



# EU Migrant Sex Work in the UK Post-Referendum

ILLUSTRATION BY INDIA JOSEPH — HELLO@MOONANDMOTHSTUDIO.COM

Over recent decades, UK governments have implemented increasingly repressive immigration controls. Stricter conditions of entry have been accompanied by an expanding immigration detention estate, the increased use of criminal penalties for so-called immigration 'offences', and an increasingly hostile environment for people who have migrated to the UK. The UK can be particularly hostile for migrant sex workers, with the quasi-criminalised and stigmatised nature of the sex industry compounding the negative effects of 'migrant' status. The effects of this can be particularly acute for racially minoritised, transgender, and non-binary migrant sex workers.

## The Research

It is in this socio-political context that we set out to explore: 1) what impact, if any, the EU Referendum result had on EU migrant sex workers; and 2) what strategies EU migrant sex workers have adopted to navigate sex work post-Referendum.

The data presented here were generated via an online survey, which was made available to EU migrant sex workers in two languages, English and Romanian, between April and October 2019. In total, 41 sex workers completed the survey. This relatively low completion rate – common in research of this nature – is indicative of EU migrant sex workers' reluctance to speak out about sex work in the current socio-political climate. Whilst not statistically representative, this small-scale research – the first of its kind to explore this issue – offers important insight into EU migrant sex workers' experiences post-Referendum. In particular, it points to key things that sex workers and their allies can organise around in pursuit of better rights for migrant sex workers in the UK context.

Whilst the findings outlined here pertain to EU migrant sex workers' experiences specifically, it must be noted that non-EU migrant sex workers share many of these experiences. Indeed, the conditions that both constituted, and were constituted by, the Referendum result are likely felt even more acutely by non-EU migrants (and especially, racially minoritised sex workers) because of their experiences of intersecting inequalities and potentially more precarious immigration status.

## Key Findings

- 78% of EU migrant sex workers reported that their ability to earn income through sex work has decreased since the Referendum.
- 68% of respondents noted at least one way in which they have changed their working practices post-Referendum. Key changes include: where they work (39%), the hours they work (24%), and the 'type' of client accepted (24%). On the latter point, some reported having to accept clients that they would have previously rejected on safety grounds.
- EU migrant sex workers also reported having to make changes to their working practices due to a perceived increased risk of deportation. Some reported having been raided and arrested, whilst others have been threatened with closure orders. This is particularly concerning post-Referendum because even those granted Settled Status under the EU Settlement Scheme can be deported if they are convicted of committing a criminal offence.
- The majority of respondents (63%) perceive that clients' attitudes towards migrant sex workers have worsened since the Referendum.
- The majority of respondents (63%) also perceive that

the general public's attitudes towards migrant sex workers have worsened post-Referendum.

- 68% of respondents are worried about the levels of violence they experience as EU migrant sex workers.
- 68% of respondents said that their concerns about experiencing violence have increased since the Referendum.
- Reflecting on actual levels of violence against migrant sex workers post-Referendum, 44% of respondents noted an increase.
- Three-quarters of respondents (76%) reported having experienced hate crime post-Referendum. We included sex worker hate crime in the list, alongside other widely accepted types of hate crime. The most commonly reported type of hate crime was sex worker hate crime (reported by 61% of respondents), followed by hate crime on the basis of nationality (51%) and gender (17%).
- Over half of respondents (57%) noted that the levels of hate crime that they experience have risen since the Referendum.
- Some respondents reported experiencing more xenophobia since the Referendum, including physical and verbal attacks. One sex worker had eggs and tomatoes thrown at them.
- Respondents have also developed strategies to navigate negative experiences post-Referendum. Some conceal the truth about their nationality to avoid xenophobia, others have increasingly adopted safety strategies such as 'buddying' or working with a third-party (e.g. maid); although, this has legal implication given that existing sex work laws prevent sex workers working together or with a third-party for safety.
- Respondents reported increased stress post-Referendum (59%). A key source of stress was the increased risk of detention and deportation. There is a commonly held perception amongst EU migrant sex workers that because they are sex workers they have no right to reside in the UK. Whilst technically sex workers can claim self-employed status, there is no legal precedent for this. This means each sex worker must fight immigration rulings on an individual basis. Depending on how migrant sex workers have sold sex, they may not have the documentation required to prove continual residence in the UK under the EU Settlement Scheme.
- A significant number of respondents (54%) believe that their risk of arrest has increased since the Referendum.
- 66% of respondents perceive their risk of deportation to have increased post-Referendum.
- 44% of respondents described their relationship with the police as either 'poor' (20%) or 'very poor' (24%). Respondents noted that do not report victimisation to the police for fear of arrest, detention and deportation.
- The vast majority of respondents (85%) would like to see changes made to sex work laws in the UK. All of

these respondents either explicitly or implicitly advocated for the decriminalisation of sex work. None of the respondents were in favour of the so-called Swedish Model (the criminalisation of clients).

## Recommendations

Based on these findings, we make a number of evidence-based recommendations:

1. **Decriminalise sex work.** This will improve the rights and safety of all sex workers, including migrant sex workers.
2. **Grant automatic Settled Status to all EU citizens in the UK.** This will help to redress the significant challenges EU migrant sex workers encounter in applying to the EU Settlement Scheme.
3. **Expunge historical convictions for all sex workers.** This will help to ensure that migrant sex workers are not deported as a result of having criminal convictions for sex work.
4. **Improve financial assistance for migrants in the UK.** This will help to ensure that migrant sex workers are not compelled to accept dangerous clients in order to earn enough income to live off.
5. **End the hostile environment.** This will help tackle the range of state-imposed difficulties faced by people who migrate to the UK.

A Romanian language version of this research summary and the full report are available on the English Collective of Prostitutes' website: <https://prostitutescollective.net/> For hard copies, queries, or future research collaborations please contact Dr Laura Connelly (University of Salford) on: L.J.Connelly@salford.ac.uk

