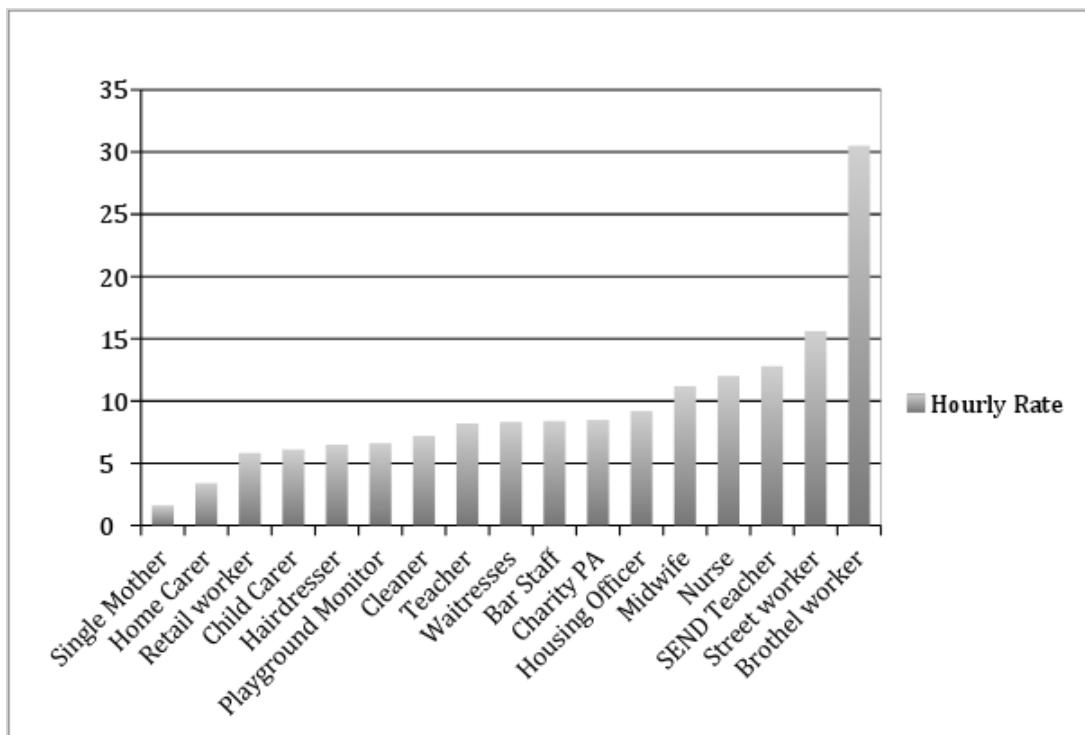
- h) **The illegality of sex work meant that sex workers had no legal redress** for working time violations but in practice, neither did many of the women in legal work (see section below ‘Working Conditions’).

## 2. Hourly rate

To assess and compare pay we looked at the hourly rate for each worker. Hourly rate was calculated taking into account hours of unpaid overtime and hours of unpaid work that were necessary for the job (e.g. planning lessons at home). We also included time when the worker was “on site” and “on call” but not actively with a client or caring for a child. This was particularly relevant to the single mother, both sex workers and the home care worker, although the sex worker on the street only got paid when she was with a client and the brothel worker only got a small “tiding you over fee” if she had no clients.

To help with an assessment of the hourly rate of the women workers in our study we looked at the scale of hourly wage generally in the UK. Amounts have gone up slightly since we conducted this research.

- The Minimum Wage is: £7.83 for over 25-year-olds; £7.38 for 21-25 years old; £5.90 for 18-20 years old; £4.20 for under 18; £3.70 for apprentices.
- The Living Wage is: £9 nationally and £10.55 in London.



- a) **Five of the 17 workers earned less than the Minimum Wage** (at the level at the time of asking). The retail worker was under 20 and earned the Minimum Wage for people of that age. A further six earned less than the Living Wage according to their location in or out of London.
- b) **By the measure of hourly rate, the sex workers earned the most** (the sex worker on the street earned an average of £15.60 per hour and the brothel worker earned an average of £30.55). This was clearly and explicitly stated as the primary factor by the two women for entering the sex industry. The workers on the highest hourly rate (after the sex workers) were the SEND teacher and the nurse.

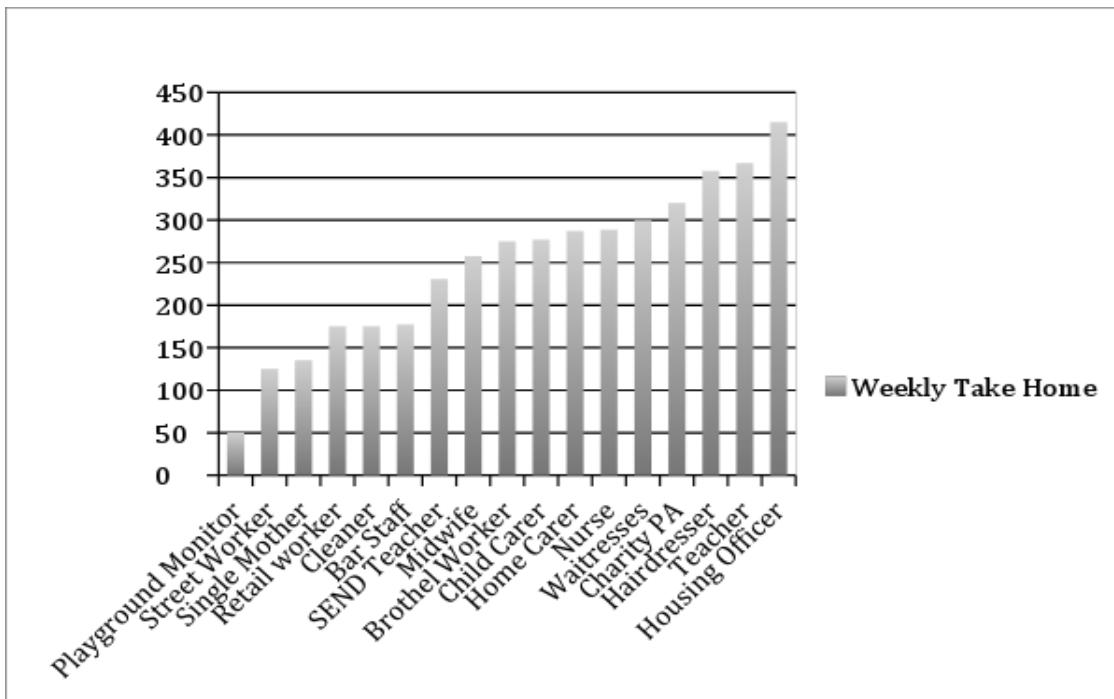
*"It's the only possibility to earn more than the minimum wage in less time. With that higher hourly wage comes independence, relief, choice and fewer worries. The difference between other jobs I've worked at pubs or retail where you get £7 per hour and sex work is stark." – Sex worker in a brothel.*

- c) **The single mother had by far the lowest hourly wage at £1.60 per hour.** She was living on benefits which we counted as her weekly wage (for the work of raising her child!). She worked on average 12 hours a day.<sup>7</sup> This was not enough for adequate heating or food – the definition of destitution.
- d) **Unpaid overtime reduced workers' hourly rate**, and this was particularly true for the salaried workers such as the housing support worker and the state school teacher, where their actual hourly rate was significantly and consistently reduced. For the housing support worker this brought her hourly rate down from what she was given (£30 an hour) to what she actually received (between £8-£12 an hour).

### 3. Total take home pay

**Those with the lowest weekly pay were the playground monitor and sex worker on the street** but they worked only a few hours each week. After that, the single mother received the least amount of weekly income in the form of benefits of £135 a week for her and her son. This forced her to live in destitution at times.

*"Life is really difficult, it is tense . . . one day on a Sunday I had to check before I went shopping to see how much money I had and I only had two pounds . . . so I checked on my food and I had some rice so I could make some simple food . . . we can't go anywhere on two pounds so we go to the library or to the shopping centre where it is warm and so I could have the heating off in the house to save money". – Single mother*



For the retail worker and bar tender they could only survive on such low wages because their accommodation costs were low.

### 4. Working conditions

Established labour rights include: a contract of employment; rest breaks and time off; minimum wage; holiday and sick pay; compensation for work related injury; flexible working; maternity leave and time off to care for children and other dependants; pension.

"Decent" working conditions are defined according to whether people have a "safe system of work", that is whether occupational health and safety standards are maintained and upheld. Additional rights included in definitions of "decent work"<sup>8</sup> are: the opportunity to get

education, training and career progression and work that is varied. In some jobs, the right to participation in decisions about how the job is managed is also considered essential, as is the right to collective bargaining, underpinned by the right to strike.

We did not ask women if they thought they had “decent work” but all the women described their job falling down in some way compared to the descriptions above.

The workers with a contract of employment (for example the public sector workers – midwife, teachers, housing support worker) were entitled, in theory, to the established labour rights listed above. In practice, they were often denied them like the midwife who said “*it's not uncommon not to get your break. In theory we can claim that time back and they encourage you to document it but we're short staffed every shift so you can't take it back.*”

The five workers on zero/variable hours contracts were denied even basic labour rights such as sick pay for illness and injury. The rights they did get were at the whim of the employer or worse their direct manager.

## **Holiday pay, sick pay and dependency leave**

- Six women got no paid holiday or sick leave, including both sex workers and the single mother. The workers on zero-hours contracts were entitled to some paid leave but in practice their employers often organised their hours to deprive them of these rights.
- Eight women lost all their earnings if they missed a day of work due to illness or caring for a dependent.

*“I get child tax credits, help towards my child care which covers about two thirds of the cost but if I call in to say that my kids are sick my pay gets deducted ... I think it's about £100. It's a lot of money so it's quite bad. I think there used to be a policy to say that you are entitled to five days dependency leave but at the discretion of the head teacher and our head teacher has decided that we're not entitled.”* – SEND teacher

*“I suffer really badly from quite chronic migraines and once I had to do a six hour one off clean and I had a migraine that morning which meant I couldn't see ... One of my colleagues had conjunctivitis and could barely see and she got to work crying and my boss said, 'don't worry we'll find a way' – she meant to make her work.”* – Cleaner

*“On my current contract I'd get nothing if I was sick. . . I'm on a 20-hour contract and if I'm injured at work and have to take time off, I may be able to get compensation for medical bills. . . The casual workers don't get maternity leave, only those on the 45-48-hour contracts.”* – Waitress

*“Some people do get ill, but they depend on the agency to arrange cover and they might have to wait two or three days for that. There's a lack of carers and it depends where people are. Someone might be able to cover but they might be in France.”* – Home care worker

## **A note on mothers**

Just under half the women interviewed are mothers and none of those in legal waged work had children younger than pre-school age. Some of the mothers had taken a significant

drop in wages since having children. Other women complained about the lack of acknowledgement and flexibility for mothers on the job and observed that mothers had to rely on informal care arrangements (relatives and friends) and/or work part-time organising their waged working day around their children. A number of women also described depending on child tax credits to cover childcare costs and that waged work would not be possible without this benefit.

- The playground monitor said that the primary reason for her taking that job was because “*it was school hours so that I was available for my children after school and during holidays.*”
- The SEND Teacher was not in work when she had a child under two and had difficulty finding work afterwards because of it. She had gone down to part-time hours so she could be available to care for her children. She said that working part-time was unpopular with employers because it costs them more and that taking maternity leave and going part-time has a negative effect because employees miss out on information, training and career development opportunities.
- The cleaner said that her colleague was fired because she had to leave work to care for her son ‘too often’.
- The single mother had not tried to get a waged job because “*it's full time to look after kids*”.
- The state school teacher described how her job used to be one that women could do with school age children, but this had now changed: “*I don't know any teachers who finish at the end of the school day. Most are doing after school clubs. I know that a lot of my friends rely on parents to help them with free childcare.*”
- The street-based sex worker was a mother to a young child but her hourly rate meant that she could afford to pay for a babysitter whilst she worked. It cost nearly half her take home pay. This was comparable to other mothers like the SEND teacher although unlike her, the sex worker was not entitled to child tax credits to help with the cost of childcare because her work is not recognised as such.
- However, the street-based sex worker could choose not to work at short notice if her child was unwell, for example, at short notice without repercussions on her future income. This was largely not true for other mothers.

*“There is no flexibility for childcare or shift patterns or nursery dates. I know from colleagues it's a nightmare. Most midwives are women of reproductive age so lots of young mothers with young children. We've lost three midwives in the last six months because they [management] refused to give enough notice or set shifts so that women could make childcare arrangements - so they just had to leave midwifery which is madness.”* - Midwife

Practically, mothers with babies and young children would be locked out of doing many of the jobs in this survey because low hourly wages don't cover the average hourly cost of childcare, and/or because lack of flexibility means that if women needed to leave their job at short notice to attend to their children they risked being penalised, characterised as unreliable and possibly sacked.

This helps in understanding why, of the 90% of sex workers in the UK who are women, the majority are mothers. Sex work provides a higher wage and the kind of flexibility that is often absent in other jobs. Horrifyingly some mothers who turned to sex work to make ends have had their children removed from their care by the state.<sup>9</sup>

## **Work related injury**

Entitlement to sick pay and compensation for injury at work was a contentious issue as some workers described how their work caused serious injury but that this was often seen as integral to the job.

- The midwife said ruined bladders (because they couldn't take toilet breaks when needed) were common amongst colleagues as were back problems.
- The barmaid's wrist injury had been exacerbated by lifting heavy objects.
- The personal assistant's eyesight deteriorated to the point of needing glasses and she developed Repetitive strain injury (RSI).
- The home carer had suffered muscle and tissue tears as well as back injuries.
- The retail worker dislocated her elbow doing her job and lost wages on leaving work to go to A&E.

*"I've got coloured tape all over me that athletes have on their muscles. Most people leave jobs with back or shoulder ache for a while. It is a hazard of the job."* – Home Care Worker

None of the workers received any financial assistance to help with their work induced physical conditions, nor did they have any help towards the preventative measures they took to keep themselves well enough to work. The midwife spent £70 a month on back care with an osteopath so she could do her job and said that most of her colleagues were doing the same “*for the longevity of being in the job*”.

## **Violence**

Workers made a distinction between violence with malice and violence from people who were disturbed or distressed (or children) where they did not hold the person responsible in the same way.

The sex worker on the street was the only one to say that she had experienced physical violence from a client. She also described police harassment and the constant threat of arrest as violence.

*"There's a big chance of violence mainly from customers which is made worse by the fact we haven't got enough time or safe places to work in when we're trying to avoid the police. They just put us in more danger."* – Sex worker on the street

The cleaner had been pushed backwards by a client, but she described it as harassment not violence.

The nurse, home care worker and housing support worker described experiencing violence from the adults they worked with. Both teachers, the childcare worker and playground monitor experienced violence from children. What was important for the workers was the process in place to deal with the violence. The nurse described being assaulted by a patient. She said it was easy to complain and management would back her. However, she was conscious of the limited options for action:

*"Some wards you get physically assaulted a lot and it's hard to know what to do. You could report to the police which is a disaster in itself because they're the police but also you don't want to do nothing."* – Nurse

## **Sexual and other harassment**

The women we interviewed initially said they either had not experienced much sexual discrimination or harassment because they worked predominantly with other women and with women in leadership roles. However, in the course of describing the detail of their job, some serious harassment emerged.

- A male colleague trying to touch a woman between the legs and the manager supporting his actions saying, “*what a lad*”.
- Being refused staff food until giving senior staff a hug.
- Being intimidated by a man whilst providing care to his spouse to the point where the worker had to leave the room.
- Having to tolerate sexual and personal remarks from customers.
- Feeling uncomfortable about sexually inappropriate comments from senior staff and buying new clothes or changing shifts to avoid the comments.
- Being smacked on the bottom.
- Sexually explicit comments from a male colleague in front of a child.
- Sexual and general harassment from the police.

*“A head chef I used to work with, with the ego the size of a house, used to often make comments on what the waitresses were wearing, especially if it was above the knee, and tell some of us that we were his favourite because we were pretty. . . He was sleazy, he was gross. I just put up with it but I think I wouldn’t now.”* – Waitress

*“Clients sometimes hassle you to provide services you are not ready to provide or are trying to push boundaries persistently even when I have said no or stop doing that.”* – Sex worker in a brothel

*“My boss called the vice-chair a slut and mutton dressed as lamb because she wore a skirt above her knee and she’s 60.”* – Personal Assistant

*“He just pushed me back on to the mat and said “take your shoes off before you come in the house”. I just felt like he’d been waiting to do that. It’s disgusting. I told him not to touch me. I’ve had other clients who’ve treated me like “you’re lower than me and I have you here for my hire.”* – Cleaner

How much women felt able to complain was clearly a big issue. There was a sliding scale that was dependent on a number of factors: how much complaining might impact on their income (this was particularly an issue for women on zero hours contracts); if there was an established complaints procedure; could they complain without repercussions.

*“I can complain to the maid and on one occasion she told me that she knew the guy and he had a reputation of being pushy. I said why did you let him come in and she didn’t really care. I didn’t take it further. On another occasion she took my side, gave the man his money back asked him to leave and got the boss to come.”* -- Sex worker in a brothel

What emerged is that the more a job is socially respected, the less likely a woman is to experience explicit harassment and vice versa. If the non-sex work jobs were criminalised, and predatory men knew that the workers didn’t have employment rights and the opportunity to report, it could be fairly predicted that sexual harassment would be more severe.

The fact that sex workers experienced harassment and discrimination from the police meant that they saw no point in complaining about it when they suffered it from clients or members of the public. The sex worker on the street who reported men harassing her was told by the police that that was part of her job.

*“You can complain about violence [to the police] but it’s same as if you try to complain about harassment, they don’t care”* - Sex worker on the street

## **Discrimination**

Under the Equality Act 2010, workers have the right to fair treatment and should not be discriminated against because of their gender, race, sexual orientation, beliefs and age.

Women reported witnessing and experiencing different types of discrimination. Whereas the sex workers reported mostly discrimination from police (the most serious consequences of which were not being able to report violence from dangerous men) and some clients, other women reported discrimination from their employers, colleagues and clients.

The basis of this discrimination was sexism, racism, ageism, ableism, mental health, sexuality, motherhood and religious discrimination. The consequences of some of the discrimination were unfavourable working conditions, increased stress at work, detrimental effect on mental health, a loss of earnings and even the loss of the job.

- The housing support worker (a woman of colour) remarked that “*there are no Black people in positions of power despite there being lots of Black clients*” and that she had been discriminated against as someone who was “*less educated or lower class*”.
- The midwife described a lack of support and understanding for her disability, but this was quickly addressed when she raised it because her employers know that they’re “*at risk because I’ve got the law on my side*.”
- The nurse got called a “dyke” by a patient.
- The child care worker said: “*I am a Black lady and some people are nice, but some parents are extremely nasty. You are trying your best for their son or daughter and when they see you are an ethnic minority, every little thing they pick on it.*” Her boss wouldn’t take complaints seriously because the nursery was private and “*parents mean money*.”
- The state school teacher said that older teachers were discriminated against and their experience not valued. She speculated that was also because more experienced teachers cost more so schools, trying to save money, would opt for an employee they could pay less.
- The PA said that a male colleague “*assumed that I was his PA as well because I’m a woman and the youngest, so would ask me to arrange meetings for him and do his admin stuff because he couldn’t be bothered.*”

Both sex workers (who were white) had seen and heard racism against migrant sex workers and women of colour from clients. The woman working in a brothel was aware that employers were reluctant to employ migrant women as they thought they would be targeted by the police for raids and arrest. What emerged from their experience is that anti-trafficking legislation<sup>10</sup> which requires no force or coercion to be proved in order to get a conviction, and thus labels all migrant sex workers as victims, had exacerbated this problem.

## **Mental health**

Although we did not specifically ask, many women told us of the impact work had had on their mental health. This is important for any comparison between sex work and other work as one of the claims (subsequently discredited<sup>11</sup>) made by an academic, and picked up by others, is that sex work is so inherently harmful that the majority of sex workers suffer high levels of PTSD<sup>12</sup>. In our study, a number of workers described mental health problems.

- The midwife had been diagnosed with PTSD. She was consistently severely distressed about not being able to adequately care for mothers due to an unmanageable workload.
- The single mother had been depressed by the daily grind of trying to survive and provide for her son on so little money. She had not sought help as she was fearful of being characterised as a bad mother.
- The childcare worker said that she was so mentally and emotionally drained that she felt unable to do anything at all in her leisure time.
- The retail worker said she had had a mental breakdown after not seeing daylight over a number of shifts and subsequently quit her job.
- The nurse said that colleagues had left work due to mental health issues caused by the conditions of their work.

*“You [employers] are forcing me to take time off of my own life to feel terrible, to use all my emotional resources at a level that is unfair and literally makes people go crazy because you won’t fund adequate staffing levels” – Nurse*

Where sex workers spoke about mental strain it was primarily because of the illegality and associated stigma. Working under the threat of violence was a source of severe stress and this was exacerbated by the knowledge that they had little or no protection beyond what they could organise themselves. They faced the “choice” of working in isolation and therefore greater danger or with others and risking arrest. This was counterbalanced by the financial independence and autonomy over working conditions which made them feel more positive about their job.

## **Emotional labour**

Emotional labour, the process of managing other people’s feelings and expressions, is officially described as “forced affective performance” and is performed “when disparity occurs between workers’ felt emotions and displayed emotions in a given occupational and organisational context.”<sup>13</sup>

We asked women how much emotional labour they did, how much was expected of them that they considered as ‘part of the job’, how much was expected that was ‘beyond the call of duty’ and how did this compare to what was expected of male colleagues.

It is of course also a theme that comes up in many discussions on women’s work. Overwhelmingly women are the majority doing unwaged caring work and jobs that require emotional intelligence and strength, but this is rarely recognised as a valuable skill that should be remunerated. It is assumed that women, as natural carers, will do emotional work for free.

Examples of emotional labour given by women interviewed include:

- Managing the difficult behaviour of customers and clients.
- Balancing being friendly with minimising inappropriate sexual behaviour from men.
- Acting unfelt emotions.

*“Your job working at a bar is to make people feel special so you’re talking to them, taking an interest in their day, what they do for a living.”* -- Bartender

*“I did intense work reassuring her, focussing on her positives because she was focussing on her deficits and I had to keep bringing it back to the positive things she had achieved. It was emotionally very taxing.”* – Housing Support Worker

Emotional labour was so integral to the sex workers work that they hardly registered it. This is important as sex workers rarely get credit for this aspect of their work and are often disparaged as unskilled workers whose job is reduced to the physical act of having sex. Both sex workers said that putting men at ease and making them feel “special” was part of the job and described it in a similar way to the bartender above.

## **The Intimate nature of work**

Sex work has been judged as innately different to other jobs because, it is argued, sex workers are selling an intimate part of themselves. This view was expressed at an event by an audience member opposing the ECPs demand for decriminalisation of sex work.

*“The factory worker agrees to commodify their arm, a woman in prostitution is agreeing to commodify a very intimate part of her body. This causes dissociation of the self. I would describe factory work as consenting to slavery; sex work is consenting to rape. That is why we shouldn’t allow prostitution.”*<sup>14</sup>

The sex workers did not look at their job in this way, that is they did not consider their job intrinsically more degrading than other jobs. They were more concerned with their income, hours and conditions of work, and any comparison with other jobs was based on these. The brothel worker objected to providing sexual services only when clients demanded services she did not provide, and she did not have the power to refuse and/or did not have the backing of management.

A number of the workers in non-sex work jobs had to perform physically intimate acts in the course of providing care (teachers, nurse, midwife, child care worker). This is sometimes labelled professional intimacy – a term which could apply to sex workers as well.

*“I have to clean arseholes and no one is concerned about my working conditions.”* – Nurse

## **Working together or on your own**

The vast majority of workers in this study worked with others and all of those said they preferred doing so. The reasons cited included safety in numbers such as receiving instant help from colleagues nearby if they were threatened or hurt, protection from exploitation, helped make the day pass, enjoying working collaboratively and general sociability.

*"I like the camaraderie that we have in this industry. There are certain divides like the kitchen/floor thing but there's generally a sense of 'we have to be here, so we might as well make it enjoyable'. I've found some of my best friends in this industry and it's nice to know that I'll go to work and have someone to talk to and bitch about customers with."* -- Waitress

All three women who worked alone -- the single mother, home care worker and housing support worker -- said that they would prefer to work with others. The home care worker even said the solitude of working alone was the worst thing about her job.

Working alone for the cleaner in the past had been particularly disastrous. She was accused of not doing a good job by a client who refused to pay. It was her word against the client and she was not believed. The lost income was deducted from her wages by her employer. On another occasion she was pushed by a client and had no means of protection due to working on her own. After those experiences, she decided that she would only work with others even if the wages were less.

The ability to work with others is a crucial issue for any comparison between sex work and other work. Sex workers are specifically prevented from working together both on the streets and in premises by the prostitution laws; this is a significant factor in increasing isolation and risk of violence. They are forced to choose day-to-day between risking their safety and being arrested.

Both sex workers did not always work entirely alone. Whenever she could, the sex worker on the street tried to keep within 'talking distance' of other women. The brothel worker had a maid in-house, as well as having a CCTV camera installed for her protection.

*"The danger of violence is much less because I have an experienced maid. Working with a maid is the only way I would work. She answers the phone, gets the client's number, rings it back to make sure it's a real number, opens the door and is just outside the bedroom at all times."* – Sex Worker in a brothel

However, these safety measures put sex workers at greater risk of arrest. The sex worker on the street would draw attention to herself if she worked in close proximity with other women.

It is the ECP's common experience that women working on the street are constantly running from the police and will move to more isolated areas when there is a crackdown in order to avoid arrest — attacks increase as a result.

In the case of the brothel worker, she was breaking the law. Both she and her maid could be prosecuted for brothel-keeping; her maid could be prosecuted for controlling. In some cases, police have accused the maid of working too and the ECP has even seen cases where two women were prosecuted for controlling each other. Brothel-keeping is a serious charge carrying a penalty of up to seven years in prison and in the ECP's experience is most commonly used against sex workers working together.

One important comparison: the housing support worker, the only other woman working with physically strong adult clients, had special measures in place to make her job safe by established labour standards. These measures included six CCTV cameras, wearing an automatic alarm around her neck that would go off if she stopped breathing and a reporting system in place. She had also developed her own informal safety network in the community, which, unlike sex workers, she could do free from the fear of stigma and the worry that she would attract unwanted attention from the police.

So, for her these were the measures needed to do her job safely, but those same measures are denied to the sex workers and if they organised them, they would face arrest and even prison.

## **Intensity of work**

A number of women described how the cuts in public services and a profit motive from the company they worked for increased the intensity of their work.

*“The only thing the children know is that they want to explore and have energy. There aren’t enough staff to make sure they do the activities so they’re running about and you can’t go here, there, everywhere after them. It’s too difficult. You always have to be on your feet. They are feeding, they are sleeping, there are nappies -- so many things to look after a child.”* – Child care worker

*“You are supposed to have two hours off a day but sometimes that’s just not possible because the person can’t be left or you’re constantly disturbed.”* – Home care worker

*“I’d be given two hours to clean a three storey, eight-bedroom house with two bathrooms and do the inside of the oven which isn’t actually possible. If you didn’t do it completely up to scratch, which is quite likely given the time, you would be dropped from that clean with no notice.”* – Cleaner

## **Exploitation**

Labour exploitation is defined as workers suffering “poor conditions at work, intimidation and wilful disregard of employment law”<sup>15</sup>.

We didn’t ask women “do you feel exploited” but many described what they considered to be “poor” working conditions (including a “wilful disregard” of their need to work enough hours to earn enough to eat), lack of notice about shifts, overly long hours and expectation of unpaid work, unsustainable intensity of work, harassment and lack of protection against injury. Five of the women in our study were on zero/variable hours contracts and were denied basic employment rights such as sick pay, holiday pay and maternity leave.

Some spoke of intimidation and bullying from employers and others spoke of bosses who took advantage of workers’ social weakness to deny them their labour rights.

*“The people in this industry need the job. . . And if you need to make money then the person paying you is in the position of power. So people are taken advantage of. . . If the boss says you have to work a double on Tuesday you just do it because you need the money.”* – Waitress

The two sex workers in our study like other workers were also denied basic employment rights but both described having significant control over when and how long they worked.

*“I can choose which days I work. The pattern is that I go out when I need to, when the bills come in.”* – Sex worker on the street

*“I don’t work if I don’t want to. I don’t work on holidays, or Christmas but of course if I take too many days off, I would eventually get the sack.”* – Sex worker in a brothel

## **Trade Union membership**

Over half the workers interviewed were not members of a trade union. Of those that were, most said that it hadn't made any significant difference to their working conditions.

However, the housing worker said that whilst her trade union was generally quite inactive, individuals within the union had been helpful in fighting for improvements. The teacher was her school's union representative and said she had fought and won, through the union, to "ensure that an additional unaccounted for 10 minutes at the end of each working day is now factored into the number of hours we are contracted to work in a year".

The midwife said that in her union there was "*not great awareness about oppression and racism for BME staff or health inequalities and the dreadful state of affairs for migrant, refugee and BME women in the UK.*"

Neither of the sex workers were members of a trade union although one described getting help and advice from the ECP in a way that was comparable to a union. She had got help complaining about mistreatment by the police and discrimination from a health care provider.

## **Tax**

We didn't ask if women paid tax, but this is a question that comes up in relation to sex work and is relevant to how much sex workers keep of the money they make. In practice, a lot of sex workers do pay tax registering as escorts, masseuses and entertainers etc.. Since sex worker Lindi St Clair was taken to court, prostitution has been classified "a trade" and liable for tax. After Ms St Clair was given a bill for unpaid taxies of over £100,000, she accused the Inland Revenue of being "Her Majesty's pimps".<sup>16</sup> The ECP supported Ms St Clair and protested that sex workers should not be taxed whilst they are denied, civil, human, economic and legal rights. Placards outside the court reflected this saying "No Taxation without Civil Rights" and "The State is a Pimp."

One estimate of the UK "tax gap", that is the gap between what is due and what is paid, is £120 billion<sup>17</sup>. Given that corporations, many of them household names, invest millions in schemes to avoid paying tax, the primary responsibility for the tax gap should be laid at their feet.

## **Immigration**

All the workers interviewed had immigration status in the UK. But as we were compiling the research one of the women from the All African Women's Group, a self-help group of women asylum seekers based with the ECP at the Crossroads Women's Centre, commented, describing her working conditions. She had not claimed asylum because she had been told that, despite suffering violence in her home country, she wouldn't be entitled. She therefore worked illegally as a carer for an agency. At the time of speaking to us she had been in the UK for eight years.

Until 2014 when the Immigration Act was introduced her work was regular, low paid and comparable in conditions to the live-in carer described in this study. But the 2014 Act made it illegal, with a penalty of five years in prison and an unlimited fine, to employ people

without immigration status. This woman was then forced to pay someone to use their papers to register with the agency. She described that the bosses took advantage of her lack of status and paid less than the minimum wage. On some occasions, she would travel miles to a job paying her own fare, work for several hours and not get paid at all. She had no legal redress against that. It is also worth noting that people without papers in the UK are now also denied social rights available to others such as the right to rent accommodation, free health care (including maternity care) and access to essentials for survival such as being able to open a bank account.

## **Similarities and Differences**

There were so many similarities across all the jobs that it is hard to list them all. Some were logistical, for example all the workers had to pay their own travel to work and a number of them had to buy all or part of their own uniform.

A key similarity emerged when workers were asked what they liked about their job: the women who worked with others said this was the best thing.

*"My favourite thing? The individuals I work with when they let you in to see a glimmer of who they are. It's just lovely. These are the moments. We're all keeping masks on ourselves. They've been so crushed, and the trust issues are major so when you do the real heart-to-heart work that makes that connection that says 'we're the same but individuals' that's what's really magical. Then they start to rise and can leave the nest." – Housing support worker*

Some described that this most gratifying aspect of their work could also be the most distressing because so often cuts in funding or the employer's profit motive meant they were not able to care in the way they wanted to.

*"I work in a fractured system that doesn't enable me to provide the best care for women. . . I've got a diagnosis of PTSD because of my job. Not because of seeing dead babies or people haemorrhaging, I'm traumatised by having to leave people when they need me. One of my colleagues was asked to look after a woman with a dead baby inside her and a dying baby just born. With the paperwork and other women who needed her, she didn't have time to look after her and it was inhumane to the woman and inhumane to her. . . I love what my job is, but I don't love what I'm asked to do. I shouldn't have to apologise for the system, but I can't bear for people to think that I think I've given appropriate care. It's hard to do a job where you want to love people and care for them but you're in a system that's abusive." – Midwife*

*"We do more and more for less and less. The social housing is literally gone. That's really hard to see. I think it's criminal. Watching people suffer to the degree they are with no housing is the hardest thing." – Housing support worker*

The sex workers also valued the company of colleagues and friends. They disliked the constant fear of being raided – the latter was the most striking difference between their job and other people's jobs.

*"The hardest thing about this job is knowing that it's illegal and the police could raid and shut it down. From what I know of women who worked in parlours in the 80s the conditions were better. There were lots of them on shift at the same time so more protection. Sex workers had more power; now bosses and clients have more power." – Sex worker in a brothel*

## **Why did women choose their job?**

Multiple factors came into play when women described why they chose their occupation in general and the particular job they were doing. For example, the state school teacher and childcare worker said they went into their line of work because they loved children. But they like others chose where to work depending on other factors for example, proximity to home, flexible hours that fitted round childcare, familiarity because they trained at the same school.

*"I chose the restaurant I'm working in because they share my ethical considerations in some ways. I know that sounds weird and isn't how most people would choose their restaurant but I wanted to work at a place that cares about sustainability and local produce and has a really good sense of purpose in what they're doing."* -- Waitress

The sex workers made a choice about their job in a similar way to the other workers. They weighed up the options and this was the best. They were the ones to most forcefully mention that pay was determinative. However, the woman working inside chose that particular brothel because it was recommended to her as a safe place to work and was relatively close to home.

# Summary of findings

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1. **Sex workers earned the most per hour.** The higher wage was the primary reason women gave for entering the sex industry.
2. **Five women interviewed earned less than the Minimum Wage** (at the level at the time of asking). A further six earned less than the Living Wage according to their location in or out of London. Six workers earned more than the Living Wage, including both sex workers.
3. **The sex workers worked fewer hours than the other workers** except for the playground monitor.
4. **The single mother worked the longest hours and got paid the least.** She was forced to live in destitution at times.
5. **The two sex workers and the single mother are not recognised as workers** despite being engaged in activity to earn an income and had no formal employment rights. The street-based sex worker was effectively self-employed.
6. **Criminalisation of sex work made the job more dangerous** and prevented sex workers from fighting for their workers' rights.
7. **The salaried workers on higher wages had their actual hourly rate reduced by unpaid overtime** expected and done on such a regular and consistent basis that it became routine.
8. **Some workers were pushed to work longer hours than they wanted,** and some said they couldn't get enough hours to give them an income they could live on.
9. **Mothers were discriminated against and disadvantaged in many ways in the job market.** Women's wages dropped when they became mothers. Mothers organised their working day to ensure they had time with their children, going part-time in many cases. The cost of childcare took approximately half of women's earnings. Free childcare from family members enabled some mothers to do paid work who otherwise would not have been able to do so. The sex working mother in our study was severely disadvantaged because she wasn't classified as a worker and was therefore denied benefits such as child tax credits to help towards the cost of childcare.
10. **Women reported different types of discrimination** including on the basis of gender, race, age, class, disability. For the sex workers, the primary discrimination they experienced first-hand came from the police.
11. **Five of the women were on zero-hours or variable hours contracts.** They got no sick pay or holiday pay and had very little control over their working hours and conditions. Any rights or protections they had were largely at the whim of management or employers.
12. **Only the women on formal (not zero/variable hours) employment contracts had statutory employment rights.** None of the workers described their jobs as fitting the

description of “decent work”. Few women felt they had legal redress against a violation of their employment rights.

13. **The sex worker on the street was the only worker to describe that she suffered intentional physical violence;** other workers like the nurse and teacher experienced violence from children or patients; **for some others their work had caused serious injury.** None of the women received any financial assistance to help with their work induced physical conditions. The sex worker said the laws put her at greater risk of violence as she couldn't work in close proximity to other women and couldn't report violence to the police for fear of getting arrested herself.
14. **A number of women said that their work had had a detrimental impact on their mental health.** Two of the workers in our study described being traumatised by their work. This was not the sex workers. We register this because of the (subsequently discredited<sup>18</sup>) claim that 68% of sex workers suffer post-traumatic stress disorder. In order to understand PTSD levels, sex work must be considered in the context of jobs generally.
15. **Three women worked on their own,** deprived of the company and safety which many described was what they liked most about their job.
16. **For the sex workers, working with others and the safety measures they put in place to protect themselves from violence were essential;** being deprived of these put them at risk of violence, arrest and prosecution.
17. **All of the workers interviewed described doing emotional labour.**
18. **Three workers, in addition to the sex workers, said their job demanded physical intimacy.**

# Findings corroborated

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Our study involved a small sample, so we looked to see what other research corroborated our findings.

1. **We found that sex workers earned more per hour than women working in the other jobs.**

This was corroborated by a study<sup>19</sup> of sex workers' income which found that:

*On average, a hairdresser earns £7.43 per hour. . . for nursing [it] is £17.58 per hour. Waiters and waitresses earn, on average . . . £6.95 an hour.*

*By contrast, a middle-income off-street sex worker in London earns £70 per hour. . . A middle-income off-street sex worker outside of London . . . earns £30 per hour. A female migrant street sex worker outside of London [earns] £30 per hour.*

Note however that women in non-sex working jobs got approximately 210 hours per year of paid holiday.

There is also a strong indication that sex workers internationally are earning significantly more than women in other jobs. For example, the sex worker collective Empower in Thailand, reports that wages in other industries that commonly employ women, such as agriculture, fisheries and factories, were so low that even the lowest paid sex workers were earning twice the minimum wage.<sup>20</sup>

There is also evidence that the disparity in pay has been a driving force for women engaging in sex work for over a hundred years. Several late nineteenth-century studies found that up to half of the women selling sex in Britain had been domestic servants, and that many had hated it so much they had willingly left service: “*What will you give me if I do give this up*”, one prostitute asked a woman police constable in the 1920s, ‘*a job in a laundry at two pounds a week--when I can make twenty easily?*”<sup>21</sup>

2. **Our research found that the two sex workers worked fewer hours than other workers except the playground monitor.**

This was corroborated by research<sup>22</sup> with indoor sex workers which found that more than half worked 10 hours or less per week.

3. **We found that just over a quarter of the women interviewed earned less than the Minimum Wage and that two-thirds earned less than the Living Wage.**

Other research showed that over a quarter of all UK working women (26%) are still earning less than the Living Wage.<sup>23</sup> Of the 340,000 directly employed council staff who are paid less than the Living Wage, 87% are women.<sup>24</sup>

Lack of pay equity (where women full-time workers earn approximately 14% less than men; less for part-time workers) is a major factor in women's low pay.<sup>25</sup> And even this is an underestimation because new research from the US that looked at women and men's pay over 15 years, rather than just over one year, found that women earn 49 cents to every dollar that men earn.<sup>26</sup>

Other studies pointed to low wages across the board. One survey<sup>27</sup> found that four million UK workers are living in poverty and that the rise in child poverty in families where one or more parent was in waged work is because “parents [the data was not disaggregated by gender so we don’t know if “parents” are in fact “mothers”] are getting stuck in low-paid work, especially in retail and hospitality jobs in hotels, bars, restaurants and shops”. And wages have dropped dramatically since the introduction of austerity measures with workers now earning a third less than in 2008.<sup>28</sup>

Black, Asian and ethnic minority workers also suffer from a lack of pay equity with one study estimating they lose £3.2bn a year in wages compared to white colleagues doing the same work. Another study of public-sector pay in London found that BAME staff were paid up to 37% less on average.

4. **Our study found the single mother worked the longest hours, got paid the least** and was forced to live in destitution at times. Her work raising her son was given little value.

We note research<sup>29</sup> that shows that unpaid housework in the UK is worth £1.24tn a year.

5. **In our study, the salaried workers hourly rate of pay was significantly reduced by unpaid overtime.**

National figures show unpaid overtime is common. On average, workers in the UK put in 10.1 overtime hours per week, the equivalent of 469 hours per year. Women did more unpaid overtime than men with only a third of women being paid for working overtime, compared to half of men.<sup>3031</sup>

6. **Our research found that some workers were pushed to work longer hours than they wanted.**

Other research shows that long working hours, especially where jobs are stressful, precarious and considered meaningless by the workers themselves, are very bad for people’s health.<sup>32</sup>

7. **Our research found mothers were discriminated and disadvantaged in the job market** with low wages and little consideration for their caring responsibilities in shifts, flexibility and hours.

This is corroborated by an analysis<sup>33</sup> that found that young mothers – those who give birth before the age of 33 – are paid 15% less than their childless peers.

In a study<sup>34</sup> from the Equality and Human Rights Commission, one in nine mothers (11%) report being dismissed, made redundant, or treated so poorly they felt they had to leave their job. 30,000 women a year are forced out of their jobs when they get pregnant.<sup>35</sup>

8. **In our study, the cost of childcare took approximately half of women’s earnings.**

This was a higher percentage than in other studies which found a single parent working full-time with a one-year-old in nursery for 21 hours a week spent a fifth (21%) of their wages on childcare; a single parent working full-time with a one-year-old child in nursery for 40 hours a week spent two-fifths (40%) of their salary on childcare.<sup>36</sup> Our figure may be higher because the women had more children.

**9. The majority of the workers in our study were deprived of basic statutory employment rights and none described their job fitting the description of “decent work”.**

This widespread denial of labour rights is corroborated by research<sup>37</sup> that 9.2% of female workers are not getting their legal holiday entitlement and many were cheated out of holiday pay.<sup>38</sup>

Migrant workers suffered particular abuse. A survey of migrant workers on building sites in London found 36% reported not being paid for work done, a third reported verbal or physical abuse, half had no contract, and more than half had been made to work under dangerous conditions.

Getting redress for the denial of employment rights has become more difficult since tribunal fees were introduced, with low paid women being the biggest losers.<sup>39</sup>

**10. Five of the women were on zero/variable hours contracts.** Despite being entitled to some statutory employment rights like holiday pay some said employers found ways to deny them these rights.

The widespread use of zero-hours contracts is corroborated by a study<sup>40</sup> which estimates that as many as 5.5 million workers are subject to zero-hours contracts, 22% of those employed privately. Zero-hours contracts were particularly used in hotels, catering and leisure (48%), education (35%) and healthcare (27%).<sup>41</sup>

Over half (54.7%)<sup>42</sup> of workers on zero-hours contracts are women, who suffer the lowest pay.<sup>43</sup> Single mothers, were more likely to be trapped in precarious work.<sup>44</sup>

Research by Citizens Advice found that “hundreds of bosses are ‘deliberately flouting the law’ by denying workers access to their rights.”

When McDonalds workers went on strike this year, they spelt out the horrendous conditions now rampant in many industries:<sup>45</sup> zero-hours contracts, starvation wages, abusive, bullying and exploitative bosses, workers forced to live in homeless hostels because they couldn’t afford to rent. A new campaign by the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union in conjunction with Women Against Rape aims to expose high levels of sexual harassment.<sup>46</sup>

**11. Our study found that the sex worker on the street suffered intentional physical violence;** other workers like the nurse and teacher experienced violence from children or patients; others had been caused serious injury by their work. The sex worker said that she didn’t report violence to the police because they wouldn’t do anything.

Many studies have reported on the very high levels of violence suffered by sex workers for example one survey of three UK cities found that 50% of street sex workers had experienced violence in the past six months compared to 26% of indoor workers.<sup>47</sup>

Less attention has been paid to the high levels of violence suffered by other workers. One study found that 29% of nurses were subjected to violent episodes once a month or more.<sup>48</sup>

Nationally, despite its illegal status and the laws which institutionalise vulnerability to violence, sex work does not have the highest rates of death. Whilst every death is a tragedy and a raging injustice, figures show that 183 sex workers have been murdered since 1990 (seven a year) whereas 193 farmers have been killed on the job since 2010 (24 a year). Bin collection and construction are some of the other deadliest jobs in Britain.<sup>49</sup> Well enforced

legal protections against injury are crucial to keeping workers safe for example, firefighting is recognised as inherently dangerous but stringent safety standards mean the death rate is under two a year<sup>50</sup> – still too many!

High levels of violence against sex workers are used to justify claims that sex work is inherently violent. What should then be said about marriage and heterosexual relationships when two women a week are killed by their partner or former partner?

Other research also corroborated sex workers reluctance to report violence to the police with one survey<sup>51</sup> finding that 69% reported ‘no or hardly any’ incidents of victimization to the police. Where arrests of sex workers and clients were high, only 5% of sex workers who experienced violence reported it to the police.<sup>52</sup>

**12. The sex workers in our study said that criminalisation undermined their ability to work safely and deterred them from reporting violence or exploitation to the police.**

This was corroborated by a study that found “sex workers are three times more likely to experience violence where the sex industry is criminalised. . . . Criminalisation of sex work normalises violence and reinforces gender, racial, economic and other inequalities. It does so by restricting sex workers’ access to justice, and by increasing the vulnerability, stigmatisation and marginalisation of already-marginalised women and minorities.”<sup>53 54</sup> Considering that approximately 50% of sex workers have been through the criminal justice system, criminalisation of sex work is an issue affecting many thousands of women.

In New Zealand, where decriminalisation of sex work was introduced in 2003 sex workers have labour rights. In 2014, a sex worker pursued a brothel operator who had sexually harassed her through the Human Rights Tribunal. She won her case and was awarded \$25,000 (£13,777) in compensation.

**13. Our study found that women workers commonly suffered sexual harassment from employers and clients and that many didn’t complain.**

This is corroborated by a survey which found that more than half of women (52%) had experienced workplace sexual harassment.<sup>55</sup> And that figure leapt to 67% for women in hospitality and leisure.

Around four out of five (79%) women did not tell their employer about what was happening because it would impact negatively on their relationships at work (28%) or on their career prospects (15%), they were too embarrassed to talk about it (20%) and/or they felt they would not be believed or taken seriously (24%).

# Conclusion

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This report documents the low pay and exploitative working conditions in many jobs commonly done by women. It documents that women are denied basic labour rights and face discrimination and abuse with very little legal redress. That zero/variable hours contracts have intensified exploitation and made women's working lives unendurable. It documents that mothers are disparaged and taken advantage of by employers – paid less with little consideration or acknowledgement for their caring responsibilities. Considering that, the question is not why women go into sex work, but why more women don't go into sex work.

At the same time as wages have plummeted and exploitative working contracts proliferated, benefit cuts have made it impossible to survive in other ways, especially for mothers. Millions of people have been plunged into intolerable poverty. The statistics are horrifying: 1.5 million people are destitute, and 14 million people are living in poverty, including four million children. Women, particularly mothers, have borne the brunt of the cuts.<sup>56 57</sup> It took the UN Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights to point this out saying that the government's "*punitive, mean-spirited, and often callous' austerity policies*"<sup>58</sup> appeared to have been designed by a "*group of misogynists*" in the way that they targeted women.

Benefit sanctions alone have driven thousands to prostitution, as Ken Loach's acclaimed film I, Daniel Blake illustrates. Doncaster reports a 61% increase<sup>59</sup> with charities saying: "*women are being forced to sell sex for £5 because of benefit sanctions*",<sup>60</sup> Sheffield reports a 166% increase<sup>61</sup> while charity workers in Hull report: "*women who are literally starving and they are out there to feed themselves.*" The introduction of universal credit has also pushed many more women into prostitution.<sup>62</sup>

In the face of this devastation of women's lives, to advocate the further criminalisation of sex work, as some politicians (particularly women it seems) are doing, is dangerous and irresponsible. How can it be justified without ensuring that women have other ways of surviving and feeding their children?

Sex work is a resistance to the standard of grinding poverty imposed on us. As one of the women in the ECP said when giving evidence to a parliamentary committee:

*"We can stay in bed, live in squalor, we can live on bread and jam, but myself personally I feel I deserve more and so does my daughter. I choose to go on the street and earn that money because I want a better life."*

Former stripper, Nickie Roberts, put a voice to it this way:

*"Working in crummy factories for disgusting pay was the most degrading and exploitative work I ever did in my life ... I think there should be another word for the kind of work working class people do; something to differentiate it from the work middle class people do; the ones who have careers. All I can think of is drudgery. It's rotten and hopeless; not even half a life. It's immoral. Yet as I say, it's expected of working class women that they deny themselves everything ... Why should I have to put up with a middle class feminist asking me why I didn't 'do anything – scrub toilets, even?' than become a stripper? What's so liberating about cleaning up other people's shit?"*<sup>63</sup>

To cut women off from one of the ways we have found to survive and support our families puts us even more at the mercy of exploitative and abusive bosses and anyone ready to take advantage of women's desperation – desperation which for mothers is exacerbated by the responsibility for another precious life dependent on you.

No government politician of any party should be allowed to get away with claiming they care about exploitation, violence and abuse when their own policies actively promote exploitation, destitution, violence and abuse. A government which has introduced misogynistic austerity policies, overseen a drop in wages, denied workers' protections, enforced a hostile environment against immigrants, single mothers, claimants and people with disabilities, and criminalised poverty is promoting exploitation.

Exploitation and abuse of workers and even slavery like conditions is widespread across the whole of the UK and is especially prevalent in construction, agriculture, food packing, fishing, shellfish gathering, warehouse and distribution, garment manufacturing, taxi driving, retail, domestic work, social care, recycling, nail bars and car washes.<sup>64</sup> So why is the exploitation in sex work not judged by the same standard and the same remedies applied?

Removing the illegal status of sex work and recognising sex workers as workers would enable people to more easily report abuse and exploitation and demand their labour protections. Established remedies would then be available to sex workers: where there is force and coercion offenders could be prosecuted under the criminal law, where there is severe exploitation for example in the form of withholding of wages, bosses could be prosecuted under gang masters legislation, where there is exploitation such as employers paying less than the Minimum Wage prosecutions could be brought under low pay laws and/or workers could go to employment tribunals for redress.

However, in practice the government has not demonstrated that it is interested in addressing exploitation or even slavery: it has cut funding to implement the Modern Slavery Act in relation to agriculture and other industries. Since its introduction there have been only three prosecutions of firms paying less than the Minimum Wage.<sup>65</sup>

It is the actions of workers themselves, bravely going on strike, risking losing their jobs altogether, with help from the best of the trade union movement, which have done most to tackle labour exploitation, including sexual harassment.<sup>66 67</sup>

Some people refuse to compare prostitution with other work because it is about sex. But as Selma James commented in a gripping account of the ECP's 12-day occupation of a church in 1982:

*"It is true that sex workers sell a service that we all hope will be connected with intimacy and deep personal feeling. But the women's movement has been at pains to spell out that sexuality is romanticized to hide how it is sometimes a tragedy or disappointment, or danger —or all of these—for women."*<sup>68</sup>

The best way to understand sex work and put it in perspective is to hear to what sex workers themselves are saying about their jobs. One woman spoke about why she went into sex work:

*"I was fed up of being a cleaner, bar maid and shop assistant, often all on the same day. Prostitution is certainly not the worst job I have ever had. I have worked on the fish market and as a cleaner where I was working for people who didn't care if we were cold or tired or how we were spoken to."*<sup>69</sup>

Women in the red-light area of Soho, central London, subjected to mass raids in 2012, went to court to oppose closure orders on their flats. They gave evidence to say that they were working independently, found out about the job from a friend, that they decided which days they would work, could turn down clients and — crucially — far from being controlled by a maid, they wanted to work with her because she helped protect them from attack. Women commented indignantly:

*"The police gave evidence to say that normal employment practices such as being required to work certain days of the week, between certain times, charge a specific amount of money for each service (which the police said was "treating the sex worker as a commodity rather than a human") all adds up to us being controlled and exploited. We take great offence at this. Does what we say about our own situation not matter?"<sup>70</sup>*

The criminalisation of sex work cuts sex workers off from the ways other workers have found to organise to improve their working conditions. Even basic protections such as the ability to work with others are denied to sex workers, let alone the right to join a trade union and organise collectively, go on strike and protest against our work when it is exploitative and abusive.

That is a key motivation for the international sex worker-led movement to demand the full decriminalisation of sex work.

The only country so far to introduce decriminalisation is New Zealand. The 2003 Prostitution Reform Act removed prostitution from the criminal law, allowed people to work together collectively and organise to assert their rights to better working conditions.

Since decriminalisation, over 90% of sex workers said they had additional employment, legal, health and safety rights. The percentage of sex workers who felt able to refuse clients — a key marker of exploitation — went up from 47% (a year before decriminalisation) to 68% after decriminalisation. 70% said they were more likely to report incidents of violence to the police.<sup>71</sup> Police now take reports of violence more seriously<sup>72</sup> and have moved from “the role of prosecutor to that of protector”.<sup>73</sup> Removing the fear of arrest has meant that sex workers, particularly street based workers, feel more able to work during the day and in well lit, safer locations.

In New Zealand, the State discriminates in favour of sex workers who want to leave sex work and need to claim benefits — it applies different rules to them than others who quit their jobs voluntarily. Other workers who leave their job are not paid job-seekers allowance for a number of weeks. Sex workers do not have this stand down period when going on a benefit. This is so that the State cannot be accused of compelling people to stay in sex work.<sup>74</sup>

What the decriminalisation of sex work in the UK and internationally would also do is strengthen sex workers struggle against exploitation by connecting it with other workers fighting similarly for the right to refuse “bad” jobs and for alternatives in a world where the 99% have to do waged work to survive.

The information gathered here clearly points to the urgent need to tackle the poverty and exploitative working conditions that many workers, especially women, face. A living wage, including for mothers and other family carers, the abolition of zero-hours contracts, an end to sanctions and the reinstatement of benefits that people can live on, ... are crucial if women are to have real options about what work they do and what work they refuse to do. That, and decriminalisation, must be the focus of any politician and institution concerned with women’s safety and rights.

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