

FACTS ABOUT SEX WORK



Facts about sex work are often misrepresented. Gathered here is some of the most reliable and current evidence addressing who sex workers are, levels of violence and poverty and the devastating impact of criminalisation.

These facts should provide a basis for a change in law and policy so that sex workers are no longer criminalised, can access healthcare and are able to report violence without the fear of arrest and deportation. Efforts to reduce prostitution should focus on providing money and resources to women, especially mothers, so that they can exit sex work if they choose.

WHO ARE SEX WORKERS

Of the approximately 72,800 sex workers in the UK — at least 88% are women.

Most sex workers are mothers working to support families.

A 2004 government report found that 74% of off-street sex workers “cited the need to pay household expenses and support their children”.

More than 70% of UK sex workers have previously worked in healthcare, education or the voluntary sector.

This was because of the “inability to meet living costs” in other jobs traditionally done by women.

The average age of entry into prostitution is 19 for outdoor workers and 23 for indoor workers.

The claim that 75% of sex workers became involved in prostitution as children is false. It comes from small samples (e.g., 30) of street-based women. One often cited statistic comes from a study of young

people specifically, another asked when young people first had sex not when they started sex work.

Prostitution is increasing because poverty is increasing.

86% of austerity cuts have targeted women. Women of colour, in particular, have been disproportionately impacted. Policies like the two-child limit, the benefit cap and benefit sanctions are proven to make women and children poorer. A parliamentary committee inquiry found a direct link between the move to Universal Credit and an increase in “survival sex”. In some areas, an increase in street prostitution is primarily attributed to destitution caused by benefit sanctions and the bedroom tax. A fifth of young homeless women have engaged in sex work to fund accommodation or in the hope of getting a bed for the night.

THE LAWS

Whilst it is legal to exchange sex for money, anything that sex workers do to contact a client is criminalised.

The most commonly used laws are:

- **Street Offences Act 1959, Section 1: *Loitering or soliciting for purposes of prostitution***, which criminalises the act of offering sex for money on the street.
- **Sexual Offences Act 1956, Section 33: *Keeping a brothel***, which criminalises sex workers who work with others from premises and anyone that manages or assists in the running of a brothel. This is primarily used against women working together for safety.
- **Sexual Offences Act 2003**
 - **Section 53: *Controlling prostitution for gain***. No evidence of force, coercion or even exploitation is required to bring charges for controlling or inciting so workmates or anyone who could provide protection, is at risk of criminalisation.
 - **Section 51A: *Soliciting***, criminalises a person who solicits another for sex in the street or a public place. This law increases sex workers' risk of violence as they have less time to check out a client who is nervous of arrest.
 - **Section 53A: *Paying for sexual services of a prostitute subjected to force*** is a strict liability offence which means a client can get

convicted whether or not he knew the sex worker was forced and regardless of what efforts he made to find out.

- **Modern Slavery Act 2015** included the “exploitation of prostitution” as a form slavery. Police justify raids and arrests in the name of saving victims yet in 70% of “anti-trafficking” raids no victims were found -- migrant sex workers report being targeted for deportation.
- **Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001** made it illegal to put a prostitute's card in a phone box.
- **Civil Orders** -- Criminal Behaviour Orders, Civil Injunctions, Public Space Protection Orders, Community Protection Orders, etc. are used against sex workers on the street and Brothel Closure Orders are used to close premises. All can be imposed on the basis of hearsay and police evidence alone, yet a breach is a criminal offence.
- **The Online Safety Act 2023** obliges advertising platforms to remove sex workers' adverts that could be construed as committing a criminal offence making it harder for people to work safely and screen clients.

- **Online advertising of sexual services** is not explicitly illegal but prosecutions can be brought against content that is considered "obscene".

IMPACT OF THE LAWS

It is principally women who face criminal charges.

Statistics from London from 2016 to 2021 show that 100% of people arrested for "loitering for the purposes of prostitution" were women.

The prostitution laws are implemented in a racist and discriminatory way.

People of colour, migrant and trans sex workers are targeted for arrest. Over 90% of women arrested between 2016 and 2021 in London for loitering for the purposes of prostitution were migrant and/or women of colour. Evidence shows that the criminalisation of clients is a "smokescreen for punitive and racialised policing" which often leads to deportations and evictions.

Sex workers face a lot of violence, but criminalisation increases the risk of attack.

UK sex workers have the highest murder rate compared to women in other occupations. It is much safer to work indoors with others but this is illegal. Sex workers are three times more likely to experience rape and other violence in countries where sex work is criminalised.

Violence from the police is a significant problem.

Research in 2021 found that 42% of street-based sex workers had experienced violence from the police, and that women of colour and migrant sex workers are disproportionately targeted. The police are also one of the most “common perpetrators of violence” against trans sex workers internationally. 49% of online workers in the UK were unconfident that police would take reports of violence against them seriously.

The police profit from raids, arrests and convictions for prostitution.

The police, CPS and Home Office get a proportion of assets and cash seized under Proceeds of Crime law.

Criminalisation undermines health - the stigma associated with prostitution prevents sex workers getting appropriate health care.

Evidence from around the world has shown a clear link between criminalisation and sex workers' increased risk of HIV, STIs, and poor emotional health. Fear of police, and increased police presence, were linked to avoidance of health care services. Police confiscating condoms and using them as evidence for arrest forces sex workers into unsafe sex.

TRAFFICKING AND MODERN SLAVERY

Most sex workers are not trafficked.

A study of migrant sex workers found less than 6% had been trafficked, many said they prefer working in the sex industry rather than the “unrewarding and sometimes exploitative conditions they meet in non-sexual jobs.” Studies in Nordic countries (where trafficking has been used to justify the introduction of laws criminalising the purchase of sex) found only

6% of sex workers were trafficked or forced by someone to sell sex.

CRIMINALISATION OF CLIENTS

Criminalisation of people who buy sex (known as the “Nordic Model”) puts sex workers at greater risk of violence and does not reduce the demand for prostitution or reduce trafficking.

Violent crime against sex workers in Ireland rose by 92% after clients were criminalised and research found that: *“the criminalisation of buyers has exacerbated violence and stigma against sex workers.”* In Nordic countries which have laws to criminalise clients, sex workers are still the main targets of the police.

Research in France found that since the law criminalising clients was introduced: 63% of sex workers experienced a deterioration of their living conditions, more isolation and greater stress; 42% were more exposed to violence (sexual violence, theft, and armed robbery); 38% found it increasingly hard to demand use of condoms.

A Northern Irish Ministry of Justice review found “*no evidence that the offence of purchasing sexual services has produced a downward pressure on the demand for, or supply of, sexual services*”.

Evidence compiled by the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women showed that in countries where purchasing sexual services are criminalised, trafficking is not reduced.

DECRIMINALISATION WORKS

Full decriminalisation of sex work has been implemented in New Zealand in 2003, Belgium in 2022, and a number of Australian states over the past decades, with verifiable success. In New Zealand over 90% of sex workers said they had additional employment, legal, health and safety rights. 64.8% found it easier to refuse clients and 70% said they were more likely to report incidents of violence to the police. In Belgium sex workers won labour rights, including pensions, maternity leave and the right to refuse clients -- strengthening workers' hands to fight workplace exploitation.

The majority of people support prostitution law reform and oppose the criminalisation of clients.

Decriminalisation is supported by many prestigious organisations.

In the UK this includes the Royal College of Nursing, Women Against Rape, Freedom United and the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants. Internationally support comes from Amnesty International, the World Health Organization, Human Rights Watch, UNAIDS, International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association and Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women. Trade Unions both in the UK and internationally also support decriminalisation such as BFAW, ASLEF, GMB, Equity, and IWW.

Decriminalisation is different from legalisation.

Decriminalisation involves the removal of all prostitution-specific laws; sex workers and sex work businesses operate under the same labour laws as everyone else. Under legalisation sex work is legal only under certain state-specified conditions, creating a two-tier system where the sex workers with the least social power remain illegal and outside of the protection of the law.

For references and more info on sex work please visit: prostitutescollective.net

The English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) is a grassroots organisation of sex workers and supporters campaigning for the decriminalisation of prostitution, for sex workers' rights and safety, and for resources to enable people to get out of prostitution if they want to. Our network includes sex workers working on the street and in premises.

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