

PRESS BRIEFING ON PROSTITUTION

It is estimated that there are over 72,800 sex workers in the UK, the majority women.¹ Many are mothers supporting families.² A recent survey found that 76% of respondents entered sex work out of direct financial necessity.³ Rising rent and energy costs, benefit cuts,⁴ and the prevalence of exploitative, low-wage and bad conditions in jobs traditionally done by women were also cited as reasons for entering sex work.⁵

THE LAW

The Sexual Offences Act 2003 defines a prostitute as a person who has offered or given services of a sexual nature to another person in return for financial gain on one or more occasions.

In the UK, the act of buying or selling sex between consenting adults is not illegal in itself. However, almost all activities *surrounding* it are criminalised. (It is illegal to buy sexual services in Northern Ireland).

UK SEX WORK LEGISLATION

Law/offence	Explanation/ legal context	Impact
Loitering & soliciting	It is a criminal offence for a “person to persistently loiter or solicit in a street or public place for the purpose of prostitution”. Street Offences Act 1959 (SOA 1959), s1 (1). The sentence is a fine.	Pushes workers into isolated areas, reducing ability to vet clients and increases risk of violence. It is disproportionately used against women. ⁶ 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. ⁷
Clients soliciting for sex	It is a criminal offence for a “person in a street or public place to solicit someone for the purpose of obtaining their sexual services as a prostitute”. SOA 2003, s51 (1). The sentence is a fine.	Pushes sex workers into isolated areas and to rush transactions, therefore having less time to assess risk.
Civil orders (Community Protection Notice/Criminal Behaviour Order/Public Space Protection Order)	These are used to ban people: from specific areas, from association with particular people; and from taking particular actions. A breach is a criminal offence, with fines of up to £2,500 or possible imprisonment.	Pushes sex workers into more isolated areas; creates a parallel legal system with a lower burden of proof that is largely dependent on police evidence alone.
Brothel-keeping	It is an offence for “a person to keep a brothel or to manage, act or	Prevents sex workers operating together for safety;

	assist in the management of a brothel". Sexual Offences Act 1956 (SOA 1956), s33. A brothel is defined as more than one person working together. The maximum sentence is 7 years in prison.	disproportionately impacts women, often migrants. ⁸
Controlling prostitution	It is an offence to "intentionally control the activities relating to the prostitution of another person with the expectation of gain", SOA 2003 s53 (1).	Doesn't require force or coercion to be proven and therefore can be used against sex workers working together for safety.
"Prostitute's caution"	A non-statutory police warning based on police evidence alone. "Two officers would need to witness the activity and administer the non-statutory "prostitutes caution". ⁹	The "prostitute's caution" differs from other police cautions, in that the accused does not have to admit guilt, there is no right of appeal, and the caution stays on their record for life (or until the accused is 100 years old.) These life-long records prevent sex workers from leaving the industry, stigmatising them, and affecting future employment. ¹⁰
Advertising	The Online Safety Act 2023 (OSA 2023) restricts sex workers' online advertising. It puts a duty on platforms to pre-emptively take down adverts that may be associated with criminal activity. Non-compliance results in heavy fines. It is an offence to advertise in public spaces e.g. phone boxes under the Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001. The punishment is a fine or up to six months in prison.	Mandating platforms to remove illegal content in practice often leads to a blanket removal of sex work advertisements, affecting workers' ability to screen clients and work independently. This has pushed sex workers offline and onto the streets where it is more dangerous.
Banking	Money laundering legislation gives banks great powers to surveil and monitor accounts. Sex workers accounts are regularly and arbitrarily closed as a result with no transparency or redress. This is despite the Financial Conduct Authority warning banks not to deny accounts to "adult entertainment workers". ¹¹	Denying sex workers access to banking forces them to depend on others, making them more vulnerable to exploitation. Having to operate in a cash only environment increases risk to workers.

LEGAL MODELS OF SEX WORK REGULATION

Model title	Country	Impact
FULL DECRIMINALISATION	New Zealand (2003) Belgium (2022)	In New Zealand, 90% of sex workers reported improved legal, health and safety rights since decriminalisation.

<p>Removes all criminal penalties; sex work treated as labour under employment laws.</p>		<p>The law empowered workers: the rate of workers refusing clients rose from 47% to 68%, and 70% felt more able to report violence to the police.¹² In Belgium since 2022 sex workers have labour rights, including pensions, maternity leave and the right to refuse clients — strengthening workers’ hands to fight workplace exploitation.¹³</p> <p>Decriminalisation is supported by organisations including Amnesty International,¹⁴ the World Health Organization, UNAIDS, Liberty, and major trade unions such as the GMB, Communication Workers Union, and ASLEF.¹⁵</p>
<p>PARTIAL CRIMINALISATION or NORDIC MODEL</p> <p>Criminalises the purchase of sex, but not the selling.</p>	<p>Sweden (1999) Norway/Iceland (2009) Canada (2014) Rep of Ireland (2015) (others)</p>	<p>The Nordic model was first introduced in Sweden and has since spread to other countries. Supporters say it “decriminalises” sex workers because only clients are prosecuted. But in practice sex workers still face arrests, fines, evictions and deportations.¹⁶</p> <p>In Ireland, violent crime against sex workers almost doubled in the two years after client criminalisation was introduced.¹⁷</p> <p>This happens because client criminalisation forces sex workers to rush negotiations and move to more isolated locations to avoid police detection.</p> <p>Proposals in the UK to criminalise the purchase of sex would expand police powers—a dangerous move considering that research indicates that 42% of street-based sex workers have already experienced violence at the hands of the police.¹⁸</p>
<p>LEGALISATION</p> <p>The sex industry is controlled by the government, and sex work is legal only under certain state-specified zones or brothels.</p>	<p>Germany, Netherlands etc.</p>	<p>Under a legalised system, sex workers who operate outside designated areas or fail to register can face criminal charges. This creates a two-tier system in which the most vulnerable remain criminalised and excluded from legal protections. Legalisation has not improved working conditions or safety and has further marginalised many sex workers. Most prefer to remain outside the legal system rather than comply with its requirements (e.g.</p>

		only 12% of women in Germany work within the legalised sector).
<p>CRIMINALISATION</p> <p>Selling and some forms of purchasing sex are legal but activities associated with sex work are not, such as working on the street, working together from premises and “third parties” that is workmates, bosses and even partners can be prosecuted. Clients are criminalised for soliciting for sex on the street.</p>	UK	<p>Criminalisation undermines health and safety by forcing sex workers to work in isolation. It deters sex workers from accessing services and reporting violence and excludes them from many resources available to others. Criminal records and “prostitute’s cautions” brand sex workers as criminals and place them at greater risk of exploitation and violence. Sex workers can lose custody of their children and are denied compensation and/or insurance and are deported or prevented from travelling.</p> <p>A systematic review of research covering nearly three decades found that criminalisation triples the likelihood of sex workers experiencing violence and doubles the risk of HIV infection.¹⁹</p>

TRAFFICKING

Trafficking and exploitation remain illegal under decriminalisation. When workers are not criminalised, they are more able to report exploitation and help identify victims. Estimating the exact number of victims trafficked into sexual exploitation in the UK is difficult because there is evidence that statistics have been exaggerated²⁰ to justify police enforcement against prostitution and because sex workers, particularly migrant workers, are falsely labelled as victims.²¹

The most comprehensive research in the UK found that 6% of migrant sex workers are victims of trafficking – as defined according to the Palermo Protocol: the transportation of persons by means of force and coercion.²²



English Collective of Prostitutes, May 2026.

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- ¹ Brooks-Gordon, B. Mai, N. Perry, G. and Sanders, T. (2015). Calculating the Number of Sex Workers and their Contribution to the Non-Observed Economy in the UK. In Decriminalisation of Prostitution, English Collective of Prostitutes (2016) <https://prostitutescollective.net/decriminalisation-of-prostitution-the-evidence/>
- ² Home Office. (2004). Paying the Price: A Consultation Paper on Prostitution.
- ³ Decrim Now Survey Report: Sex Workers Navigating Gendered Poverty. (2025). <https://decrimnow.org.uk/2025/10/30/decrim-now-survey-report-sex-workers-navigating-gendered-poverty/>
- ⁴ A parliamentary committee inquiry (House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee (2019) <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201919/cmselect/cmworpen/83/83.pdf>) found a direct link between the move to Universal Credit and an increase in “survival sex” (The Guardian, 22 May 2019) <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/may/22/universal-credit-hardship-linked-to-prostitution>)
- ⁵ English Collective of Prostitutes (2019). What’s a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Job Like This? <https://prostitutescollective.net/whats-a-nice-girl-like-you-doing-in-a-job-like-this/>
- ⁶ Metropolitan Police, Prostitution / Keeping a Brothel Arrests, 1 Jan 2016-31 Dec 2021.
- ⁷ Metropolitan Police, released under the FOI Act 2000: <https://www.met.police.uk/foi-ai/metropolitan-police/d/february-2022/people-arrested-loitering-soliciting-for-prostitution-keeping-brothel-2016-2021/>
- ⁸ Platt et al. (2022). The Effect of Systemic Racism and Homophobia on Police Enforcement and Sexual and Emotional Violence among Sex Workers in East London: Findings from a Cohort Study. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11524-022-00673-z>
- ⁹ <https://www.cps.gov.uk/publication/prostitution-and-exploitation-prostitution>
- ¹⁰ English Collective of Prostitutes. (2024). Proceed Without Caution: The Impact of “Prostitute’s Cautions & Convictions on Sex Workers’ Lives <https://prostitutescollective.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Proceed-Without-Caution-Report.pdf>
- ¹¹ The Guardian, 4 September 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/article/2024/sep/04/city-regulator-fca-warns-banks-over-denying-sex-workers-business-accounts>
- ¹² Ministry of Justice. (2008). Report of the Prostitution Law Review Committee on the Prostitution Reform Act 2003. <https://prostitutescollective.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/report-of-the-nz-prostitution-law-committee-2008.pdf>
- ¹³ Utsopi, Decriminalisation. <https://www.utsopi.be/our-work/decriminalisation>
- ¹⁴ Amnesty International, Sex workers rights. <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/issues/authoritarianism/gender-justice/sex-workers-rights/>
- ¹⁵ <https://x.com/ukdecrimnow/status/1735018689827627333>
- ¹⁶ Vuolajärvi, N. (2022). Criminalising the buying of sex? Experiences from the Nordic Countries <https://www.lse.ac.uk/women-peace-security/assets/documents/2022/W922-0152-WPS-Policy-Paper-6-singles.pdf>
- ¹⁷ Amnesty International, (2022). ‘We live in a violent system’ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur29/5156/2022/en/>
- ¹⁸ Research in 2021 found that 42% of street-based workers had experienced violence from the police (Elmes J, Stuart R, Grenfell P, *et al.* Effect of police enforcement and extreme social inequalities on violence and mental health among women who sell sex: findings from a cohort study in London, UK. <https://sti.bmj.com/content/early/2021/10/26/sextrans-2021-055088>). Women of colour and migrant sex workers are disproportionately targeted. (Platt et al. (2022). The Effect of Systemic Racism and Homophobia on Police Enforcement and Sexual and Emotional Violence among Sex Workers in East London: Findings from a Cohort Study. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11524-022-00673-z>)
- ¹⁹ Platt, L., Grenfell, P., Meiksin, R., Elmes, J., Sherman, S.G., Sanders, T., Mwangi, P., and Crago, A. (2018). Associations between sex work laws and sex workers’ health: A systematic review and meta-analysis of quantitative and qualitative studies. <https://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.1002680>.
- ²⁰ The Guardian, 20 October 2009. Prostitution and trafficking – the anatomy of a moral panic. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2009/oct/20/trafficking-numbers-women-exaggerated>
- ²¹ Connelly, L., and English Collective of Prostitutes. (2021). EU Migrant Sex Work in the UK Post-Referendum. <https://prostitutescollective.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Full-Report-EU-migrant-sex-work-in-the-UK-post-Referendum.pdf>
- ²² Mai, N. (2011). Migrant Workers in the UK Sex Industry: ESRC Full Research Report. <https://prostitutescollective.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Migrant-Workers-in-the-UK-Sex-Industry-Project-Final-Policy-Relevant-Report.pdf>