

# Sex Workers Too: Summary of Evidence for VAWG 2020-24 Consultation



ENGLISH  
COLLECTIVE  
OF PROSTITUTES

UMBRELLA  
LANE

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## Introduction

The Home Office launched a Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Consultation which sought insights on a range of experiences of violence among women and girls and men and boys. Through a public survey, focus groups and written evidence from experts, information about the scope and prevalence of harms as well as prevention and information on perpetrators were elicited, with the intent to inform the 2020-2024 VAWG strategy to tackle issues of gender-based violence in our communities.

From our point of view, sex workers are rarely included in developing policies and setting the agenda for ending VAWG, particularly as it pertains to their diverse working conditions and priorities around safety. Frankly, sex workers and the organisations they trust are often subject to exclusionary politics and practices that block us from contributing details and nuance to prevent the (unintended) harms of policies developed without this population. This is due in part to divisive debates in feminism about whether individuals should be allowed to sex sell; how to treat buyers of sexual services; how systems of power and domination shape (women's) choices; how society ought to treat sex workers; how sex work relates to poverty, addictions and (mental) health; and if sex workers have, or should have, entitlements to labour rights, justice, and access to services and protection.

It is clear to us that sex working adults need to be included in debates and policy discussions that are about them and their work. This contribution of evidence is part of that effort. Findings from our survey among active sex workers throughout the UK, is intended to inform the 2020-2024 VAWG strategy in ways that respect the particular forms of violence that respondents experience. Active sex workers are most affected by the policies and decisions of the state as well as the priorities and practices of public services and state agents. In this document we report sex workers' insights and recommendations for policy and social change that will prevent existing and emerging forms of violence, provide them equitable access to the public services that they pay for (police, health, income support), reduce susceptibility to predatory and situational violence, and ultimately save their lives.

## The Organisations

National Ugly Mugs (NUM), the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) and Umbrella Lane collaborated to survey sex industry workers and these findings make up the bulk of this report. We fashioned the survey on the Home Office's call for evidence. Although our groups are not funded as part of the VAWG sector, nor did we have the resources to do a full consultation with sex working communities, it was important to ensure that active sex workers had a safe means to contribute to this policy table with the intent that the 2020-2024 VAWG strategy includes policies that improve their safety in communities.

This report reflects what we could do with limited resources and support to participants, and we hope that we have done justice to those who took the time to share their experiences.



NUM, formerly the UK Network of Sex Work Projects (UKNSWP), is a proven model for crime prevention and victim support for adults in sex industries. NUM was founded in 2012 after 10 years of advocacy to the Home Office from practitioners, police officials and researchers who called for a centralised service that managed reports of harm to sex workers. Our mandate is to *'end all forms of violence against sex workers'* and to eliminate the conditions that lead to survival sex. Our membership exceeds 7,000 individuals with over 6,000 who identify as active UK-based sex workers. We aim to develop robust national victim support services for this growing population of diverse individuals, some of whom, due to poverty and labour precarity, find themselves working across several sex industries to pay for basic living expenses. We are sex worker-centered and work with people with lived experience in and from sex industries in the (re)design, implementation and evaluation of our services. NUM aims to meaningfully work with sex workers, to effect positive changes in their lives alongside community safety strategies, rights advocacy, and anti-oppression initiatives.



The English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) was founded in 1975 and is a network of sex workers working both on the streets and indoors campaigning for decriminalisation and safety. We fight against being treated like criminals. We've helped sex workers win against charges of soliciting, brothel-keeping & controlling – the last two most often used against women who are working together for safety. Most sex workers are mothers trying to do the best for their children. We campaign against austerity cuts and for housing and other survival resources so that any of us can leave prostitution if and when we want. We have an [international network](#) including sister organisations in Thailand (Empower) and the US (US PROStitutes Collective).



Umbrella Lane is a peer-led Sex Worker Wellbeing Project, founded in 2015 and based in Scotland. Our goals are to address the needs of sex workers holistically and to offer meaningful and non-judgmental support for each of these needs. Umbrella Lane is there for the sex worker

not the sex industry. The organisation offers crisis support, free counselling through a partnership with Wellbeing Scotland, peer to peer support, sexual and reproductive health services and financial advice amongst other services. The mission of Umbrella Lane is to create an inclusive stigma-free society for sex workers to empower and encourage autonomy for each worker, and to increase their health and wellbeing.

Umbrella lane has three main goals: *Connection, Conversation and Community*. *Connection* is created through meaningful partnerships with third sector and mainstream services encouraging a non-judgmental attitude towards sex workers that is rights respecting and trauma informed. This would allow sex workers to access services they are often unable to due to fear of stigma and discrimination. We aim to develop this further through the creation of peer-led inclusivity training for any organisation who may work with or support sex workers. Inciting public *Conversation* through events, social media and creative projects are all important aspects of our work aimed at reducing stigma and to remove the taboo of sex work through education and wider engagement. Umbrella Lane believes in the power of peer-to-peer support and encourages *Community* building using online spaces and hosting physical drop-in sessions. We believe that having a wider connection to the sex worker community is empowering and can help increase self-esteem and confidence, as well as encouraging sharing of skills and peer learning which has proven long-term benefits on sex worker well-being.

## Violence Against Sex Workers

NUM, ECP and Umbrella Lane all have a vested interest in the VAWG agenda because harms associated with sex work and 'prostitution' are named in previous strategies, but not explored in great detail, based on the lived experiences of diverse on and off-street and online sex workers. Sex workers experience violence and victimisation differently, depending on a range of structural and personal factors, such as the type of work they do, how they do it, why, and how they identify and *are* identified with respect to race, class, gender, ability, and so on.

Our groups have supported and facilitated sex workers' voices in research such as the Beyond the Gaze (2015-2018) study into online sex work led by Professor Teela Sanders of the University of Leicester; a range of public inquiries; and the Home Office commissioned Bristol study led by Hester, Mulvihill, Matolcsi, Sanchez and Walker (2019) of Bristol University who, based on the 2016 Home Affairs Select committee, studied the nature and prevalence of sex work in the UK. Sex workers shared a lot of information in these studies and inquiries and there is little uptake with respect to the direction of policies as they relate to reducing harm to adults in sex industries. Gender-based violence is an issue that underpins violence against sex workers, because of the subjugated positions of women and gender minorities in our society and we contribute the information herein with the desire to open dialogue about how VAWG can better serve sex workers.

There are several misconceptions about sex workers, and we find it necessary to state that sex workers are not criminals. Voluntary sex working among adults is not illegal in the UK and the income they earn is not proceeds of crime. All sex workers are not victims of sex working itself, and in this document, we discuss the harms that they do experience, some of which are tied to policies that negatively affect working conditions, social status, and access to protections. Many experience survival sex and exploitive labour conditions due to poverty and urgent need for money to fund basic needs and emergencies for them and their families, and to address health issues such as addictions. Survival sex can be eliminated with initiatives that combat poverty and the feminization of poverty and health initiatives that support harm reduction and safer drug use, treatment options and recovery. Some are exploited due to the lack of power and control that sex workers have over their own industries, and the lack of recognition of their human and labour rights. We support social justice and restorative approaches to resolving these issues, which includes the decriminalisation of poverty, adult sex work and drug use and regulate respective industries with health and safety as priorities. Essentially, we must build housing, not jails.

## NUM's Work

NUM documents violence against sex workers that occurs across the country and within various sites and working arrangements on- and off-street as well as online and disseminates alerts to warn members of potentially harmful people and conditions. We do this in partnership with sex workers themselves through our membership of over 6,000 individuals and over 1,000 frontline service providers working across 350 community and practitioner groups that make up our membership. We also manage the NUM Checker tool, which is a database that holds the contact details of those who have perpetuated harm against sex workers. This is a prevention and screening tool that facilitates sex workers in screening potential client *before* agreeing to bookings.

We also provide associated victim support services through our Case Work Team (CWT) of Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (ISVAs), other sex industry experts and those trained in mental health support, to ensure that every victim and survivor receives acknowledgment and quality support services. Our CWT assists sex workers directly and bridges survivors with resources in their communities, in sex worker networks, and facilitates their equitable access to state resources such as police and supports found in the criminal justice system, towards providing a continuum of support for sex workers.

NUM is expanding support services to include Transition Supports (forthcoming, late 2021) and [Mental Health Support Services](#). These resources were developed in response to our surveys with sex workers asking about the resources they need during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond. For example, in 2020 NUM worked with sex workers to develop Grief and Loss and Suicide Prevention materials, along with a directory of sex worker-friendly therapists, and a small number of therapy packages offered to sex workers who need support paying for therapy. We will be trialing an online mental health tool in 2021 and plan to build out support services in priority areas.

We believe that by working with sex workers who experience harm, in developing a range of tools, strategies and resources, specifically geared to prevent the violence they experience, we can achieve increased safety and respect, expanded options and a full realisation of the human and labour rights, and cultural citizenship of this population.

Although this report does not cover all the manifestations of violence against sex workers, we highlight some key issues and hope to work with sex workers, trusted groups and state proponents of anti-violence to ameliorate harms identified.

### **NUM Membership, Reports of Harm to Sex Workers and NUM Alerts**

Although we quantify harm in this section, we are mindful that every report is based on harm experienced by an individual and despite the pain and trauma, sex workers chose to report and share information that prevents harm to others in their communities. NUM is on a journey to better collect information in various categories of identity. We can share general information about our membership at this point. Most members of NUM are active sex workers who work on street, as well as those working off-street in brothels and flats and those working online. Our membership includes individuals whose sex work is facilitated by information communication technologies (ICTs) for in-person sex work, and those who operate mainly online, whose work is dependent on technologies such as webcammers and adult content creators.

As of 2020, we have 6436 members who are sex workers, 72% of our members are cis women in sex industries; 14% are cis men; and 14% identify as transgender, non-binary and other genders. The majority of NUM members work in major cities and the top 5 regions where incidents of harm to sex workers reported to us in 2020 took place from most frequent to least are London, the North West, East Midlands, West Midlands and Yorkshire and Humberside. There are shifts in who reports to us as we now receive most reports directly from sex workers, the balance come

from community organisations and other third parties. For example, we received 97 reports about dangerous people from police forces in 2019 and 84 reports in 2020, that we then shared with sex workers to help prevent harm. Seventy-seven percent (77%) of our members are off-street independent workers, only 6% work exclusively on-street and the balance work in multiple locations or did not disclose this information.

In the over eight years of NUM's existence, reports of harm to on- and off-street and online workers sex workers have steadily increased from receiving a total of 166 reports in 2013 to nearly 1,000 in 2019. In 2020, reports declined due to pandemic-related full and tiered lockdowns throughout the UK; however, many sex workers were forced to continue work during lockdown due to poverty and destitution. We received 603 reports in 2020 that contained 723 accounts of harm to sex workers: 41% (295 reports) were of physical violence including rape, attempted rape, sexual assault, and condom removal; 24% (171 reports) were fraud and robbery; and 23% (165 reports) were stalking and harassment. The balance of reports comprised a series of other harms.

The combination of criminalisation, sex work stigma and marginalisation has a chilling effect, and disincentivises sex workers from accessing police and (public) services<sup>1</sup>. The reports that NUM receives may only account for a fraction of the harms against sex workers. We recently held a needs assessment with workers of colour (WOC) and most of them do not report violence to anyone outside of their friends and close relations.

Every sex worker who reports harm to NUM is offered support from our Case Work Team (CWT) who engage in brief interventions, triaging and in-depth individualised judgement-free support to sex workers from report right through to court if this is what they choose. This team ensures that sex workers know their rights and options and facilitate equitable access to public and community resources. Reports of harm and violence are processed by the CWT and disseminated as alerts to sex workers. In 2019, for example, we sent 377,901 alerts to sex workers warning them of dangers, compared to the 153,362 we sent in 2016. We have sent a total of 1.34 million alerts since inception. These alerts form part of our violence prevention work as people's lives are saved as a result of receiving timely alerts containing information about those who victimise sex workers. It is a tried and tested model for preventing harm and we intend for it to be expanded to more diverse adult industries and among marginalised and isolated sex workers. This system of reporting and alerting works because sex workers have been using it for generations, the world over, sharing information about dangerous individuals. NUM has just digitised this and built supports around it. We will be launching our new platform that has marked improvements to processes of signing up for membership, reporting harm and retrieving alerts.

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<sup>1</sup> See Bowen, Swindells, Hodsdon & Blake (Forthcoming) 'Why Report? Sex Workers who use NUM Opt-Out of Sharing Victimisation with Police'.



### Consent to Share Information and Reporting to Police

Not everyone has the capacity to report the harms that they experience for several reasons, but those who can engage in an act of human kindness and solidarity. It is important for us to emphasize that our alerting service is only possible because of the generosity of sex working victims and survivors. Sex workers have choice in how the information they provide in reports is used and can consent to (1) share information anonymously among other sex workers - 97% of sex workers do this. Sex workers, in addition to sharing information with their communities, can (2) consent to provide anonymous reports to police and intelligence agencies (NCA, SCAS) for the gathering of intel on dangerous people operating in our communities. In 2012, 95% off-street independent workers who reported to NUM consented to sharing anonymous intel. This percentage has steadily declined to 69% in 2020. Sex workers can (3) consent to provide a full report to police (inclusive of their details) in pursuit of justice. There has been a steady decline in the numbers of sex workers willing to engage police in this way. The percentage dropped among off-street independents from 28% in 2012 to 7.7% in 2020. We asked our members why and among the reasons they indicate a fear of or experience of increased criminalisation, fear of stigmatization and discrimination and lack of trust in police<sup>2</sup>.

NUM continues to reach out to the 43 police forces with community education and to build relationships to meet the needs of victims. We attend various policy tables and meetings to share information about barriers to reporting and sex workers' experiences of police interaction. Our aim is to develop process maps for more predictable victim journeys and consistent police response for sex workers; a full uptake of the '[NPCC National Policing Sex Work and Prostitution Guidance](#)' that governs police interactions with sex workers; and an end to criminalisation and discriminatory practices. Our Research & Development (R&D) team of sex industry experts developed a [teaser video](#) as part of our invitations to forces to gain understanding of the plight of sex workers. We have clarified the [NUM-Police partnership](#) as sex workers express concerns about this relationship and individuals who are not members of NUM fear that they may become targeted by police by joining. This is of great concern to us because sex working victims and survivors are not getting the help that they deserve due to fear and negative experiences with police.

### Sex Work Stigma and Exclusionary Politics

Sex workers are an intersectional group who include parents, students, migrants and others who must hide their sex work and protect their identities because being 'outed' has deleterious effects on their lives. They weigh the costs and benefits associated with being known to the state and public services and with respect to their housing, banking, family situations, immigration status, and employment. NUM has seen that for many the cost of being 'out' as sex workers is too high a price to pay due to how society treats this population. They experience victim-blaming, vile verbal and physical abuses, and often face additional harms associated with being outed, such as evictions, deportation, extortion and unemployability due to past or current sex work and

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<sup>2</sup> More details about this issue will be available in a forthcoming publication: Bowen, Swindells, Hodsdon & Blake 'Why Report? Sex Workers who use NUM Opt-Out of Sharing Victimisation with Police'.

criminal records. Many experience high levels of sex work stigma that affects their mental health, outlook and possibilities in terms of work both inside and outside of sex industries and their wellbeing.

Sex workers are often excluded from groups and decision-making bodies that claim to represent them to work in their interests. There are few populations that are infantilised in this way. Social exclusion and barring sex workers from civic participation and from informing the policies that govern their work is a form of violence that we must end.

### **The Importance Sex Workers' Contributions to the VAWG Agenda**

Active sex workers are most affected by policies as they relate to violence prevention, the policing and regulation of sex industries, as well as those governing health services, income assistance housing and adult care. We believe that active workers must be equal partners in developing solutions for the harms that they identify and can no longer be excluded due to stereotypes about their capacities and understandings of their own lives. Many workers feel violated by VAWG policies themselves, due to historical exclusion, mischaracterisation about them and their work, and the lack of diversity and nuance in understanding sex work and society.

NUM are the last to deny that sex workers experience harm. Sex workers face situational and predatory violence, and some harms are associated with ill-conceived policies driven by ideologies and not by facts. Restrictive policy environments and laws that run counter to safety advice, such as the loitering and soliciting laws which target street sex workers for arrest and the Brothel-Keeping Law that prohibit sex workers from working in pairs or in small groups from premises, reduce safety and correlate to increased harm. Legislation is a blunt instrument and existing policies do not accommodate nuances and diversity of experience in sex work nor the specific forms of violence associated to working conditions and power relations. Sex workers experience fines, area restrictions, raids, and 'welfare' visits from police that may serve institutional goals around gathering intel on who trades sex, but it is unclear how forcing interactions between sex workers and police best improves their safety and abilities to exercise agency. Migrant sex workers often face threats of deportation, preventing them from accessing the criminal justice system or other support. Sex workers desire privacy to guard against the harms of social stigma and they need protective responses from police when they are called upon or invited to be part of justice-seeking and recovery from violence. Sex workers must be freed to implement buddy-systems and respective occupational health and safety strategies based on the type of work they do and when and how they do it. No legislation ought to run counter to safety strategies, particularly for marginalised people.

Sex workers forced to work alone become targets for violence because of this legislation. Working in brothels, saunas, clubs, or simply share a flat with other sex workers prevents them from reporting harms to police because they were violating the law when they experienced harm. There is an underreporting of violence among this population due to this piece of legislation, that isolates and disempowers victims, and works in concert with sex work stigma to reduce sex workers' access to police as a protective force. Instead, most sex workers experience police as

enforcers and not as public servants. The lack of police protection is more pronounced among workers of colour and some migrant workers who historically experience racism throughout public services when they are working as sex workers (due to symbolic stigma) *and* in their private lives. We must do more to hear from marginalised sex workers in protected categories and work with them to improve access to public and community services and their treatment.

Direct and indirect criminalisation that appears in Nordic approaches to eliminate sex workers' sources of revenue makes them poorer, more dependent on sex working, and more susceptible to violence<sup>3</sup>, trapping them in cycles of criminalisation>>marginalisation>> victimisation>> and social exclusion. Approaches that view sex working as inherently and wholly victimising have not been paired with a guaranteed livable income to ensure victims and survivors can live above the poverty line. Asymmetrical criminalisation (the criminalisation of buying sex) is a legislative strategy that targets migrants and people of colour in our community whilst silencing sex workers and controlling *what can be said* about the breadth of violence experienced and their unique vulnerabilities and *by whom*. Narrow strategies to address violence against sex workers also ignores the structural violence associated with policies themselves, that are not designed in the interests of active sex workers. Many public services are biased against sex workers with respect to how they are talked about, as having 'chaotic lives' or being 'service resistant' or 'complex'. This discourse has power and shapes policy and interventions. For some sex workers, the circumstances of their lives are unstable, due to the lack of resources and investments to address health issues such as addiction and primary care for physical and mental issues, or poverty, housing, education and career exploration for sex workers. Sex workers experience this structural violence in addition to gender-based violence, racism, and harms tied to sexual identities, poverty, citizenship and status.

The various attempts of introducing further criminalisation, for example in the form of the Nordic Model, which have previously been supported by the Home Office, are a threat to the safety and wellbeing of sex workers. Especially the most marginalised members of the sex working community are at risk of being pushed underground, resulting in increased isolation and separation from support networks.

Ultimately, we must stop viewing sex workers *as* the problem or as a population that needs to be managed through criminal sanctions and forced welfarism. Adults in sex industries know what they need. Public services, along with the groups and charities they trust, can work together to ensure that all of us are accountable to this population.

Below we share our focus group and survey results, highlighting sex workers' needs and priorities.

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<sup>3</sup> See Independent.ie (2019). Crime against sex workers 'almost doubles' since law change. Available at: <https://www.independent.ie/breaking-news/irish-news/crime-against-sex-workers-almost-doubles-since-law-change-37957325.html>)

## The Survey

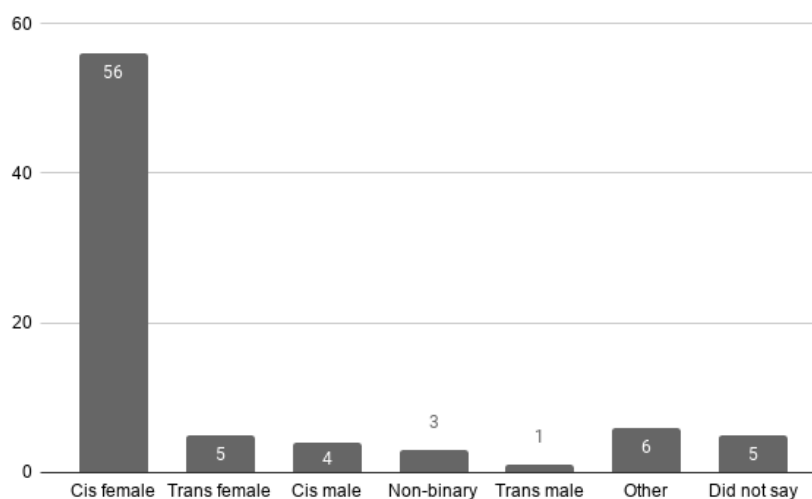
With the support of ECP and Umbrella Lane a survey to sex workers sharing their experiences of violence was launched for a 2-week period (25 January to 6 February 2021). We were sensitive to the Christmas holidays and the fact that while people are struggling, collecting information is difficult. We thank all of the individuals who replied to the survey and we honor their experiences in this document. We also thank members of ECP and Umbrella Lane who helped promote the survey and assisted sex workers with English as a second language and others to complete it.

## Survey Results

In total, 161 people responded to the survey and 81 (51%) were active UK sex workers, fitting the criteria of this consultation.

### Demographics

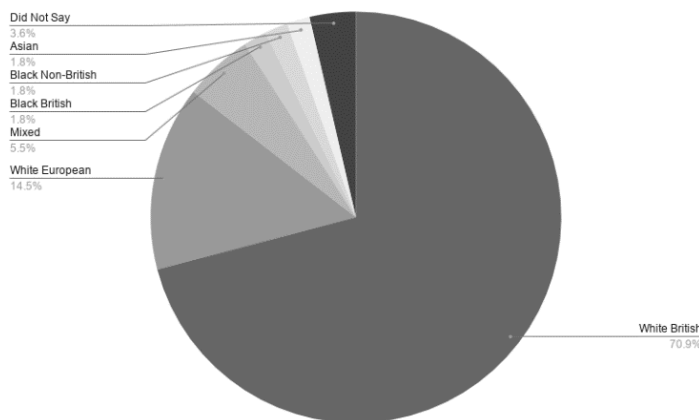
We asked about gender identity<sup>4</sup>, race/ethnicity, age, and sexual identity.



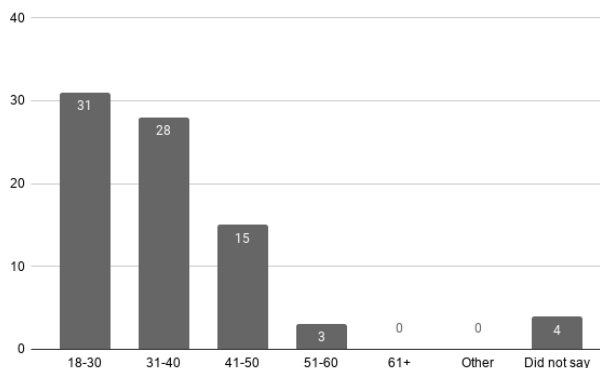
Of the 75 people who responded to this question, 75% identified as Cis Female and the balance comprised Trans people, Cis Males, non-binary and other genders. Trans women may be underrepresented in this survey because of the nature of this question as some trans women work as cis women.

With respect to race/ethnicity, 53 respondents answered this question and 70% identified as White British, 14% were White European, 5.5% were Mixed Heritage, some identified themselves as Latina or LatinAx, one was Black British, one was Black Non-British, and one identified as Asian. We did not specifically ask if participants are migrants, so migrants may be underrepresented.

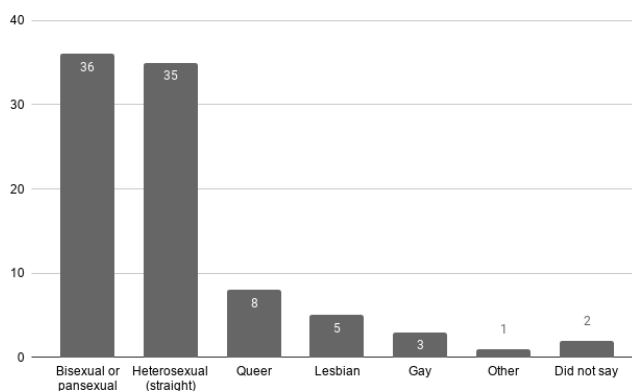
<sup>4</sup> For various reasons, many sex workers will advertise as a different gender as they identify in their private lives. In the survey, we asked for the gender identity that they used while working.



In terms of age, of the 77 people who responded to this question, 40% were between the ages of 18 and 30; 36% were between 31 and 40; 19% were between 41 and 50; and 4% were between 51 and 60 years of age.



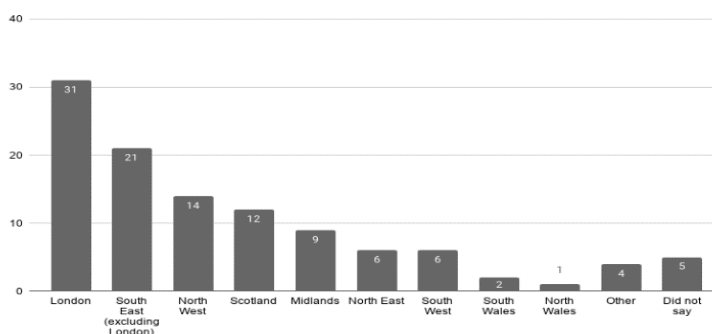
Of the 88 respondents, the majority of the sample identified within two modal categories, 41% identified as Bisexual<sup>5</sup> or Pansexual and 40% as Heterosexual. The rest identified as Queer, Lesbian, Gay and other sexualities.



<sup>5</sup> Bisexuality may be overrepresented as we asked about sexuality while working

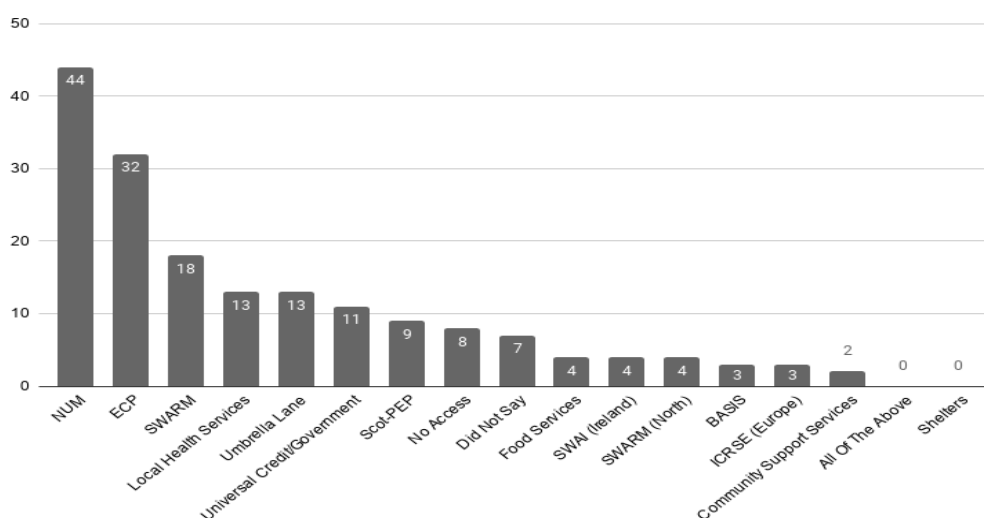
### Other Factors

We also asked about location of work and where respondents were able to select multiple locations. The majority of respondents worked in London and the South East, others worked in the North West, Scotland, the Midlands and the North East. In error we did not include Northern Ireland. Sex workers contacted us stating that they selected the 'other' category in this case.



With respect to employment, schooling and other pursuits, 48% of respondents did not have other work, 35% held other jobs and 19% were active students who did sex work alongside school and other work. We wanted to get an idea of sex workers' family responsibilities. Of the 77 people who answered this question, 36% had children or were responsible for other family members. This question was posed as gender neutral, but evidence demonstrates that women tend to be responsible for the primary care of children and other family members.

We also asked if sex workers were connected to any sex worker support services and 81 respondents listed a range of services, particularly NUM, ECP, SWARM, local health services and Umbrella Lane. Notably, there were eight individuals who indicated that they had no access to services.



## Experiences of Violence<sup>6</sup>

Based on the VAWG categories of harm, sex workers surveyed indicated that they had experienced several types of violence. Of the 79 sex workers who answered this question, most frequent experiences were Online Harassment 57% (n=45); Sexual Harassment 47% (n=37); Sexual Assault 46% (n=36); Stalking 41% (n=32); the sharing of intimate images without consent 30% (n=24); and Cyber-flashing 29% (n=23). Additionally, 22% (n=17) experienced rape; 11% (n=9) experienced domestic violence and one participant experienced Female Genital Mutilation. Sex workers added other forms of violence, such as emotional manipulation, experiences of partners extorting money, nonconsensual filming, being outed, excluded from services, exclusion from feminist spaces, verbal harassment, and not experiencing violence at all.

In addition to the above, we asked sex workers: 'What other forms of violence or oppression contribute to harms against you?' and 73 respondents added free text detailing the ways in which oppression constitutes harm against sex workers. These comprised a range of harms, the scope of which is captured below.

### *Immediate Harms*

Immediate harms were perpetrated by a range of individuals and included: threatening communications through a range of media, stalking and intimidation, and threats with weapons. Being 'outed', and having non sex work businesses sabotaged featured, as did verbal and emotional abuse and manipulation, threats to report sex workers to the police, and 'calling the papers'. Other harms included threats of blackmail, bullying, and exploitation by partners.

The issue of non-consensual filming was raised, supporting the 30.4% of respondents who had experienced the sharing of personal images without consent. This topic is particularly pertinent for sex workers, where image-based violence is invasive and pervasive.

### *Image-based violence and sex work*

The dissemination and non-consensual sharing of sexual photographs via the Internet is referred to as *revenge porn*. Image based sexual behaviours have been addressed through interventions in the legal system that have led to the criminalisation of image-based sexual abuse; however, the same cannot be said for the way women (including cis, intersex, and trans-women) sex workers

*'Until sex workers are seen and treated as equal citizens, worthy of respect and support, exceptional harm against them will exist.'*

*'There needs to be an entire overhaul of how society treats sex workers, and this must start with them being given a seat round the table to make decisions about their own lives and what is best for them.'*

-Survey Participant

<sup>6</sup> In error, we did not specifically ask about physical violence so this measure will be underrepresented in the survey responses. We deeply regret this.

experience this violence. What is problematic for sex workers in terms of whether or not a criminal act of revenge porn has been perpetrated against them or taken place is the prerequisite in law that the images are *private* and of a *sexual nature*. In short, definitions of what constitutes revenge porn and the 2015 Act fail to recognise how sex workers experience image-based violence or properly define what should be considered a private image in today's digitally networked, online world. Furthermore, the legislation leaves several questions unanswered: what happens when the photos are of a sexual nature and used for sex work marketing purposes but wilfully sent to people who are not the intended audience? What happens when the photo shared is not of a sexual nature but maliciously shared without consent with the intent to incite the same reputational destruction? For sex workers, the sharing of private, non-sexualised photographs is just as significant a threat as the sharing of sexually intimate photographs.

Sex workers have the right to develop content for intended audiences, and they do this to contain their sex work, to screen out harmful individuals or undesirable clientele and for marketing purposes. They must be entitled to protection if their content is stolen or used without their consent.

#### **Government Laws and State Actors**

The quasi-criminalisation of some aspects of sex work result in harms to those working. The loitering and soliciting law push sex workers on the street into more isolated areas and prevents them working in close proximity with others as this means they are more likely to be targeted for arrest by police. This puts them at greater risk of violence. The Brothel keeping law, under the 1956 and 2003 Sexual Offences Acts, prohibit the offer of intercourse in premises by more than one person<sup>7</sup>. This prevents sex workers from working together for safety. One respondent remarked that the law: *'stop[s] me from being able to work with a friend because we are afraid of being arrested'*. Two sex workers who work together for safety are charged with keeping a brothel for each other.

Renting premises also featured as problematic, with reports of local councils trying to evict workers from their flats. Exploitation by landlords was also reported. One worker stated that her landlord *'used my profession against me in an attempt to keep my entire deposit when I moved'*.

Compounding this, several respondents expressed concerns around possible changes in the law and how these might result in harm. One person replied to whether they have experienced harm working with *'so far in my 5 and a half years as a prostitute, none whatsoever. But I fear that this will change if ever the Sex-Buyer Law is introduced to Britain.'* Another person details how criminalisation means they *'can't stand up to violent clients let alone report them.'*

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<sup>7</sup> See CPS 04 January 2019 <https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/prostitution-and-exploitation-prostitution>. *"It is not illegal to sell sex at a brothel provided the sex worker is not involved in management or control of the brothel. A house occupied by one woman and used by her alone for prostitution, is not a brothel": Gorman v Standen, Palace Clarke v Standen (1964) 48 Cr App R 30.*



Sex workers risk extortion and harm from anyone who knows they do sex work. Some people are willing to take advantage of their precarity, because sex workers have little power in the situation or opportunities for resources, and they are not likely to receive protection or resolution if they call police.

### ***Austerity, Immigration policies and Marginalisation***

Austerity and poverty serve as key drivers in how people involved in sex work experience oppression. A respondent stated that they *'can't access disability benefit or housing benefit so have to do sex work [...] can't access diagnostic services on NHS for autism so can't apply to PIP so have to do sex work.'* The intersections of immigration policy, poverty and marginalisation are captured in some accounts, for instance one sex worker remarked: *'when also you are experiencing poverty this harms you as it is affecting your working conditions and the power you have to refuse things, this also is true if you do not have rights to work in the UK,'* and another said: *'Instead of helping me they gave me a paper saying I had to leave the UK',* and *'being a migrant and a trans woman has contributed to my experiences of violence (and reporting).'*

### ***Men who Sell Sex***

Men involved in sex work experience harm through their erasure and are described as more likely to be at risk from drugging attacks in *'chemsex'* cultures as well as experiencing *'extreme isolation'*.

### ***Stigma and Public Attitudes***

For sex workers completing this survey, the far-reaching implications of social attitudes and stigma are evident. This is enacted upon sex workers within interpersonal relationships, as well as institutionally, for example, through the denial of banking services, the closing of accounts and banning from advertising platforms. There are also many cases of individuals losing their jobs outside the sex industry when they have been identified as sex workers due to stigmatisation, making them more dependent on the income that sex work provides. The following words sum up the experiences of many: *'Poverty, austerity and Tory government have worked to strip my rights and leave me desperate for money in a Capitalist system and then judge and shame me for doing whatever it takes to survive'*. Respondents discussed the stigma of sex work that can lead to *'discrimination in employment'* and *'gaps in the CV that can't be explained'*.

Finally, respondents detail the oppression of being *'spoken-over'*, of not being listened to, particularly by those in positions of power: *'Politicians claim to know what's best for us. Journalists spread lies about us. None of them talk \*to\* us, and when we try to talk, we get told we're not exploited enough if they can hear us, or else we're so blinded by our exploitation that we can't realise the truth of our own oppression'*. These experiences of misrepresentation and silencing were prevalent in the comments.

### ***Sources of Violence and Harm Against Sex Workers***

We asked sex workers *'Who commits crimes against sex workers?' and 'What can be done to stop them harming sex workers?'* For many respondents, the people who commit harms against sex workers are more likely to be men. These may be clients, people posing as clients, men known to them in interpersonal relationships or strangers. For example, strangers on the internet,

summarised by one respondent as *'mainly misogynistic men who view sex workers as less than human'*. Respondents listed *'Police Officers'*, and *'men in positions of power abusing their status, knowing they are unlikely to be reported / experience repercussions'* and another sex worker stated that *'the law contributes to exploitative working conditions'*.

Beyond identifying the men who harm them, sex workers name *'Sex Worker Exclusionary Radical Feminists (SWERFs), Police, judges, politicians, so-called welfare workers'* as victimisers and individuals who are potentially detrimental to sex workers' safety. The wider societal structures are deemed violent and anyone who *'participates in this system of power, exploitation, stigma and marginalisation'* and those who *'reinforce a system which keeps sex workers down, marks us as "other", makes us targets.'* These comments are akin to Pheterson's *'whore stigma'*<sup>8</sup> and Lowman's concept of the *'discourse of disposal'*<sup>9</sup> where state actors, politicians, community members and the media collaborate in efforts to deny sex workers' fair representation, protection from violence and discrimination, and meaningful civil participation.

#### ***What Can Be Done to End Violence Against Sex Workers?***

Survey respondents report a range of possible solutions that would address harms perpetrated against them, including a shift towards decriminalisation, attitudinal changes, recognition of the labour of sex work, and addressing the drivers that mark people's entries into sex work, all of which ought to be accompanied by direct consultation with sex workers themselves. The following excerpts speak for themselves:

*'If we were not criminalised but were respected as workers and citizens with labour rights and social protections, we would be taken seriously and wouldn't be a target. It is not the nature of sex work that makes it dangerous but the lack of rights and protections, social stigma and criminalisation.'*

*'Sex work needs to be distinguished from sexual exploitation otherwise when you make all sex work 'rape' actual assault at work and ways we can lessen it get ignored.'*

*'We need safe platforms for advertising, safe working places', we are scared our children will be taken away if we report violence.'*

*'Tackling the issues which drive people into sex work - poverty, and the consequences of austerity.'*

*'Relaxation of immigration control (and eventually abolition of immigration control and prisons), Universal basic income.'*

*'Listen to sex workers when they tell you [what] they need to be safe.'*

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<sup>8</sup> Pheterson, G. (1993). The whore stigma: Female dishonor and male unworthiness. *Social Text*, 37(Winter), 39–64. doi:10.2307/466259

<sup>9</sup> See Lowman, J. (2000) Violence and the outlaw status of (street) prostitution in Canada. *Violence Against Women*. 6(9): 987– 1011.

### Services

We asked sex workers what services were available and what help they needed to heal from violence and harm. The individuals who responded to this survey reported mixed awareness of available support services; most likely because sex work support services are inconsistently spread across the UK and some areas have none. NUM, SAAFE, SWARM, ECP and Umbrella Lane were all cited as services / collectives that sex workers could access with confidence. Some local projects were also included, as well as the NHS. For some workers though, it was felt there are *'not many'* or *'none'* and a respondent stated that *'a lot of people feel too socially stigmatised to seek help'*. For those involved in activism and awareness-raising, collectives such as ScotPEP were groups that allowed sex workers to be *'active politically'* and heard.

### Mental Health

With respect to mental health, some individuals detailed accessing private therapy, whilst acknowledging this is a privileged position to be in, and that accessing mental health services through the NHS is difficult, with an additional barrier faced by sex workers: *'I would be too afraid to talk to a mental health service as I wouldn't want my profession in sex work to be kept on file and used against me'*. There have been various situations of sex workers being actively excluded from mental health provisions if they refused to give up sex work all-together. In this way, peer support is cited as valuable, through the use of *'informal sex work support pages'* and *'thanks to Umbrella Lane I have access to my community so I don't feel isolated and can seek advice from my peers'*.

### Support to Screen Potential Clients

Respondents listed the NUM Checker and ClientEye as *'better screening and security options'* providing valuable and sometimes life-saving information to sex workers before they plan to see potential clients. These checker tools support sex workers to *'feel safer when accepting clients'*.

### Needed Services

Overarchingly, sex workers report needing non-judgmental, sex worker friendly services. Some services that aim to support workers can add to the stigma they experience, and respondents requested that they *'Stop shaming us'*, citing the difficulties in discussing issues with support services that hold strong ideological positions against sex work. One member remarked: *'It is impossible to talk about assault at work when someone views your work as assault'*. Service provision that acknowledges the work in sex work, without resorting to discrimination is important as judgement and discrimination can be problematic. A respondent stated: *'I have experienced discrimination in mental health services for being a sex worker'*. Sex workers noted that they have confidence in non-judgemental services and see these as crucial. One sex worker remarked that she chooses *'services where I know I will not be judged, where I know my choices and autonomy will be respected.'* Conditional support services which require individuals to give up sex work in order to access support are ineffective.

### Prevention and Gaps

We asked, how crimes against them could be prevented and what the gaps were for preventing crimes. For the sex workers surveyed, the dominant responses called for decriminalisation.

Workers state: *'If the work is not criminalised, we can work with friends and others for our safety and we can report attacks that are happening to us or others and we will not be scared of the consequence'*. The full decriminalisation of sex work is seen as enabling greater accessing to justice, where currently some might not report crimes against them at all, for fear of being criminalised themselves: *'Being able to form sex worker cooperatives, legally, would be a massive game changer'*. Another respondent writes: *'clients knowing that sex workers do and will go to the police and will be able to press charges'* will prevent violence. Such changes in the law have the potential to reverberate across harms of stigma, violence, and oppression: *'If neighbours or people are attacking to us at least we could defend ourselves like other people'*. Decriminalisation would support sex workers in accessing the police for protection and would ward off anyone who aims to violate or extort people working in sex industries. In terms of prevention strategies, sex workers state: *'having better tools to weed bad clients out, and more protection'* would prevent harm. Changes to existing laws would offer some sex workers the ability to challenge racism, prejudice, and discrimination by police. A migrant worker of colour remarked: *'I have been here for many years but they [police officers] still ask me for my passport when they don't do that with the white girls.'*

Sex workers reported not wanting their clients to be criminalised and a strong desire for police to use resources towards pursuit of individuals who commit violence against them. They expressed wanting to lawfully and safely work in pairs, or with others at least present in the same property without fears of legal repercussions. Sex workers also asked to end the banning or shadow-banning of online safety mechanisms used to screen clients. One respondent stated: *'Let us advertise online for good quality clients. Keep online registers and punter reviews going for our safety.'* Several respondents identified housing discrimination that threatened safety and controlled where they could live: *'Let us rent property and remove morality clauses from housing contracts.'* Others discussed the need to expunge current criminal records that affected if they could work: *'let us be eligible for better employment'*.

### ***Income Security***

Financially, a universal basic income for all adults was identified as a means to eliminate survival sex and provide money for basic needs. This coupled with the removal of barriers faced by specific marginalised groups of people including *'trans people, disabled people, migrants, parents, people of colour'* was reported. A sex worker summarises: *'Poverty creates the need for work. Give workers liveable wages and genuine exit strategies that do not look like hostels.'* In relation to services specifically, a range of measures are cited as important from the perspective of preventing harms, including access to contraception, adequate housing and safe drug consumption facilities.

For individuals fleeing domestic violence, or those in caring roles for others, more financial assistance is requested. One person explains how poverty threatens safety for sex workers and the need for social investments: *'The flexibility and quick access to money makes it appealing when you're struggling, and when you're in a terrible situation it's harder to be pickier with who you're seeing. Provide people with more stability in the first place and have non-judgemental support there for people specifically involved in sex work.'*

### *Services Needed for Sex Workers Experiencing Violence*

The sex workers surveyed detailed a range of support that would benefit them should they experience violence. These included non-judgmental healthcare provision, mental health support and access to talking therapies and support groups, particularly specialist counsellors with understanding of sex work. Specialist professionals in both social services and police departments would be beneficial indeed. For some, it is important that when disclosing sex work in any capacity, there is an acceptance and a lack of judgement: *'Sex workers need to be able to go to doctors without judgement, to be able to tell the Dr their true health position'* and a worker mentioned that *'attitudes to sex work in both mental health and addiction services need to change'*. Respondents also referenced the fluidity of gender identification and note that services need to be *'all gender inclusive services with times when specific groups feel more welcome e.g. male and non binary.'*

Addressing stigma is viewed as a critical step towards sex workers having their rights recognised, from which tangible outcomes are possible. Sex workers called for legal aid support to remedy harms and prevent them. One respondent stated that sex workers need *'access to solicitors that can tell us our rights and sue when possible'*. Survey respondents also listed that they would benefit from assistance with housing, claiming benefits, evictions, legal and tax advice, immigration advice, access to government support and challenging discrimination faced in jobs outside of sex work.

*'I would have never thought that I would need help just to be able to eat properly. Normally we earn good money.'*

*'First, I respected well the rules, but we need to earn money to live.'*

-Survey Participant

### **Covid-19, Harm and Access to Services**

A previously administered Covid-19 specific follow-up NUM survey (November 2020) yielded 78 responses. The key findings of this survey detailed how loss of income impacted sex workers the most, with increased risk in work environments for those continuing to do sex work. Additionally, workers experienced increased mental health struggles and isolation, with digital divides within the sex industry becoming apparent. Notably, although 89% stated a reduction / loss of income, only 46% reported receiving universal credit or government support. These results are consistent with this present (February 2021) survey. Almost one year has passed since a variety of Covid-19 restrictions were put in place in the UK, and the impacts of such restrictions continue to reverberate widely across the sex work sector.

Respondents to the present survey who have continued to sex work during the pandemic, reported feeling less in control of their work, and needing to forego safety screening measures. They also discussed having to take more risks in order to earn money. *'Being taken advantage of'* featured in responses. Sex workers stated that clients are *'asking more and demanding more'* and that opportunistic robberies are occurring because sex workers are less likely to report to police during restriction periods. Financial desperation resulted in some workers being *'forced to work for lower rates and unsafely'* citing *'our bargaining power has been reduced'*. Furthermore, the closures

of hotels and apartments mean some *'have to risk letting clients into their own homes'*. With significant financial struggles, one woman describes her situation: *'can't live on my wages anymore. I got ECP food vouchers and a referral to my local food bank. My kids went to school and then came home so I can't work'*.

Sex worker-only groups and chats utilised to warn each other about risky clients highlight some emerging risks. One sex worker stated that these groups *'have been very active and we've seen clients that had been blacklisted re-appearing and trying to take advantage of the reduced number of clients'*. Sex workers have experienced a lack of government support coupled with problems accessing Universal Credit and are working in more competitive circumstances. A respondent remarked that because of *'the increase of people entering sex work due to a lack of other income; it's become harder to survive'*.

The increased competition and challenges of earning money without serious compromises to health and safety was echoed across the sample. One respondent remarked how the Covid-19 pandemic has *'shown the real effects of an "end demand" model without any safety net available for us'*. With less demand, there is less money available and potential clients have more power in negotiations for services with sex workers. As a result, sex workers work more to earn the same or less money than they did previously. This dynamic reduces safety and increases the risks of harm. Some potential clients are refusing to be screened. One sex worker stated the present situation has *'increased power for clients [...] since they know we are more desperate'*.

In addition to increased risks whilst working, fear of enforcement and criminalisation from the police has resulted in the closure of safer working premises. Sex workers discussed being *'forced [...] to work when they don't want to because of inadequate Universal Credit.'* Compounding fear from clients and the police, some sex workers' neighbours have been *'told to inform on workers'*; in effect, police them for rule-breaking, adding extra layers of social controls while withholding resources necessary to obey Covid-19 restrictions.

For sex workers who have moved to online working (or individuals who started sex working online because of redundancies) issues such as *'doxxing [the malicious disclosure of personal information online, such as a legal name or address] and stalking'* are reported to have increased. Proposed changes to the regulation of sex work by Dame Diane Johnson's 10-minute Bill<sup>10</sup> that would criminalise the purchase of sex thus indirectly criminalising sex work were discussed. A sex worker stated that *'Diane Johnson's Bill will push us onto the streets'* due to the lack of investment in a liveable income or other strategies to end poverty<sup>11</sup>. Some respondents who had financial safety nets at the start of the pandemic are now experiencing struggles: *'I lived off my little savings to begin with. Now I have gone back to work but the clients have all the power because I am scared of being reported for breaking Covid conditions.'* Sex workers seeking other forms of employment face

<sup>10</sup> See <https://commonsbusiness.parliament.uk/document/43648/html>

<sup>11</sup> See 'Briefing for MPs against Ten-Minute Rule Motion "Sexual Exploitation" put forward by Diana Johnson MP' <https://prostitutescollective.net/briefing-for-mps-against-ten-minute-rule-motion/>

additional barriers and carry the weight of hiding their sex work involvement. They fear people finding out. One sex worker said: *'employment gaps and people finding out make it hard to get a normal job'*.

### **Access to Support Services during the Covid-19 Pandemic**

Many respondents reported either severely restricted access to support services, or no access at all:

*'I think most of the projects are shut.'*

*'NUM SWARM and ECP are still there for us, Clinics are still open. I know of no other organisations you could trust.'*

*'It's hard to access services with COVID, they're overstretched and often you feel a sense of guilt for using them at this time.'*

Ironically, sex workers who previously had no need to access support services are now finding that reduced operational capacity makes *'going to services hard'*. A sex worker who approached services had been refused: *'it's really hard to access sexual health support they have refused to see me.'* Survey respondents highlighted that *'many sexual health clinics are shut during Covid or offering postal services'*. Several sex workers report that there is more service provision available online, that benefits certain populations of workers over others: *'I feel like more services are online, which suits me fine, but I do worry about those on the other side of the digital divide and what services they have available'*.

Finally, peer support networks have suffered from Covid-19 restrictions and this has had an effect on emotional support and a sense of belonging. A respondent sums up this sentiment: *'not being able to gather with our peers has meant a large contingent of support has vanished'*. This has resulted in feelings of being isolated. One sex worker stated that she feels *'disconnected from my community. I haven't been able to get a sexual health test as my local clinics are closed and I'm not supposed to travel during lockdown'*.

In summary, the sex workers who responded to our survey experienced a variety of violent crimes and had very clear ideas on how to improve the situation in terms of support services and policies. Survey respondents provided rich details about their experiences of violence and the policies and working and social conditions that put them at risk of violence. We have shared a range of themes there and it is evident that sex workers have a valuable analyses and insights towards ending VAWG. Our survey has shown yet again the importance of listening to sex workers and treating them as experts they are.

### **Focus Group: (NUM Research and Development (R&D) Team**

We conducted a two-hour focus group with four members of the NUM Research and Development (R&D) team, who are industry experts by experience. The R&D team are a group

of sex workers with experience in various sectors of the sex industry, including street-based sex work, brothel- and agency-based sex work, independent escorting, lap dancing, pornography, and camming. They also have experience of homelessness, drug use, violence, poverty, unemployment, lawful and unlawful migration, mental health issues and disability. Their feedback was based on the survey questions discussed in the last section and the discussion will be summarised in themed areas below.

### **Contact with Support Services**

In relation to contact with support services, the group reported that they do access support services, but because specialist sex work support services are not evenly spread throughout the UK, in-person support is not necessarily available. Their contact with support services is not directly linked to sex work per se and varies according to life circumstances at different times in life. Peer-to-peer, and peer-led collectives are held in high estimation as sources of support, due to 'trust' in these networks.

### **Violence and Harm**

The group are all knowledgeable about the forms of violence that can be experienced in sex work, spanning physical and sexual violence through to emotional abuse, 'outing' and coercion. Whilst the group spoke about domestic violence outside of the sex working relations, there was discussion around how accessing service provision for domestic abuse can be tricky for sex workers, particularly those who do not want to be 'typecast' as vulnerable victims in those contexts.

Wider harms that can be experienced due to sex working include structural violence and stigma, and those that come as a result of police operations and actions, as well as police inaction in responding to violence, along with discrimination when accessing health services. A participant discussed how the capitalist system that depends so much on money places them in potentially '*violent or uncomfortable situations.*' Participants discussed wider structural inequalities that keep marginalised people oppressed and in positions of vulnerability including harsh immigration policies, xenophobia, racism, sexism, transphobia, ableism and classism, meaning that sex workers also experience 'harm' across a broad spectrum. They note that some abusive behaviours of men are enabled by patriarchal structures, and the impacts of austerity measures and a Conservative government.

### **Sources of Harm**

When asked who commits crimes against them, the group divulged a range of individuals and state actors. Men, some clients, people posing as clients, some women, other sex workers in competitive environments, the government, politicians, health services, wider society, police, some third parties (managers, landlords) and partners are some of the avenues through which the group have experienced and witnessed harms against the sex work community. One participant disclosed trying to access mental health support for issues unrelated to sex work and being told by professionals that sex work is the issue. Sex workers have experienced the sharing of information about their sex work without their consent and define this as a form of violence along with non-consensual disclosure of their sex work status to professionals and authority



figures. Harassment from the police and wider community also featured. One participant detailed undue pressure from police to report a crime when doing so would put them at risk of retaliation. Another discussed how when their property was set on fire, information about their sex working became public knowledge.

Focus group participants disclosed feeling coerced by health professions to for example, go on the contraceptive pill. They also share experiences of discrimination, for example, the denial of mental health support because services were conditional upon 'leaving' sex work. These experiences of sex work stigma and the denial of services from medical professionals dissuades sex workers from accessing services, causing emotional harm. The refusal of mainstream services freely enjoyed by non-sex workers extends to financial institutions too. This manifests in sex workers' being refused loans, being denied accounts or having accounts closed down, all of which serve as symbolic and structural violence.

There was furthermore some conversation on borders and immigration systems inflicting structural violence by exercising control over what participants can and cannot do in their daily lives and restricting their access to governmental support. The constant fear of immigration charges impacts on their relationship to state authorities and support services, preventing them from reporting violent crimes to the police without intermediaries such as NUM.

### **Ideas for the Prevention of Violence upon Sex Workers**

When asked how these crimes and harms can be prevented, the responses were very clear: decriminalisation of sex work, and the rationale for this has been echoed in survey responses. Addressing the impacts of austerity measures upon people experiencing poverty in sex work was understood as a violence prevention measure. Focus group participants called for anti-stigma education for both the police and health service professionals. This was suggested as a means to reduce discrimination and improve treatment. One member remarked: *'You're not helping sex workers by rejecting them'*. Participants suggested that if service provision policies are written in ways that treat sex workers as victims, it makes it difficult for people whose narratives do not fit this view to access adequate support. The group felt strongly that police need to create and foster positive relationships with sex workers, including taking crimes (particularly crimes of a sexual nature) against them seriously, and investigating them properly.

### **Support Services and Harms Associated with Covid-19**

On the topic of available support and support services, the group expressed a lack of faith in local services, which they state, *'can be terrible'* or a *'postcode lottery'*. As an alternative, group members utilised friends and colleagues. Peer-led groups, collectives and organisations are avenues of support, in conjunction with sex worker-friendly private therapists. Group participants discussed *'not wanting to access services as a sex worker generally'* and mistrust, due to a combination of negative experiences and being outed. The individuals would like to see more peer-led support services, a *'decent police service'* with appropriately trained officers and in particular, emergency first responders, who can relay useful information or onward referrals that sex workers can trust.

Sex workers have been forced into poverty by the Covid-19 pandemic, and through desperation to earn money, have engaged in risk-taking behaviours they would not ordinarily engage in. The group report how the government's furlough and self-employment schemes are largely exclusionary for sex workers for example, brothel workers and agency workers, where elements of the work is criminalised and where there are challenges for workers to declare their income to HMRC. Likewise, there are vulnerabilities associated with being out of work in these contexts. Those who worked in establishments beforehand are now isolated from any support networks they might have had workwise. People who would ordinarily have no need to access support services find themselves now needing to, because of the impacts of Covid-19; yet these services are also overstretched. Whilst some support services have 'shifted online', this creates a digital divide, particularly for street sex workers who may have previously depended on outreach services. Accessing sexual health services has been difficult, with one person stating they *'didn't go for sexual health screening for several months.'*

### **Other Thoughts and Considerations**

For the participants in the focus group, crimes against sex workers can be prevented in various ways. Decriminalisation is a frequently cited key preventative measure, which would allow working together. Further harms could be reduced by removing morality clauses from tenancy agreements meaning workers can work from their homes/rented premises; allowing people to operate as businesses; reviewing the private renting system that requires guarantors and thus makes it difficult for some people to secure a home. Sex workers and marginalised people can experience significant periods of *'sofa surfing'* due to obstacles securing tenancy agreements. One member of the group commented on why there should even be a need to 'prevent harm', likening it to rape discourses where the onus is placed on the rape victim to alter their behaviour instead of addressing the root cause - the criminal behaviour of the rapist for instance. To this end, the group discussed a particular support project in Germany that had a sex work 'entering' service (as opposed to exiting), that allows entrants into sex work to do so safely and knowledgeably.

### **Recommendations and Sex Workers' Messages to the Home Office**

This final section provides an opportunity for sex workers as part of the survey and the focus group, to speak directly to policymakers. We asked sex workers for any messages they had to the VAWG leaders about violence against sex workers and this is what they said.

#### **Decriminalisation**

Sex workers want to send a clear message about the need for decriminalisation. They state: *'we have a voice and we want decriminalisation'*. Respondents added that *'without rights and protections, we are more exposed to violence'*. From the perspective of sex workers: *'the first violence is the one from the state'*. Sex workers wish to work safely and be treated with respect, alongside *'all the rights that any other workers in the UK have.'* Some respondents feared the potential for criminalising their clients and again this was explained in the context of safety. It is well documented that criminalising the purchasers of sex results in greater harms experienced by sex workers. One

member referenced the 2016 Home Affairs Committee<sup>12</sup> recommendations that included the decriminalisation of sex workers on the street and working together in premises, stating:

*'It's time they put in place the recommendations of the 2016 Home Affairs Committee which, on the basis of sex workers safety was to end criminalisation of sex work outdoors and indoors. If the Home Office doesn't do that we know they don't care one jot whether we live or die.'*

Another respondent requests that the government look to the UN, citing *'decriminalisation of sex work is the recommended action by the UN for decreasing violence against sex workers'*. Several sex workers implore the Home Office to *'discuss their ideas and plans with actual sex workers before deciding on blanket bills that can further endanger them'* and in doing this, to make sure that a diverse sample of sex workers are consulted. For safety purposes, workers want to work in pairs and want to see the brothel keeping law repealed. Repealing the loitering and soliciting laws would increase safety as sex workers would no longer be pushed into isolated areas to avoid arrest and would be more able to come forward to report violence. Requests to *'leave review sites alone'* were prominent, as sex workers need to run checks on potentially dangerous individuals and assess risks online rather than being pushed into outdoor work if online platforms disappear.

### **The VAWG Agenda**

Collectively, members of the focus group and survey participants discussed the often-cited discourse that sex work is *'violence against women.'* They questioned why sex workers are excluded from being part of this wider conversation in the VAWG agenda. Focus group members felt that sex work is not inherently violent, and there should not be the expectation of violence. Presently, exploitation, modern slavery and trafficking are all conflated with sex work. Sex workers in this survey were also keen to emphasise that sex work should neither be conflated with violence, nor the VAWG agenda more broadly.

The conflation of sex work with violence *'stops us being able to identify when we have been harmed. Please look at the evidence for decriminalisation, we are begging you. We are dying because of criminalisation. It puts us in the hands of bad clients'*. Being viewed as passive victims by policy makers and powerful interest groups serves to undermine potentially fruitful ways of addressing violence that occurs within sex work, as one person asserts: *'There are ways of tackling violence against sex workers'*. Indeed, another suggests that crimes against sex workers should be categorised as hate crime, *'as it fits all the criteria when the same attacker would not attack the same person if they were not a sex worker.'* A survey respondent stated *'You no longer distinguish between sex work and VAWG it is like our assaults no longer count which is counterproductive to reducing VAWG. We are being viewed as victims who don't know what's best for us'*. This creates a condescending narrative that does not reflect their lives and is seen as *'an infantilising and insulting way to treat adult women'*.

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<sup>12</sup> See <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmhaff/26/26.pdf>

For sex workers who do not identify as women, they state that 'VAWG is a completely unfit definition for sex work'. It erases a substantial proportion of workers based upon gender, and 'Reducing and erasing people like me [...] means I don't come to services when I need help'. One Transgender worker stated:

*'We face more violence because our bodies are not 'typical' and yet the medical interventions required to adjust our bodies are subject to extreme medical gatekeeping [...] You make us wait years before even a first appointment at the gender clinics and further years after that to access hormones and surgery we need to avoid this kind of violence.'*

### **Sex Work and Poverty- A Last Word**

Overall sex workers expressed a lack of investment in income supports, particularly for disabled people, urging: 'If you care about us increase universal credit and disability support.' Sex workers leave the Home office with this final message:

*'Between extreme poverty and death, we will pick sex work. Always. Poverty is more violent than prostitution.'*

### **Recommendations**

- ✓ **The government and specifically the Home Office conducting this consultation should seriously consider the full decriminalisation of sex work** and put an end to the manufacture of 'sex workers as criminals' through use of loitering and soliciting and brothel keeping legislation. We are well aware of the fact that criminal records prolong involvement in sex work and survival sex, and limit opportunities for employment in good paying jobs after transitioning out of industries. We are interested in supporting a dialogue between active sex workers and law makers, that focusses on legislative changes needed to promote social justice, health, and safety. We must transcend petty politics and ideology because peoples' lives are at risk.
- ✓ **The Nordic model should be rejected because evidence shows that where it has been introduced (Ireland, France, Canada) it has led to an increase in violence against sex workers.** For example, after Ireland's sex purchase law was introduced, reported violent crime against sex workers, from threats to assaults with weapons, rose by 92%. Sex workers are now less likely to report dangerous clients to Gardaí. Migrant and trans women sex workers in particular have been targets of violence due to the racism and xenophobia embedded in such approaches.
- ✓ **Discrimination in Covid-19 related income support packages must end because if sex workers are struggling to survive this sets the stage for dangerous individuals to continue victimising them.** Sex workers note that some clients are pushing boundaries, requesting services over and above what is on offer, and sex workers must compromise their health and safety by, at times acquiescing, because they are in urgent need of funds.

The response from the authorities has been to continue with arrests of sex workers and raids and closures of premises where women work.

- ✓ **The introduction of Universal Basic Income or a similar benefit system.** There is a clear cost-benefit argument for instituting a guaranteed livable income in the UK, and a strong appeal from sex workers and anti-poverty activists. In short, for this population it would disentangle poverty and sex work, thus eliminating survival sex work; doing so would prevent much of the situational violence sex workers experience; sex industry workers would be afforded the time to properly screen potential clients and they can be choosier about how they work, when, and why, which would prevent harm. Furthermore, costs associated with (mental) health crises, policing the legal sex industry, and ambulatory services, as well as institutionalisation would be greatly reduced. In a country like the UK, which has been rattled by centuries of neoliberal policies and austerity, a comprehensive and inclusive welfare system is long overdue. The fact that many sex workers are mothers or primary carers for children would also indicate that acknowledging care work with an income, increasing family allowance and reversing austerity cuts that have targeted mothers in particular, would ensure that a significant population of sex workers are more able to avoid the risk of violence and/or leave prostitution.
- ✓ **Develop anti-violence strategies that include gender minorities.** Under the current definition, vulnerable individuals who are not cis female are excluded from accessing support and the criminal justice system. The data from our reports and various surveys has repeatedly shown that especially trans and queer sex workers are affected by physical violence and are in need of protection.
- ✓ **Current sex workers must be included in the development of services and evaluating their effectiveness.** For charities and entities working to end VAWG to block sex workers participation means they become defined *as* the problem and the true measure of violence in their lives, including the violence of social exclusion, are overlooked.
- ✓ **We need to see greater investment in sex worker-led and peer-led programs and services on a range of issues directly dealing with violence prevention, safety, health, transitioning, and so on.** Our survey as well as focus group show an indisputable trend of sex workers being uncomfortable accessing non-peer-led support structures and prefer community-based approaches to service delivery. While the sex working community in the UK is working hard on providing peer-support for sex workers, there is a lack of resources to reach out to the most marginalised and those living in rural areas. There needs to be increased support for sex worker community development.
- ✓ **More attention must be paid to visual violence and image-based violence experienced by sex workers.** Revenge porn legislation is inadequate to address how sex workers experience this crime and theft of content. More discussion and research by and with sex workers is needed to define what a 'private image' is and what rights sex workers must

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have with respect to their online content that gets used without their consent, stolen or distributed to unintended audiences.

### **Closing Remarks**

We are very proud of the community of sex workers who took part in the survey and who shared their lived experiences with NUM, ECP and Umbrella Lane to influence VAWG policy. We thank the Research and Development (R&D) team for participating in a focus group that contributed to a greater understanding of key themes reporting here.

We urge readers to take into account what sex workers have had to say and work together with sex workers and the groups that they trust to ensure that VAWG policies and strategies significantly reduce violence for this diverse population and truly reflect the expressed interests of active sex workers.

NUM has gone through some growth and in 2018, we re-evaluated our priorities, identified three key stakeholder groups (sex workers, practitioners and police forces) and we reposition ourselves as most accountable to sex workers while working in collaboration with sex worker-led groups and community organisations. At NUM we recognise that we have some way to go in providing complete wrap-around services for sex workers; however, we are plotting a course with sex workers, and including their experiences in VAWG as part of this consultation is very much a part of 'ending violence against sex workers'.