

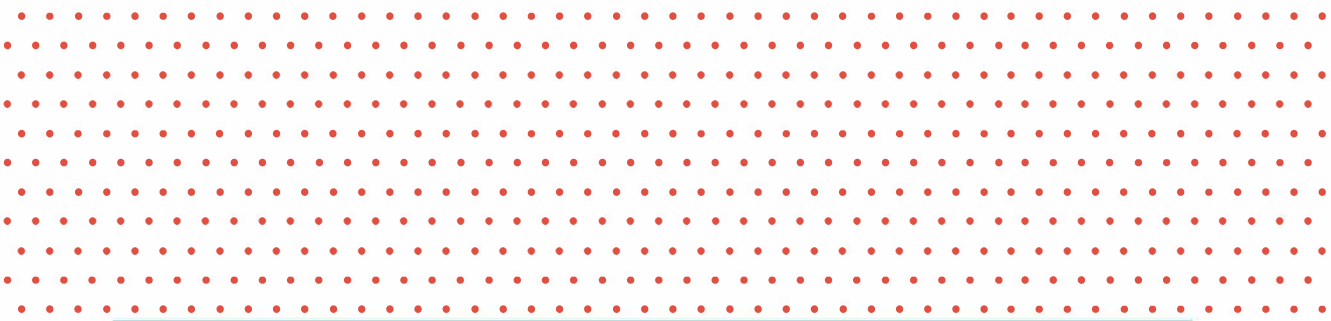
# No silence to violence

a report  
on violence  
against women  
in prostitution  
in the UK

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by the Sex Worker  
Advocacy and  
Resistance  
Movement





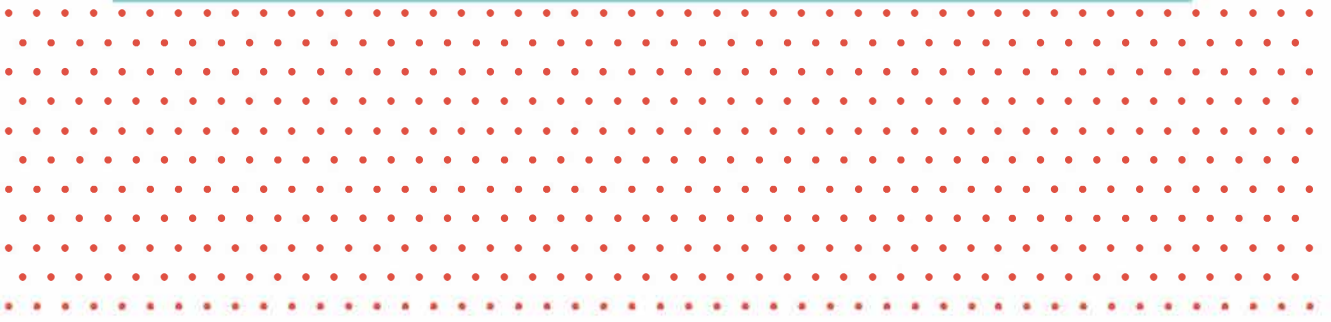
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**SWARM** would like to thank Basis Yorkshire, Decrim Now, the English Collective of Prostitutes and National Ugly Mugs for their support with producing this report. More details on these organisations can be found on page 37.

This publication was produced by the Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement in December 2018. We have used pseudonyms to protect the women who shared their stories and to preserve their anonymity.

This report is specifically intended to reach people working in organisations and services tackling violence against women. Prostitution is undeniably a highly gendered occupation - the vast majority of those buying sex are men, and the majority of those selling sex are women. In this report we use the term 'women in prostitution' and our focus is on women sex workers (both cis and trans women). We know that there are also non-binary people and men who are sex workers, and our focus on women in this report is not intended to erase the experiences of sex workers of other genders. Non-binary people are a diverse group and we do not wish to generalise their experiences of gender-based violence. However we would note that much of what is contained in this report will be relevant to supporting men and non-binary sex workers as well as women.

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# Introduction

The launch of this report marks International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers, December 17th. IDEVASW began in 2003 as a memorial and vigil for the victims of the Green River Killer, a serial killer who murdered at least 71 women in the US state of Washington. The majority of his victims were sex workers. Since the first IDEVASW, December 17th has been a date when sex workers across the world come together, often holding red umbrellas as the symbol of the international sex worker rights movement, to commemorate all the sex workers who have been victims of violence and to call for solidarity in our struggle to resist the stigma, violence and criminalisation that sex workers continue to live under.

In calling for the end to violence against sex workers, we must recognise that many sex workers who experience violence are also marginalised because of other identities they have or oppressions they suffer. Violence against sex workers intersects with gender-based violence, with economic deprivation, and with drug use, migration, racism, transphobia and mental and physical health issues. The struggle to end violence against sex workers requires efforts of solidarity and resistance that go far beyond changing the laws concerning prostitution. We need to listen to the diverse experiences of women who sell sex if we are going to truly understand the nature of violence against them.

This report has been co-authored by a number of women who are currently doing sex work in the UK or who have done so in the past. In addition, we have consulted numerous other women currently or previously working in prostitution about their views and lived experience. Also included are contributions from professionals who work in services which offer support to women in prostitution, sharing case studies and knowledge from their professional practice. We hope to cut through some of the mistrust and misunderstanding that currently exists between professionals in the VAWG sector and advocates for sex worker rights - so that we can all work together on the common goals of ending violence against sex workers and supporting every survivor of violence on their own terms.

# Prostitution and violence against women

In order to effectively tackle violence against women in prostitution, we need to understand the nature of that violence - and this means listening closely and non-judgmentally to all those who have experienced it.

In the course of offering support to women who have lived experience of prostitution, you may meet women who do not consider their experiences in prostitution to be work and who might prefer to be referred to as survivors of prostitution, or victims of sexual exploitation. We recognise the right of every woman to define her own experiences, and a person-centred approach to supporting women should never invalidate that right. All survivors of sexual violence must be believed, and supported. However, it's important to recognise that there are many, many women of diverse experiences in prostitution who do view selling sex as work, and who find the conflation of their work with "violence against women" harmful and alienating. It's also vital to engage with and understand the harm that criminalisation causes to all women in prostitution, whether we view it as work or not.

It can be tempting to simplify the distinction between those who consider their experience of prostitution to be 'work' and those who do not to be a difference between those who 'choose' to sell sex and those who have 'no choice'. However, that oversimplification can lead to a lot of confusion. For the majority of women who sell sex, the decision to do so is made under constrained conditions - that is, not being able to find an alternative form of getting the money that will keep a roof over our head and food on the table that month.

**The reasons that other forms of getting an income may not be available or accessible to women in prostitution might be:**

- having childcare or other carer commitments that make it hard to take jobs with inflexible hours, and the high costs of childcare
- having a long-term mental or physical health condition that limits ability to work long days or do regular hours
- suffering from discrimination in the job market on account of some aspect of their identity (e.g. ethnicity or trans status)
- having a low level of English, or lacking formal education or qualifications
- living in an area of the country with fewer jobs available
- being displaced due to fleeing domestic violence or another violent situation
- going through a period of crisis - redundancy or being fired, a family or health crisis, having a sudden change in circumstances or large bill to pay that means you need money quickly and don't have another way to earn or borrow it
- ...or just finding that every other job available to them at present pays too little to live on.

### It's also important to recognise that:

- Some sex workers do have another job as well as prostitution, but find that the other job just doesn't pay enough to make ends meet.
- Some are not entitled to claim benefits due to their migration status, and others find that the benefits they are entitled to are not enough to meet their living costs, or have been suddenly reduced due to sanctions or government cuts.
- There are also sex workers who have tried several other kinds of work available to them, and decided that for them, sex work offers the best pay and conditions.

Understanding this nuance around 'choice' is crucial to understanding the nature of prostitution, and how best to support women who do it. Whatever our reason for being in prostitution, we all deserve to be safe from violence, and we are all deserving of support to help us improve our lives.

While the great majority of women in prostitution in the UK are selling sex in order to meet their own economic needs (or to provide for their families), there are also women, and sometimes children, who are coerced into selling sex by an abusive person or group. It's very important not to conflate the experiences of women and children who are coerced or groomed by abusers into selling sex (or exchanging sex for drugs or shelter) with adult women selling sex out of their own economic need. Although both are examples of people selling sex not through "free choice", the different support needs of people in those very different situations need to be understood - generalisations which erase the distinction do not help anyone.

**"Once, a nurse at the sexual health clinic asked me 'do you do this work because you choose to or because you have to?' which I felt was a confused question to ask - my reply was that I choose to do it because I need money to survive."**

*Mia*

**"Career prostitutes are few and far between. Most sex workers are mothers who think "just this once," "just this week," to cover a heating bill or make something a bit special to eat. Then we get stuck in something we can never get out of. I never thought the first time I went out that I would still be here at my age. Now I have a record so can't get another job."**

*Jenny*

Some local authorities and statutory bodies consider prostitution to be intrinsically a form of violence against women and girls in their VAWG strategies, alongside crimes such as rape, domestic abuse, honour-based violence, stalking and forced marriage. The main problem with this policy approach is that it usually leads to a strategy of heavy-handed police raids on brothels, and crackdowns on areas where street-based prostitution takes place. When these crackdowns happen, women are displaced and put in greater risk and migrant sex workers are targeted for deportation. 'Tackling violence against women' is, with a very bitter irony, being used as the justification for enforcement operations that don't feel much different to old-style "vice" busts or regular immigration raids.

Instead of these harmful 'zero tolerance' approaches to all prostitution, what would help women in prostitution far more would be to view us as a group who are especially vulnerable to certain forms of violence, and to provide us with specialist support and access to justice. The forms of violence to which sex workers are more vulnerable are varied: they include rape and sexual assault, physical attacks and robbery, stalking and harassment (including blackmail and threats of 'outing'), hate crime, coercive control, sexual exploitation, and police harassment. It's crucial to listen to sex workers' own accounts of experiencing violence and what support we need, rather than making assumptions.

If a worker in a rape crisis service holds the view that a sex worker is raped every time she has sex with a client for money, how can that worker meaningfully and non-judgmentally support all of the women in prostitution who have experienced being raped or sexually assaulted, and who see a big difference between that experience and their usual experience of selling sex? Most women in prostitution who have experienced rape view the rhetoric of 'all prostitution is rape anyway' as invalidating - it erases the importance of the particular violence they have experienced. Viewing all prostitution as inevitably 'paid rape' also plays into the very dangerous idea that it is impossible for a sex worker to have and to enforce sexual boundaries when she has sex with a client for money. But these sexual boundaries matter deeply to us. Women who sell sex must be supported to enforce boundaries and to hold to account clients who do not respect them.

**"As a long term sex worker and a survivor of rape, it makes my blood boil to be told that all prostitution is rape. Both of my sexual assaults happened outside of my work. It makes me feel gaslighted and belittled to be told I don't know the difference. I consent to sex for money. I don't get a sexual kick out of it but I get money! And that's ok. It is still consent."**

*Becky*

**"A client paying me doesn't negate my consent. I have a list of sexual services I am willing to provide and I make it clear that they are all at my discretion. Just like unpaid sex, consent is a constant process and can be withdrawn at any time. The idea that I can't consent feeds into ideas that sex workers are to blame when we are assaulted or that we can't be assaulted at all. If all sex work is violence why do I take so many measures to keep myself safe?"**

*Emily*

The reasons that women in prostitution are especially vulnerable to violence are complex. One reason is that men who wish to commit acts of violence against women can view sex workers as 'easy targets' who are less likely to feel able to report to the police due to fear of being arrested themselves, or having the flat or area they work from raided. In this case, criminalisation exacerbates the problem and we explore this later in the report. Another reason is that there is a deeply misogynist stigma in our society against women who sell sex (sometimes called 'whorephobia') - this means that some people view us as less than human, and less deserving of respect. In this respect, some attacks on sex workers can bear a lot of similarity to other forms of hate crime. To compound these two factors, sex workers are generally people with less power and privilege in society, and more likely to belong to other marginalised groups. Our vulnerability to violence can be increased by additional and intersecting factors: poverty or social class, gender, race, migration status, age, homelessness, substance use, mental or physical disability, or being queer, gender non-conforming or trans.

# How perpetrators can use a woman's sex work as a tool of control

In the same way that an abusive partner might use a woman's insecure migration status as a tool of coercive control ("If you go to the police they'll just deport you," "If you leave me I'll report you to immigration"), sex workers are vulnerable to having our involvement in prostitution used against us by abusers.

## The abuser might threaten to:

- Report a sex worker to the police, exposing her to arrest and/or deportation
- Use the fact she is a sex worker to enforce removal of her children from her care (in a custody court case or by reporting a sex working mother to social services)
- Expose a sex worker to shame and public disgrace by telling their family, friends or neighbours, or 'outing' them online
- Tell their current employer (if the woman is a former or part-time sex worker)
- Report them for benefits or tax fraud if they are not declaring sex work income
- For indoor sex workers, report the address they are working from to the police so that it will be raided as a 'brothel'

Abusers who threaten a sex worker in this way might be current or former intimate partners, abusive clients or bosses, or another person in their life who is stalking or harassing them. Sex workers who have a presence online (e.g. escorts who do online advertising, or 'camgirls' and porn performers) can be vulnerable to having online evidence of their work captured and used to threaten, discredit or humiliate them. Women who have left sex work can still be threatened and black-mailed with 'outing' even years later.

**"The clients I'm most afraid of over the years have been the ones who understood how the system works - when they make reference to brothel keeping laws and how they could get me arrested or get the brothel closed or how my manager might go to jail or be pulled up on tax evasion, stuff like that. Sometimes they've made threats, but it's also scary when it's just been in passing or in the form of a joke. Those are the guys who see how weak we are, and I still really struggle to put up a boundary with clients like that - I tend to let them walk all over me."**

*Lynn*



# Hate crime and harrassment

Becoming victim to hate-motivated harassment is a huge concern for sex workers. Many police forces will dismiss incidents where sex workers are harassed specifically for their involvement in sex work because being a sex worker is not a 'protected characteristic'.

In addition to the risk of harassment by former partners or clients, sex workers are also highly vulnerable to harassment by neighbours - in their housing block, street or local community. Sometimes local and even national press can participate in outing and publicly shaming sex workers by printing their names, photos or identifying details, causing extreme stress and fuelling harassment by the wider public. Indoor workers who advertise online have had their online sex work profiles, which may include nudity, published in the press without their consent. Street-based sex workers are at risk of being verbally or physically abused by members of the public, or filmed or photographed on smartphones and shamed on social media. The criminalisation and stigma surrounding prostitution puts sex workers in a very weak position to challenge this kind of harassment.



# Accessing support services

Cuts to publicly funded services in the past decade have had a drastically negative impact on the level of support available to women seeking help when fleeing or recovering from gender-based violence. Specialist support services for sex workers have never been adequately funded, and they have been particularly hard hit by austerity. Closures due to funding cuts have left huge gaps in provision and in many cases cut off women from contact with healthcare and support workers with whom they had built a trusting relationship over years. In addition, services have often not been able to keep pace with the changing nature of sex work in recent years - the move towards more sex workers finding clients through online adverts and meeting at indoor premises, rather than soliciting outdoors.

Existing services for sex workers often have a narrow remit - some focus primarily on sexual health and are unable to offer more holistic support, while others are concerned only with 'exit' - unfortunately, these 'exit' projects are scarce and can fail to meet the needs of many women seeking to leave prostitution. A major reason for this is resourcing: if the project cannot offer financial support that can replace a woman's income from sex work, then she is likely to continue to have to sell sex to avoid poverty and destitution.

All women in prostitution need access to truly person-centred, non-judgmental support services which are fully independent from police and immigration authorities. Without these in place, no legal change alone will bring about the end of violence against sex workers.

**“As a drug using, migrant sex worker I didn’t really trust any services, except the NHS because it was confidential and I could just use my working name. I was terrified of being reported to the police or government agencies and would never have gone anywhere near a service that looked official or took my details.”**

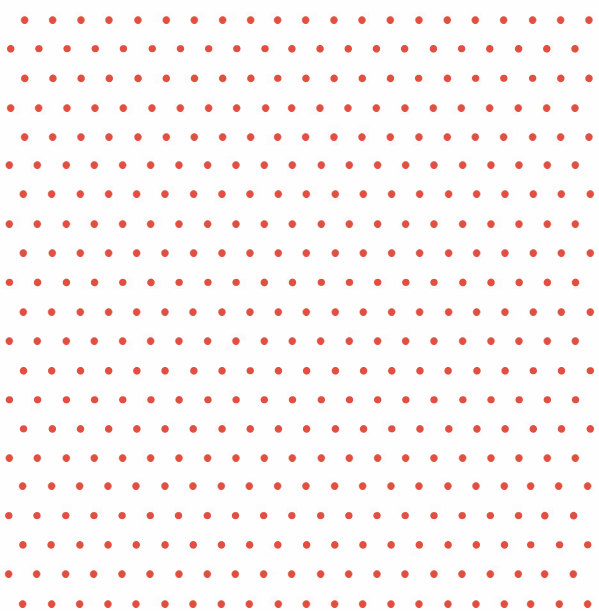
*Alice*

**“I usually go to my local sexual health clinic for routine STI tests. I’ve heard various things about some of the nurses’ seeming disdain for sex workers - one of them told a friend of mine that she would die if she kept doing this work.”**

*Mia*

“I’m a migrant sex worker and I have a chronic illness and it’s impossible for me to work full time hours, and sometimes I am unable to work at all for several weeks at a time due to ill health. Working as an independent escort (full service sex worker) is the only job I have been able to find that pays enough for me to live on, and to earn enough money to cover periods when I cannot work at all. At one point, I had severe mental health problems - intense anxiety and depression that just wouldn’t go away. It was affecting my daily life and my ability to work, so I really needed help. For a few years I had been going to the nurses from the project at St Mary’s hospital - a sexual health service specifically for sex workers that is non judgemental and not exit-focused - and had built up trust with the nurse. Because I knew her so well, and because I knew that she would not push me to do anything I didn’t want, I felt able to ask her for help. The project nurse referred me to a psychologist, and the meetings I had with the psychologist were incredibly helpful. Because I was referred by the project, I didn’t have to lie about what kind of work I did. The therapist never tried to push me to quit my work or implied that my work was the cause of my problems. I felt safe and listened to, both as a sex worker, and as a migrant with chronic illness, and the therapy helped me a lot. Without this support my depression would have lasted much longer. I am now developing a career in a different field, and I don’t think I would have been able to do that without the support I received - support that I would not have asked for if I didn’t trust the project and the therapist to be non-judgemental and to respect my agency. Sadly, I know the project that helped me has since had its funding cut and no longer exists.”

*Anna*



“For a long time I worked in parlours (managed establishments) and during that time used a few different health services. Some of them behaved as if I was especially vulnerable even though to me my tests felt quite routine. Sometimes they’d repeatedly ask if I was being ‘pimped’ or ‘forced into it’ which made me feel self conscious and like they regarded me as pitiful. I ended up just moving on to a different place and not being honest about being a sex worker, which made it really hard to complete my Hep B vaccination.”

*Lynn*

“I’ve had a lot of experience with mental health professionals, good and bad. One of the worst examples was with a student mental health nurse, who accused me of doing sex work as a form of self harm. This was after I had spoke about how I hadn’t worked for weeks, due to my depression, meaning I had pretty much told her the exact opposite! The best experience has been one woman who works as a counsellor at my university. I usually get ready to field some bad views but I didn’t need to with her. She didn’t once shame or infantilise me, and instead she was able to see the nuance of it just being a a job I do to get the money I need to live on, not some kind of ‘acting out’ behaviour. She made room for me to vent about it too, without using it as fuel to preach to me about exiting.”

*Jasmine*

“I was beaten badly by a client and it was one great woman from the local outreach project who supported me through the whole trauma -- from beginning to end, from the hospital to the police station to report it, through the court case and even to the point when I went back to work. She stuck by me and never behaved like it was my fault and insisted that the police respect me. But a few months later the police raided our flat and I was so upset when the boss at the project seemed to believe the police when they said we were criminals and had stolen stuff. It was like because we are prostitutes what we said didn’t count.”

*Lisa*

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“I worked on the street for three months. It was harsh. The women who came round with condoms were really lovely. But what we women need is often more than that. A group of men kept threatening me and I wanted to go to the police. But I was scared that the men would find out I reported them and the police would do nothing and leave time for the men to beat me up. I went to the ECP and they got my MP to help. Once she was involved the police treated me better.”

*Miranda*

.....

“I was desperate for somewhere to live. I had been kip- ping on a friend’s sofa for months. The woman from the van that comes round helped me contact the council but they only offered me somewhere in Kent, miles from all the friends I relied on and my son who is my number one. Another few months went by and I kept on getting arrest- ed and my health got really bad. I went back to the coun- cil and this time I got a flat in a local block. But some men clocked me and broke into my place and bust the door. The council wouldn’t come and mend it. Then the heating broke. I spent days cold and terrified and not able to sleep. I was at breaking point and ready to start working again. It was a girl from the English Collective of Prosti- tutes who brought me a heater and harassed the council to mend the door.”

*Hayley*

# Jenna's story: caught between poverty and prostitution

From a young age I've struggled with mental and physical health problems. I left home at 18 and got a place at university, but a lack of support for my health issues made it impossible to get my degree - I dropped out and began working. Without a degree I found it hard to find stable permanent work - I worked in bars, restaurants, pubs, call centres, post rooms, dozens of temp jobs and retail positions. My physical health issues mean that I suffer from chronic pain and fatigue, so being on my feet for long shifts was agonising. Even when I got a receptionist job where I could sit down, it paid so little that I had to cycle miles to and from work as I couldn't afford to take public transport - I would get home so exhausted all I could do was go to straight to bed.

Eventually my health deteriorated further and I couldn't keep my job. I signed on to out of work benefits. My housing benefit didn't cover my full rent amount, and after paying my bills and debt repayments I had £20 per week to cover food, travel, clothing, and everything else. For three years I lived on this, with no family or partner to support me. Having tried to go to university, tried to get into stable work, and tried to get support via the benefits system, I felt sex work was the last option open to me.

Very quickly I realised that escorting was able to provide the money I needed to live, without requiring me to work impossibly long hours. I definitely wouldn't call it 'easy money' - I was very aware of how vulnerable I was when with clients. While I did my best to 'screen' clients it was often impossible to know whether they would be violent with me or not. As I lived with friends who didn't know I was a sex worker, and couldn't afford to book hotel rooms, I often met clients in their own homes. This was very frightening for me as I had no idea who else was

in their home, and did not feel safe enough to ask to check each room. While I always texted a friend the address where I was, if a client had decided to assault me no one would have known until the end of the appointment time. When working from another sex worker's flat I felt slightly safer as someone was always in the next room, and I knew I could call on them if I felt in danger. However I had friends who had been assaulted and had to fend for themselves because they worried if they called the police, that they could be arrested for brothel keeping. There were times when I felt really short of money and did not necessarily go through all my screening options because I wanted to see a client quickly. I worried that if they assaulted me, or took my money, that the police would not help, and that I would be blamed.

Working in these kinds of conditions was stressful, and sometimes frightening, but within a few months I was not just paying my bills on time, but for the first time in my adult life I had savings. While there was much work to do on my laptop as an independent sex worker (like answering emails, placing ads, screening clients), I was able to do this in bed. I was with clients for maybe 7 or 8 hours a week. Being able to spend the majority of my week resting, being able to buy nutritious food and have the time and energy to cook it, afford to put the heating on, buy a decent winter coat: all those things felt like such luxuries after years of going without. On top of this I could afford actual luxuries like meals out and even a holiday, something that at the age of 28 I had never managed to afford.

A major setback came when I was diagnosed with breast cancer and was no longer able to work as an escort. In quick succession I had a mastectomy, 6 rounds of chemo, and 15 of radiation. I was back on benefits and much too ill to do escorting. Towards the end of my treatment programme I caught a lucky break - a friend told me about a job coming up at their office on a freelance contract, and I applied (with a few white lies on my CV about my work history) and got the job. On my first day's lunch break I found out that an anonymous account had tweeted at my new boss and the company's public Twitter account telling them all about my escorting. All my new colleagues saw the messages - it was so humiliating. I thought I might be fired on the spot, but managed to brush it off initially. As time went on the same 'anonymous' person messaged my friends on social media telling them that I had been an escort. Some of my friends knew about my escorting and weren't phased but I was frightened. My family didn't know, and neither did the housemates I lived with. I worried that I would lose my home and be cut off from my family.

The job didn't renew my freelance contract when it was up, and so I moved back onto unemployment benefits and began applying for jobs again. Now I could not push myself to work on my feet or cycle to work and back: cancer had taken a heavy toll on my physical health and I could not even push myself through my pain like I had done previously. The job centre was forcing me to apply for a minimum of 5 jobs per day, 5 days a week. My benefits payments kept being stopped for different reasons: sanctions, computer malfunctions, employees not filling in paperwork. I desperately needed money but I felt that even escorting wasn't an option anymore as after my mastectomy I only had one breast.

I saw that a local charity was offering current and former sex workers help to move out of the sex industry into new work. Desperate to avoid falling back into poverty, I applied and was accepted onto the scheme.

There were two orientation days where we met the people running the scheme, and other participants, and found out about what help we would be offered. Very quickly it became apparent that we would be given unpaid work experience roles in various companies, with no promise of a paid job at the end. After a few months of working for free we could apparently put this on our CV and hope to find a new job. I felt insulted that this was offered to us as a route out of sex work. A former escort came and gave us all a talk on how she had left sex work to become a cleaner. She worked for minimum wage, did long shifts, and lived on very little. However she said that it was much better than being a sex worker, and the people running the scheme touted her as inspirational. Almost all of us in the room listening to her had worked these kinds of gruelling jobs before becoming sex workers. In fact often the incredibly hard nature and horrendously low pay of them were the reason that many of us had gone into sex work at all. It didn't seem clear to me how this kind of work was supposed to be a 'better' option than sex work when it would not sustain us financially, and for some of us would be physically impossible to undertake. This, combined with the idea that I was supposed to be grateful to be an unpaid dogsbody in an office for a few months, made me feel like the scheme was a waste of time and so I quit.

I do want help out of poverty, and I don't want to do sex work again - but I feel like people only care that I'm out of prostitution, and don't really care if I'm still poor or destitute or struggling desperately with my health.

# 'Exit' doesn't happen overnight

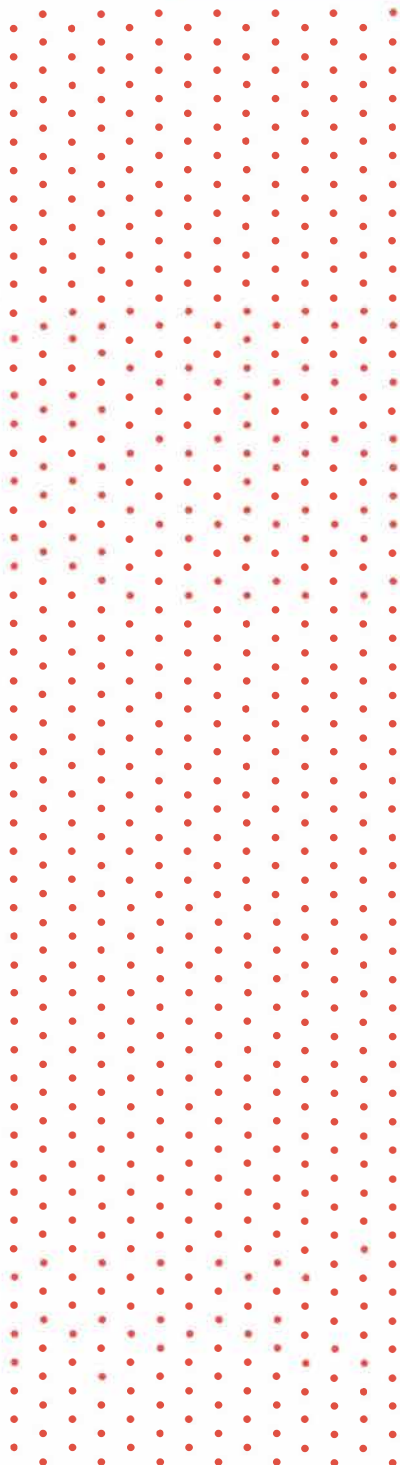
Sex workers who speak out about violence we experience are often told “why don't you just stop doing it then?” This is deeply frustrating and plays into the victim-blaming notion that a sex worker has put herself “in the path of violence” and so bears the responsibility for anything that happens to her.

Some of us don't want another job, we just want to be free from violence - in the same way that all women should have the right to have whatever sex they want, with as many people as they want, and wear what they want, without experiencing misogynist violence or being blamed for it. And for those of us who do want to leave prostitution - even if we want to desperately - it isn't that easily done. Leaving prostitution isn't like quitting smoking - until we manage to find another way to get the money we need to live on, we can't just stop - and no amount of 'willpower' can get us past that material reality.

In the images we have of women in prostitution in popular culture, their lives are usually depicted as following simple trajectories: either a downward spiral leading to dehumanisation and death, or an overnight 'rescue' away from prostitution. The reality of course is much more complex.

Sometimes women continue to sell sex in order to fund their own exit or transition to different work - by saving up or by using their sex work income to pay for education or training. Sometimes women sell sex in order to save up their own money to leave an abusive domestic relationship and support themselves while getting onto their feet independently - in this case, they often hide their sex work from their perpetrator and are at great risk he discovers it.

Supporting women who want to leave prostitution does mean offering advice and material help with leaving, but it also means respecting our agency when that process takes time. Helping a woman with exit planning might include helping her to take measures to stay as safe as possible while continuing to do sex work in the short term, alongside supporting her to work towards her long-term goal of securing another livelihood.





# Alice's story: a survival strategy

I first started working in the sex industry when I was 22, before I migrated to the UK. I was a heroin addict and in an abusive relationship with an older boyfriend who groomed me into working in brothels. He was a long-term heroin user. I began working as a prostitute because we had big debts to drug dealers and the only other option was crime - and I was smart enough to know we would get caught and end up in jail. There were legalised brothels where I lived so the process of starting work was relatively easy, in that I had an interview at one brothel and started the next day. With my new high income things like paying the rent were less stressful but my drug use spiraled. I was working five nights a week in a brothel at one point, supporting both my own drug habit and my boyfriend's. In the space of around six months I had become really isolated and a lot of my friendships had broken down. Many of my friends had staged "interventions" but at the time I thought they just wanted to break up my relationship. I became more and more dependent on my boyfriend who was emotionally manipulative and abusive. I tried unsuccessfully to come off heroin on multiple occasions - everything from cold turkey, cutting down, to using prescribed medicines like methadone. It became clear after two years that if I wanted to "get clean" I would need to break up with my boyfriend.

I migrated to the UK to get far away from my abuser and to get in control of my own drug use. Finding a decent job in England took a number of months and I didn't have any savings. I started doing sex work in flats a few weeks after I arrived - as I needed to pay rent and London was far more expensive than I had thought it would be. The most positive aspect of migrating was that I was able to stay clean and now haven't used heroin in over 12 years. The different flats where I worked over the first year were raided by police a number of times - each time the experience was terrifying and humiliating. I was worried about being arrested and deported - even though I knew that I hadn't actually done anything wrong. In one raid the police took all the money on the premises - including from myself and the other woman working - as 'evidence'. I worked in one flat that was targeted by a gang of men who posed as clients and then with knives and guns they stole jewellery, money and our phones. We didn't report it to the police because we didn't want the flat closed down. The boss who ran the flat did increase security measures after the robbery.

Due to drug use, I had contracted Hepatitis C before migrating to the UK. Access to NHS sexual health services was vital for me in a number of really important ways. The staff at the sex work clinic referred me to a counsellor who I saw for free for over two years - who was non-judgemental and I was able to be open about working in the sex industry. They also referred me to a specialist liver clinic - at which I started an intensive Hep C treatment. The treatment was a success and I have been virus free for nearly ten years now. I later began working independently as an escort by advertising online and working for a number of escort agencies. As an escort, I was making much better money and felt more in control of my sex work and safer. For instance, I was able to pay international student fees for my masters degree because of working as an escort. My decision to stop working came because I got accepted into a PhD programme with a three year scholarship and also fell pregnant - both happened in the same month. However, three years ago my partner and I were really struggling - with large debts and high rents in London pushing us to breaking point. I ended up doing a few escort bookings to try and make ends meet. After so many years of not working it was a bit of a shock to be back and the old feelings of shame and stigma certainly were present. But sex work has since the beginning for me been a survival strategy - of course it is far from perfect but each time I have made the decision it has been because the alternatives I had were worse or non-existent.

# Using non-judgmental language

Showing that you are non-judgmental often starts with the language you use. Many sex workers have experienced times when language used by professionals in the women's sector around selling sex has made us feel alienated, uncomfortable or downright angry.

## **The words “sex work” / “sex worker”**

Sometimes people can think that “sex work” and “sex worker” are terms which promote the sex industry as ‘positive’, and serve to minimise the violence that many have experienced in prostitution. In fact, that is neither the origin of these terms nor the sense in which they are commonly used by sex workers, activists and health and social care professionals. The term ‘sex worker’ is now fairly widely recognised by women currently involved in prostitution in the UK, although colloquially we may just call it ‘work’. Indoor sex workers might refer to ourselves by words such as ‘escort’, ‘call girl’, ‘provider’ or just talk about our place of work by a phrase like “I work in a brothel/walk-up/sauna/massage parlour”.

Some of us do use the word ‘prostitute’ to refer to ourselves. However, due its frequent use as a pejorative or stigmatising label, some sex workers do strongly dislike the word being used. We would encourage professionals engaging with us as service users to be conscious and sensitive about this.

Although the word ‘sex worker’ is used to describe themselves by a very wide range of people who sell sex including those who have experienced severe exploitation, there are some situations involving paid or traded sexual activity in which the phrase ‘sex worker’ may not feel appropriate for a professional to use and would likely not be a term identified with by the person involved. For example: in cases where the person is under 18, has been coerced or deceived into selling sex against their will by an abusive person or group, has exchanged sex for drugs or shelter, or has traded sex for survival in a conflict situation (which may be the case for some asylum seekers and refugees in the UK). The term ‘transactional sex’ is sometimes used as a way to describe some of these experiences that is not sensationalist or stigmatising. In cases where someone is forced into prostitution by a third party, it may be appropriate to refer to them as a victim or survivor of sexual exploitation or trafficking. For young people aged under 18 engaged in selling sex, it may be more appropriate to use the phrase ‘Child Sexual Exploitation’ (CSE), and to understand the dynamics of their experience as a form of child abuse, not prostitution.

People will always have differences of opinion over what language they prefer, and terms change and fall out of use over time. As a general rule words that aim to emphasise the dignity, humanity and agency of the people you are trying to talk about will tend to be better received.

“One phrase that really makes me feel gross and disgusted is when people say that clients ‘use’ a prostitute - you would never say somebody ‘uses’ a hairdresser or a plumber - you use their services, you don’t ‘use’ people. It feels so dehumanising. I sell sexual services, not my body. If I went to a support service and they used that phrase, I would just leave and never come back, because it just shows that the service workers see me as an object, not a person.”

*Anna*

“I hate to hear the term ‘prostituting’ - like ‘she’s been prostituting herself.’ Also, the phrase ‘selling your body’ - the idea that your ‘body’ or your ‘self’ are disappearing while you do this work really makes you feel humiliated and degraded - much more so than the actual work! If a client described me as ‘prostituting’ myself I’d say that was a pretty demeaning remark - it shouldn’t be okay for a so-called support service to say it either.”

*Lynn*

“In political contexts I refer to myself and others as sex workers as I find it the best term to position my work as labour. Otherwise I might use ‘escort’.”

*Mia*

# Basis Yorkshire: a sex worker support service

Basis supports indoor and street sex workers who identify as women, and young people who are sexually exploited. Our purpose is to empower people to make safer and healthier choices by offering information, support and options. Our work is driven by a sound evidence base, as well as working closely with women and young people to ensure our services are designed and delivered with them, putting their voices and experience at the centre of our work. We challenge stigma and inequality of access to services for everyone we work with.

We are proud to be one of a small number of specialist organisations that explicitly recognise and advocate for women's right to work more safely when selling sex, while also supporting young people who are sexually exploited to be safer and free from harm. We understand that for some women and young people, their 'choices' are severely constrained by a range of factors including physical and mental health, substance use, family circumstances and abusive relationships, as we support them in managing the risks and vulnerabilities they face. We recognise people's dignity and agency in their decision-making.

Our 30 years of working with sex workers enables us to see the diversity of experiences in the sex industry, including women choosing to earn their income by selling sex (over or alongside other forms of work, without third-party coercion) through to those being sexually or otherwise exploited and coerced by partners, peers, traffickers, employers, landlords, drug dealers and others. We recognise that inequalities play an important part in people's involvement in the sex industry. For example, when women are poor or have migrant status they can be more easily exploited. Attempts to use enforcement to control the sale of sex, as well as the stigma felt by sex workers, means a lack of access to services and resources which abusers can exploit. We support women to exit sex work, but don't compel them or shame them into that, working alongside them on their personal goals and aspirations for the future.

We are proud of feedback from women and young people for "not giving up", "having their back", "not judging", and "saving their lives". Mostly, we are proud of and inspired by the achievements they have made.

## **Basis case study: Karen**

Basis recently housed Karen, a sex worker who moved to Leeds to escape a violent relationship of over 12 years. Karen's partner had forced her to do sex work to fund his drug addiction, she was suffering poor mental health and had become totally dependent on him. Her move to Leeds initially left her feeling very anxious, she was struggling to make decisions independently and nearly returned to the streets to be with her partner. Nonetheless, thanks to her growth in confidence and the support she had from Basis, TLA and other agencies, Karen is now living without violence, is maintaining her methadone scripts and confidently takes decisions independently. She still sees her partner, however their relationship is on a totally different level; Karen is in control of any visits to her house and how long he may stay. As this change is fairly recent, managing her relationship is still a challenge and she still benefits from the substantial support from her caseworker, however as a first step she now manages and controls her own money and recently enrolled at College.

## **Basis case study: Eva**

Eva is 23 years old and currently escorting through an agency. She was referred for support around sexual violence at work. An Ugly Mugs report was taken and while the police investigated, the outcome of their investigation was an NFA (no further action). Eva received support from a specialist ISVA (Independent Sexual Violence Advisor) at Basis. During the support it was identified that her drug use was getting out of her control and she was not paying her bills, rent, and had not claimed benefits. This had resulted in her being in rent arrears and she had been evicted from her home. Basis supported her to engage with a specialist substance misuse organisation to address her drug use, arranged debt advice (resulting in the agreement of a manageable repayment scheme) and arranged for benefits to be restored and access to a GP, sexual health services and a counsellor. We have had multiple conversations about safe working and what kind of support she should expect from the agency she is working for, and her rights as a sex worker. She was happy with the way the police investigated and understood the reasons why it was NFA'd. She felt that she was respected and was pleased the man was interviewed about it - she hopes this will prevent him from harming other sex workers. She feels more confident when she is working and feels she can report to the police in the future if she needs to.

## **Basis Housing First Project**

Housing First is a scheme which originated in the US and aims to provide unconditional access to housing and support for those people whose needs are not being met by existing housing or homelessness services. Housing First is based on the principle that stable and suitable housing should be provided without restrictions based on personal circumstances or life choices. Intensive personalised support and housing management are provided alongside each other without one being dependent on the other.

Basis Yorkshire has been running a Housing First Project in Leeds since November 2016. The service provided by Basis is one of the only sex worker specific projects in the country and has met significant needs for women who were previously falling through the gaps of existing services. Gemma Sciré, CEO of Basis Yorkshire: "Our non-judgemental, unconditional and flexible approach to working with sex workers is focused on reducing harm and providing choices for women. It made our service an ideal fit with Housing First."

Having a small case load allows the caseworker to provide intensive personalised support in a variety of areas that is needs-based and client-led. This includes women indicating where they might want to live which we try to accommodate as best we can. Alongside the caseworker, there is housing tenancy manager - helping with tasks such as keeping housing benefit in payment, organising repairs and lock changes and ensuring they understand their responsibilities as tenants. This distinction in roles enables a wrap-around support service that allows women to engage with support at their own pace without risking their tenancy or other support services. Unlike in supported housing, there are no obligations for the women to engage with support (other than ourselves initially) but it is made clear that support is always readily available whenever it is needed.



Providing housing for people with complex needs presents a unique set of challenges as their personal needs must be met as well as ensuring they integrate with the local community. We measure the success of our service based on the positive improvements the women we support make to their lives, which in turn should lead to positive relations with the local community.

The evaluation report conducted by the University of Leeds has shown positive improvements in areas such as offending, substance use, physical and mental health and engagement with other support services. Specifically the physical health needs of two service users were so severe before entering the Housing First service one was at risk of having her leg amputated and another was told it was unlikely she would leave hospital. These health outcomes have now turned around completely with them being supported to manage their health and achieve further outcomes in other areas of their lives. Other professionals have highlighted the positive impact Housing First has had on client's engagement. It has ensured that other professionals have had reliable workers they can contact with concerns and a secure address they can locate service users at and improved multi-agency working, ensuring cost savings for all. A reduction in accessing emergency or crisis services has also undoubtedly led to cost savings for the local authorities and/or health services. Some women are no longer sex working, some still are but are using their income earned to improve their quality of life, no longer funding a drug addiction.

Gemma Scire: "The wider benefits of this programme to both service users and stakeholders cannot be overstated. Women with highly complex needs are no longer in a spiral of chaos, and improved housing stability was found to lead to stability in other aspects of their lives too." As one of the women taking part in the scheme said: "This is the first time in a couple of years that I have felt secure and happy with my housing situation - things can only get better."

If you would like to have a more detailed look at the successes and challenges of Basis' Housing First project you can read the Housing First Final Evaluation Report by Emma Bimpson of the University of Leeds, available at: <https://basisyorkshire.org.uk/general-news/housing-first-evaluation/>

# An outreach worker's experience

I was a sex worker for many years but I now work in a support service for women sex workers, doing frontline support work. I never disclose my status or history as a sex worker to the women who use the service, but I was known to the service as a sex worker before I applied for the job and I have always been open with my colleagues about it. I wish I could be more open with the people I work for but I understand and respect the need for professional boundaries - my time as a sex worker is rarely relevant for my clients to know, but professionally I believe it puts me in a position where I can empathise, without pitying them. I can understand and want to help without attempting to be their 'saviour'. I don't see their situations as necessarily exploitative or violent, but rather, circumstantial and survivalist. It's important to navigate the difference and sex worker outreach should be about being person-focused, understanding the client's need and working with that rather than assuming that everyone who has ever had transactional sex needs to be 'rescued'.

Harm reduction is so important for the women we support and that is of course a big part of what we do. We give out condoms and advice to help sex workers protect themselves from STIs and clean needles for drug users. We support women to come forward when they've been victims of crimes, but we also give advice on how to reduce their vulnerability while working - there are ways to work more safely such as carrying a personal safety alarm, having a safety procedure to 'screen' clients, and passing a client's car registration number or mobile number to a friend before being alone with them for the booking. These strategies can save lives.

However, I do think that we need to do much more for sex workers than just 'harm reduction' - but often public funding for sex work projects wants to focus on just the issues which 'bleed out' into wider society (like preventing STIs, or catching sexual predators) because they affect other people as well who aren't sex workers. Sex workers can even be viewed as the "vectors" or source of those problems, which is so wrong. They're not the source of society's problems, they're the scapegoats. And we need to be doing more work that is focused on supporting women holistically - helping them with all their needs: financial, housing, migration, language, childcare and mental health support.

The main issue which we help sex workers with comes down to isolation and stigma. Often our outreach visits are us dropping off condoms and lube and then staying for a chat for another hour about anything they like. A lot of the women we see aren't open about what they do to friends and family and we can be there when they want to talk. Often I'll leave someone's home after a visit and want to stay longer because they clearly just wanted the company. I often work with women who are sex working and need support dealing with domestic violence. Their work isn't the problem - their relationship is, but because of their work they feel reluctant to talk to the police or other women's services about it in case they're pathologised or stigmatised because of it. I can think of a few women I support who are so lovely and gentle and sweet and talk about their work and the clients they see with such compassion, but their partners are violent, abusive and manipulative and they need help and don't want the two issues conflated.



Issues with migration come up a lot, and more and more women we see are becoming concerned with how Brexit will impact them. A large proportion of the women we see are originally from outside the UK and legally we are not allowed to give advice or support around migration - yet these women are particularly vulnerable to 'hostile environment' policies. But what can we tell them? Register as self employed in order to become more 'official', but also risk being more visible to immigration authorities? Don't register and risk the consequences? We don't even know what Brexit will look like, so how can we help them? We get asked this all the time and I have to impotently shrug and say "I just don't know. I don't know." They talk to us about it because we see them for who they are: women who are economic migrants. Immigration enforcement can target these women especially for "anti-trafficking" raids, and I often find myself having to explain to people that most migrant women sex workers are selling sex to earn a living, not because they are 'trafficked'. They fear these raids because they don't want to be deported.

**Samantha, a worker in a sex worker support service in England**





# Using client screening strategies for safety

Client screening is a strategy widely used by sex workers to reduce risk of exposure to violent clients and feel safer at work. For indoor workers, discussing conditions with a client before the booking is a way to assert boundaries and assess risk. Checking the client's phone number against 'Ugly Mugs' lists helps sex workers to avoid perpetrators of violence.

For outdoor workers, working with a friend to share a client's car registration number before going with him can help act as a deterrent and a recourse for the friend to contact police if their friend doesn't check in at an agreed time. Similarly, indoor workers who work alone can share the address they will be meeting a client from (his address, a hotel room number or their own 'incall') by texting a friend and giving their friend instructions for what to do if they don't check back in at an agreed hour.

**"For screening, I use a number of methods to check clients before I see them. I will search the number on NUM, SAAFE, and any WhatsApp groups I'm in. Client Eye is a new app that I have found very useful, which allows reports to be made for timewasters, no shows, or more dangerous clients, and a notification will show if a number contacts you that has been reported. Other than this, I will insist on a phone call and judge potential clients depending on whether they seem polite, coherent and can follow instructions."**

*Mia*

# National Ugly Mugs

National Ugly Mugs (NUM) is a pioneering national organisation founded in 2012 that provides greater access to justice and protection for sex workers who are often targeted by serial sexual predators and violent perpetrators who pose a threat to our communities. NUM, under our mandate to 'End Violence against Sex Workers', is achieving its mission in three key areas: 1) documenting and alerting; 2) raising awareness; and 3) policy advocacy informed by evidence about victimization.

**Documenting and Alerting: NUM endeavours to provide the following services:**

- Documenting crimes against sex workers across the UK in ways that are determined by the victim. Information can either be captured anonymously, where details of the incident are shared among other sex workers and front-line service providers who are subscribed to receive our alerts. With the agreement of the sex worker, non-identifying information is shared with police and other intelligence agencies to manage risk;
- Supporting sex workers in making full reports about crimes to police. This kind of reporting supports the police in identifying, arresting and convicting perpetrators;
- Ensuring that sex workers have access to professional support through NUM case workers, to help them cope and recover when they have been a victim of crime.



**Sex workers tell us about the importance of the NUM reporting and alerting system. "Sugar" is an escort and stated the following:**

Independent sex work is often viewed as a criminal activity (although legal in the UK) and for this and various ethical and moral reasons the work is frowned upon by the general public and elicits a vast amount of abuse and misunderstanding - as a result sex workers are very isolated and often have no one to turn to for help or advice when such incidents take place.

I recently discovered NUM and as an experienced sex worker, I can't overstate the importance of the support that they provide in this very closed world. To have this immediate professional contact for support when incidences occur is long overdue. The system of reporting is thorough, checked and immediate.

**Awareness-raising:** NUM provides training to front-line service providers who interact with sex workers in their professional capacities at a wide range of service industries, from local medical clinics to housing services. Due in part to the combined effect of criminalisation, social stigma and ill-informed discourse and policies, statutory and community services tend not to be well-equipped to support diverse sex workers who are victims of crime to report violence that they experience. NUM aims to use the knowledge garnered to build capacity among service providers and law enforcement to provide support to sex workers in the event of their victimisation. In 2017, NUM provided training to a wide range of professional service providers throughout the UK.

We also lead bespoke educational workshops for law enforcement officers, offer one-to-one support to individual officers, as well as ad hoc engagement with police forces in response to dynamic rates of violence. In 2018, we hosted a programme of training sessions with law enforcement. Among the 590 officers who completed our evaluation form, 97% felt more informed and more aware of the issues facing sex workers, and 95% would make use of NUM services when working with sex workers.

Despite these positive statistics, only a small minority of sex workers who report crimes to NUM go on to make a full report to police. This low percentage indicates that we have a long way to go in ensuring that sex workers have reduced fear around reporting and equal social and legal protections. This also reflects the challenges in reporting violence for sex workers that include the harms associated with 'outing' themselves if they report to police; the risks associated with not being believed or being blamed for crimes perpetrated against them; and the pain of being re-victimised through the court processes. Elizabeth's experience provides an example of how worrying interacting with police can be for sex workers.

### **Case study: Elizabeth**

NUM received a call from a staff member at an educational institution whose student had been outed as a sex worker. The student, Elizabeth, was referred to NUM. A NUM case worker received a phone call from Elizabeth who shared that someone online was sharing pictures of escort ads to out the sex workers depicted. Elizabeth was worried about this being a revenge porn type attack and was feeling very vulnerable. The case worker spent time providing emotional support in the matter and putting things into perspective.

Elizabeth wanted to know if the police could do anything and agreed to let the case worker discuss this with officers. Police said that they would try to determine who it was and if there was associated distress they would make contact and issue a harassment warning. Elizabeth was informed of this but did not want to talk to police at that time.

Six months later Elizabeth was referred back to NUM as the situation had escalated. The man who was outing sex workers had begun stalking Elizabeth online. After discussing the risks, Elizabeth agreed to contact police. Officers explored options and discussed risks. As Elizabeth did not feel safe to share her personal details with police, there were limits to the help that they could offer, but the case worker continued to support Elizabeth after her interaction with the police to put in place the safeguards that they had suggested.

While remaining anonymous, Elizabeth was able to access police expertise in reducing the harm in her life with support from NUM. We link sex workers with law enforcement often and hope that through these interactions sex workers experience increased access to justice.

**Policy Advocacy:** NUM engages in empirical research with university researchers and analyses our own data about victimisation to inform systemic advocacy. Our aims are to improve working conditions, safety and rights for sex workers, ultimately creating a world where sex workers have unmediated access to victim supports, police protection and all other entitlements relevant to their needs.

In order to ensure that NUM services remain effective and inclusive given the diversity among on and off-street sex workers who work on and offline and across a wide range of sex industries, we have embedded sex worker leadership within the organisation. Our Research and Development (RAD) Team comprises workers of all gender identities, as well as migrant workers and those with status. They, with the support of our new CEO Dr. Raven Bowen and COO Kerri Swindells, will lead the restructuring of the reporting scheme.

Raven states:

**“Interventions aimed to support sex workers are done largely without them. It is unacceptable that those with lived experience, who are most affected by how the sex industry is regulated, lack a controlling interest in sex worker-serving organizations. We would not tolerate this exclusionary practice on any other social issue. It is no longer enough for any group to say that they work ‘with’ sex workers. We must raise the standard so that our operational priorities, services and direction are shaped by sex workers who are compensated and valued just as any other expert would be in any other context.”**

Membership to NUM is free for sex workers and support services. We don't ask for lots of personal information for sex workers to become members and receive NUM alerts. We currently have over 4500 sex workers and over 700 frontline service providers registered to receive alerts.

### The Registration Process:

- Go to **[www.uglymugs.org](http://www.uglymugs.org)**
- Click “Join” on the top menu of the home page. This will take you to the registration form.
- Fill in the form and select which type of membership you require.
- If you would like to receive alerts by SMS and/or e-mail please indicate this by providing your number/address in the appropriate field.
- Once you have submitted your registration you will automatically be sent a password.
- Your membership will be processed manually during office hours and we will email you when we have processed your application.
- Once you've received an email to let you know that your account has been approved, you can then log in using your username and the password that was sent to you. Usernames and passwords are case sensitive and you can change the password to something more memorable once logged in.

If you have any problems please e-mail us on **[admin@uglymugs.org](mailto:admin@uglymugs.org)** or call us on **0161 629 9861**

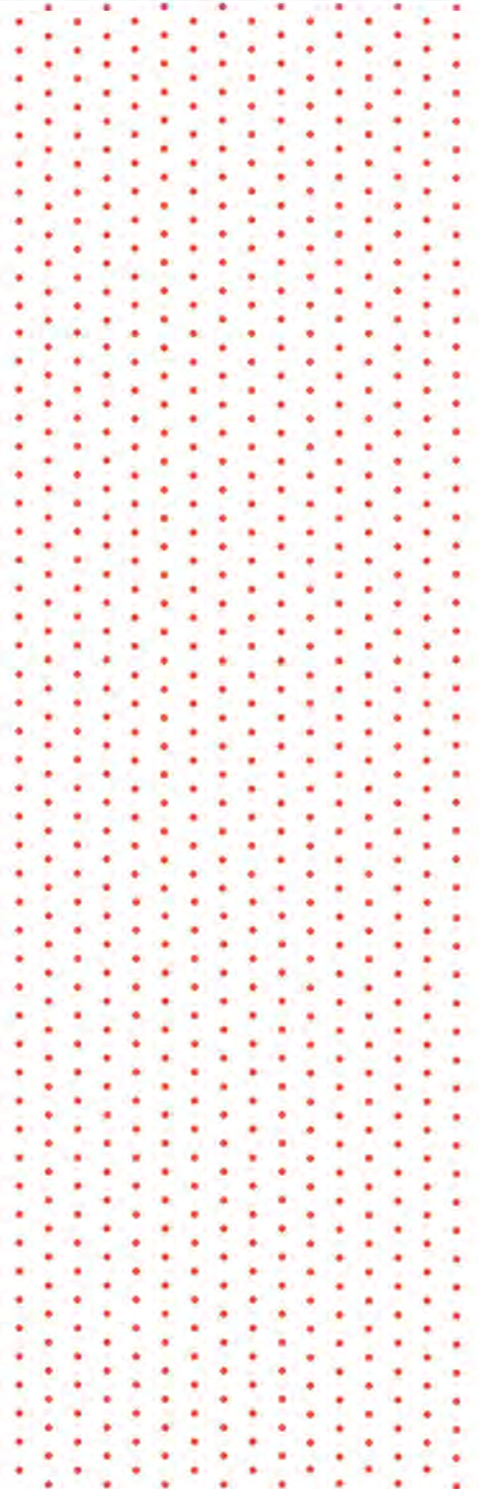
# The harms of criminalisation

A major obstacle to improving the safety, rights and access to justice for sex workers in the UK is the law. Criminalisation exacerbates the harms that women working in prostitution are vulnerable to by:

- Subjecting women to arrests, police raids, fines, enforced curfews, criminal convictions and sometimes incarceration under soliciting or brothel-keeping laws.
- Deterring sex workers from reporting to authorities when they are victims of a crime, for fear that they will be arrested themselves.
- Discouraging sex workers from accessing health and support services for fear that their details will be passed on to police or immigration enforcement.

The National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) updated its guidance on the policing of prostitution in England and Wales in 2015 to reflect some of the lessons learned from harmful enforcement operations.

It states that police forces should consider that enforcement actions can cause “risk, harm and threat to sex workers who are likely to choose to continue to work, albeit in other areas which may be less safe or familiar to them.” It further states that “brothel closures and ‘raids’ create a mistrust of all external agencies including outreach services. It is difficult to rebuild trust and ultimately reduces the amount of intelligence submitted to the police and puts sex workers at greater risk.”



This guidance is very sensible, but sadly we know that it is widely disregarded by many police forces and individual police officers. Heavy-handed enforcement operations continue to happen across the UK, despite the warning of the NPCC that they are counter-productive and dangerous.

The full guidance can be accessed at: [app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/prostitution/](http://app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/prostitution/)

Police enforcement often particularly targets migrant sex workers, and there is no clear separation between raids supposedly intended to identify victims of human trafficking and regular immigration raids. The 'hostile environment' mindset views migrant sex workers as 'undesirables', with brutal consequences. Even when people are officially recognised as trafficking victims through the National Referral Mechanism, material and legal support for them to settle in the UK and escape poverty is frequently absent or inadequate. Trafficking victims can still be subject to forced deportation from the UK, regardless of what further danger awaits them in their home country.

Many sex workers have had terrible experiences when trying to report violence to the police - being dismissed and subjected to victim blaming. When the police treat women in this way they not only exacerbate the trauma we have already experienced, but also destroy trust and push us into further isolation and vulnerability.

**“An ex client of mine who had become abusive began sending me a tirade of death and rape threats from throw-away email accounts. I work alone and in a fairly isolated area, so I felt that for my safety I had no choice but to report this to police. The initial female respondent to my phone call was very concerned and understanding, but after that, every officer I spoke to - around three others - didn't take me seriously at all. One laughed at me and asked me what else I expected, and another told me that if I 'offered myself up like a plate of food, I can expect to be reviewed like one'. They thought that this client sending me death threats was the same as a customer leaving a bad review for a restaurant. I felt devastated, and since then I've known that should any of this abuse begin happening in person, or result in violence, police aren't the people I can trust.”**

*Jasmine*

# The reality of raids

Sex workers frequently experience police raids which are claimed to be for their own welfare as traumatic, terrifying experiences. During these raids, women can have their phones and cash earnings seized. They can be subjected to being questioned by police while in a state of undress, or taken to a police station without a chance to get fully dressed. Sometimes local reporters have been invited to witness the raid. Migrant sex workers are subject to being taken into immigration detention and deported against their will. Police press statements about 'rescue operations' frequently mask a very different reality.

After a raid, sex workers who are not detained often have to go straight back out and sell sex in more dangerous and desperate circumstances, in order to make up for their lost earnings, because police will either offer no support at all or only signposting to support services - which cannot meet the woman's immediate need to earn money to survive.

In October 2016, police raided six massage parlours in London's Chinatown as part of 'Operation Lanhydrock'. The police told reporters that the aim of the raid was to 'rescue victims' and take them to 'a place of safety', but in fact most of the arrests were for immigration offences, and the 'place of safety' was an immigration detention centre to await deportation. They arrested 24 people: seven for 'controlling prostitution for gain', and seventeen for immigration offences.





Lynn, who is a sex worker and member of SWARM, was in Soho that night and witnessed the raids happening. "When I spoke to an officer on the street about the welfare of the women they were taking away, he said to me that they were there to "address the issue of exploitation in a gentle way." But I'd been standing there watching all evening, and watched them rushing in with sniffer dogs. The police had blocked me from passing some useful phone numbers to a woman as they put her in a van, while her colleagues watched in horror. After the raids I learned that over £30,000 was taken from various premises that night - there's nothing gentle about using dogs, or stealing people's hard-earned wages, or taking frightened and confused women to a detention centre in the middle of the night. And what did this do to help protect anyone?"

"I'm a migrant, and I work and live in total fear of police. My fear of raids has led to me largely working on my own, where I feel much more unsafe and vulnerable. This fear is exacerbated by the way that I have been treated elsewhere - like being evicted from my home, and being threatened with expulsion from my university course, both due to my sex working status. Police and other institutions like it don't seem to exist to help people like me."

*Jasmine*

"I got arrested and convicted for brothel-keeping even though I was working myself along with the other women and we all kept our own money. In court, the police admitted that the flat was well run and we all took care of each other. But I was convicted and then my ex-partner tried to get custody of my youngest. I spent a year fighting him off."

*Michelle*

"Most of my experiences with the police have been good, however I am very aware that although I am a woman of colour I am comfortably middle class, with a more 'educated' sounding accent, and have met them working as an independent escort in a nice flat. I contacted the police about an issue involving a client who was harassing me with constant messages. I also feel like it hugely depends on the individual officer and their own personal opinions on sex work, which is a matter of luck. I have heard second-hand about much worse experiences. I used to work at a brothel in London, and heard of a police raid in one of the flats on a day I wasn't working. The police confiscated all the women's earnings."

*Mia*

"I worked in different towns and cities for three years. Every time the police stepped up arrests, I moved on. The cold, the constant threats and violence, the rudeness and abuse from the police all wore me down. I started on drugs but then one of my friends was badly beaten and that was a wake-up call. I decided to quit both drugs and working. I went to my doctor because I thought he could help. He said there wasn't a suitable place in treatment for six months. What good was that? I needed help right then when I felt like I could do it."

*Kerry*

"I have been working in brothels since 2012. For two years I've been working in the same place with two other women on a rota doing different shifts. We are all mothers and most of the time we are sending money back home to our families in other countries. We knew working together was against the law but we decided it was better to be safe than sorry. Then last month police came bursting into our flat. I was arrested for brothel-keeping because I paid the rent. I wasn't managing the other women, we were all working for ourselves."

*Corina*

# English Collective of Prostitutes

ECP is a self-help group of sex workers working both on the streets and indoors. Since 1975, we have been campaigning for decriminalisation and safety and for money and resources so that women can get out of prostitution if they want to.

Hundreds of women contact us each year for help to report violence and to fight charges of soliciting, brothel-keeping and controlling – the last two most often used against women who are working together as workmates or friends. Police crackdowns undermine safety as sex workers are forced into isolated areas, and are unable to implement vital safety measures such as screening clients. The laws force women to choose between working alone or breaking the law.

Women in the UK are facing a crisis of poverty and overwork. It cannot be right that the priority for feminists is cracking down on prostitution at a time when 86% of austerity cuts have targeted women, four million children are living in poverty, 1.25 million people in the UK are officially destitute and women seeking asylum are scraping by on £36 a week. The policy of benefit sanctions alone is recognised as the cause of massive increases in prostitution.

The fact that feminists have been unwilling to support sex workers' demands to end the criminalisation of sex work has left sex workers isolated and at the mercy of abusive police who prioritise prosecution over women's protection.

One woman in our group was robbed at knifepoint in a flat in Enfield where she was working with others. When she reported it, the police didn't treat her as a victim, seemed half-hearted in their investigation and instead delivered a letter saying, "any female at this address now, who is found at this same address in the future, is very likely to be arrested [for brothel-keeping]". The same woman later received a deportation order which was only overturned after our campaign.

This is not an isolated incident. Last year a woman working the streets in East London came to us for help because she was being threatened by a gang of men who were enraged that she wouldn't give them a cut of her earnings. When she went to report these threats, the desk sergeant said, "Are you telling us that you are a prostitute because if so, we will arrest you."

The result of this policy is that violent men effectively enjoy impunity to attack again, knowing their victims won't report violence or that the police won't act if they do. No wonder that violence against sex workers is at epidemic proportions. We are interested in forging a feminism that attacks the violence and immorality of poverty rather than the ways which women have found to survive, a feminism that sides with sex workers against the police and with "bad" women against bad laws. In this way we can refuse to be divided from other women and other workers.

# Cristina's story:

## Fighting the raids in Soho

In December 2013, 250 police in riot gear with dogs raided sex worker's flats in Soho, central London. Met Police Commander Alison Newcomb said the raids were "not about the prosecution of prostitutes" but "to close brothels where we have evidence of very serious crimes happening, including rape and human trafficking". But no victims of trafficking were found. Instead women were handcuffed on the floor, at least one woman was walked out in front of the media in her underwear, migrant women were taken against their will to a "place of safety" and 20 flats were closed. A campaign co-ordinated by the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) won the vocal support of local people and widespread public sympathy and eventually all the flats except two were reopened.

I was in a flat in Soho when 40 police broke down our door. We saw them coming on the CCTV and called out that we would open the door but they broke it down anyway. 20 went upstairs and 20 came into our flat. They were in riot gear, with dogs — everything but guns. Both me and the maid were handcuffed and held on the floor and she is in her 70s. What threat were we? They said I was a victim but treated me like a dangerous criminal. They smashed up our flat. We told them we had the key to the safe but they smashed it open all the same. They took £385 from me and refused to give me a receipt. I was thrown out of my flat without even my coat. I was told by a policeman that I should go home (to Romania). I have the right to live and work here. 20 flats were closed. Most of the women who were evicted are mothers and grandmothers who were left with no way of earning a living. I nearly lost my home because I couldn't pay the rent. Two women ended up working on the street where it is much more dangerous.

The police said the raids were to save victims of rape and trafficking. No victims were found. But some of my friends were held for hours and bullied into accepting cautions for criminal offences. How can the police pretend to be interested in our safety when they brought the newspapers with them which then published photos identifying some of us?

The ECP had been working with us for years. In the few months before these raids we had been protesting because the police had closed Romilly Street. But in the months after we were in court every day trying to stop the closures. I gave evidence that I was working for myself, that I got the job through a friend, that I decided what days I would work, that I could turn down clients and that I wasn't controlled by the maid, I wanted her to be there for my safety. The police said all this added up to someone "controlling prostitution". They actually said in court it was "treating the sex worker as a commodity rather than a human". We thought at the time how familiar that line is because we hear it most from the feminist politicians including those who had campaigned for the law on closure orders.

We kept fighting. Women Against Rape supported us. But we often asked ourselves where are the other violence against women groups? Do we not count as victims of violence because we are sex workers or because our attackers are the police?

We held big raucous planning meetings in the basement of a local café. We spoke to the media anonymously. We went to community meetings and challenged the police. We met the vicar and won his support. Lots of local people were on our side. They are our neighbours and friends and knew that if we were thrown out of Soho the whole area would change. We got all the flats reopened except mine and one other. Mine was bought up by property developers. Was this the real reason behind the raids?

A few years on now and Soho has changed. We are less of a community, the control of the flats has in some cases been taken out of women's hands, which means we pay more to work and we are less protected. We cannot call the police because we don't trust them. Lots of local people have been forced out and the super rich have moved in. We would like to ask those feminist politicians who campaigned for the law if they think that this crackdown on prostitution is a victory in their eyes. It isn't in ours.

# The problem with the “Nordic model”

The Nordic Model, sometimes known as the “sex buyer law” or “abolitionist” model, is the policy of introducing a law to criminalise the purchaser of sex, but not the seller. Versions of this law have been introduced in several countries including Sweden, Norway, France and Ireland. In the UK, it was introduced in Northern Ireland in 2015. Proponents of this model claims that it punishes men for paying for sex while providing routes out of prostitution for women selling sex, and will lead to the eventual eradication of all prostitution. But this just isn't what actually happens in practice -- far from it.

When clients or ‘punters’ are criminalised, that means that the sex worker has to assist the client to evade the police in order to get his business. If she is working outdoors on the street, that might mean having to get into his car quickly to avoid police arrest and not having time to talk first and get a sense of whether he seems drunk or pushy, and not being able to negotiate price, condom use or boundaries before getting into the car. It might mean working outdoors in a more isolated area away from other sex workers, so as to avoid police crackdowns. If a sex worker is based indoors, it might mean that clients are unwilling to give their real name or phone number for safety screening, and will call from withheld numbers. It means that a flat that someone sells sex from is a ‘crime scene’ and subject to being raided.

Countries which have brought in this model tend to keep in place much of the criminalisation which surrounds selling sex, so that sex workers are still criminalised for ‘brothel keeping’ if they work together in a flat for safety. When police have a crackdown with the stated aim of arresting clients, sex workers who they come into contact with can often end up getting charged under other laws - such as immigration offences, anti-social behaviour orders or drug possession, or evicted and left homeless. The removal of penalties for soliciting and selling is definitely needed, but under the Nordic Model the cloud of criminalisation around prostitution remains and the ones who suffer most from that are still the women.

The deliberate disruption and displacement of prostitution by enforcement measures which occurs under the Nordic Model can lead to sex workers being more desperate for income and therefore having to accept riskier situations in order to get the money they need.

In April 2018, Médecins du Monde published a report analysing the impact of the 2016 implementation of the Nordic Model in France. 583 sex workers took part in the research. Key findings include:

- 63% of sex workers have experienced deterioration of their living conditions.
- 78% of sex workers have experienced a loss of income.
- 42% of sex workers are more exposed to violence.
- 38% of sex workers find it increasingly hard to demand use of condoms.
- 70% of sex workers observe no improvement or deterioration of their relations with the police.
- Only 39% of sex workers are aware of the existence of the exit program and, of those who know of its existence, only 26% intend to apply. The programme has been criticised for creating barriers to access which exclude most sex workers from being eligible, and for providing insufficient financial assistance to live on.

Reference:  
Médecins du Monde, *Study on the impact of the law from 13 april 2016 against the "Prostitution System" in France*, 2018. Available at:  
[medecinsdumonde.org/en/tags/sex-workers](https://medecinsdumonde.org/en/tags/sex-workers)

# Why we need decriminalisation

Those who advocate for the full decriminalisation of prostitution are often mistakenly believed to be advocates for, or supporters of, prostitution. But many practices which were previously illegal have been made legal through law reform in parts of the UK (for example: divorce, abortion, suicide) not because these are 'good' things, but because the criminalisation of these practices was in itself causing or exacerbating harm and infringing human rights. The case for full decriminalisation also recognises that when activities surrounding prostitution (advertising, buying sex, renting indoor premises to sell sex from or hiring a receptionist or security guard) are criminalised, it is the sex workers themselves who are made less safe and more precarious. It is similar to the case for decriminalising drug use as harm reduction - decriminalisation is not "the solution" to all problems associated with the activity, but an essential step towards harm reduction. Decriminalisation needs to be coupled with social action to lift people out of poverty, fund effective health and social care services and empower marginalised groups.

**"One of the main triggers for my partner's violence against me as a teenager was the fact that I was doing sex work. I've ended up with a bleeding mouth and bruises on my neck because I was a "dirty whore". The disgust he felt actually felt legitimate to me and that was because it matched the way society talked about me.**

**Decriminalisation would have concrete benefits - like safety on the job and not getting a criminal record - but if it helps break down stigma, that's huge. The violence sex workers experience at work and outside it is 100% down to the fact that prostitution is seen as dirty and disgusting. Backing decriminalisation doesn't mean you back the sex industry, it means you back the women working in it."**

*Becky*

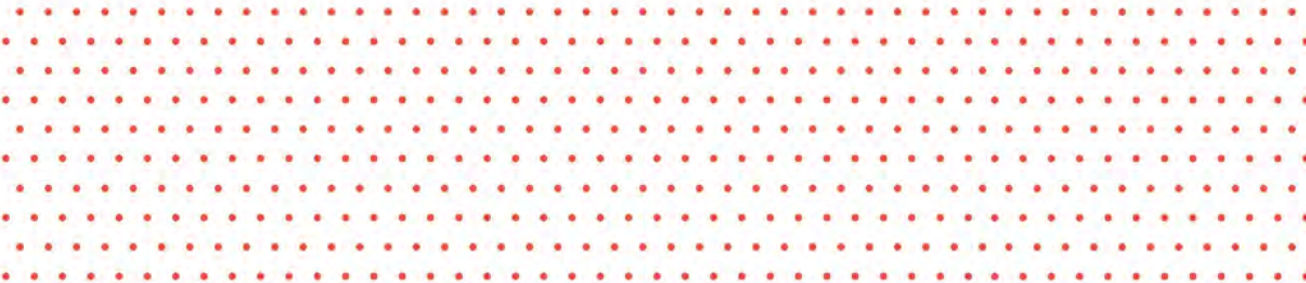
**"The big thing for me is that decriminalisation would mean that I could work with my friends for safety. There are just so many benefits to it: not feeling isolated, being able to talk to and support each other, but also in safety in numbers. When I was receiving death threats from an ex client and was terrified to work, I wished then more than ever that I wouldn't have to fear repercussions for inviting another worker to help me feel safe."**

*Jasmine*

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“As a parent I am at risk of more violence from the state than I am from my clients - in fact, state violence in the form of benefit cuts and sanctions are what pushed me into sex work in the first place. Violent clients are a sad reality, but what would change that - and provide a real deterrent to bad clients - would be a policy framework that allows me to screen robustly, and report violence without fear of arrest, or of losing my children.”

*Cora*



“Decriminalisation would mean that we have an equal playing field. If we are attacked when working we can report it the same as if we are attacked in the home. I’m sick of hearing the police tell women “if you don’t like it then go home”. I want some rights at work. I want to complain about my boss trying to get free sex, I want to be able to refuse a client if he won’t use a condom. Decriminalisation would mean I could insist on some rights and that would make a big difference to how safe and well I feel at work.”

*Amy*

# Organisations

**Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement (SWARM)** is a UK based, sex worker led, grassroots collective. Many of us identify as survivors of sexual and domestic violence, as well as economic and state violence. Our goal is to build a diverse and inclusive community of sex workers who organise together to improve our lives and working conditions and resist violence against us.  
Website: [swarmcollective.org](http://swarmcollective.org)

What we stand for:

[swarmcollective.org/what-we-stand-for](http://swarmcollective.org/what-we-stand-for)

Email: [contact@swarmcollective.org](mailto:contact@swarmcollective.org)

Twitter: [@SexWorkHive](https://twitter.com/SexWorkHive)

**English Collective of Prostitutes** is a self-help group of sex workers working both on the streets and indoors, founded in 1975 and based in the Crossroads Women's Centre, London. ECP campaign 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.

Website:

[prostitutescollective.net](http://prostitutescollective.net)

Twitter: [@ProstitutesColl](https://twitter.com/ProstitutesColl)

Facebook: [@ProsColl](https://www.facebook.com/ProsColl)

Email: [ecp@prostitutescollective.net](mailto:ecp@prostitutescollective.net)

**National Ugly Mugs** is a pioneering, national organisation which provides greater access to justice and protection for sex workers who are often targeted by dangerous individuals but are frequently reluctant to report these incidents to the police.

Website: [uglymugs.org](http://uglymugs.org)

Email: [admin@uglymugs.org](mailto:admin@uglymugs.org)

Twitter: [@NationalUglyMug](https://twitter.com/NationalUglyMug)

**Basis Yorkshire** is a charity based in Leeds. Basis are unique in their approach to sex work, taking a rights based approach, with services offered without compulsion to exit but centred on the increase of agency and control by women.

Website: [basisyorkshire.org.uk](http://basisyorkshire.org.uk)

Twitter: [@BasisYorkshire](https://twitter.com/BasisYorkshire)

[@BasisSexWork](https://twitter.com/BasisSexWork)

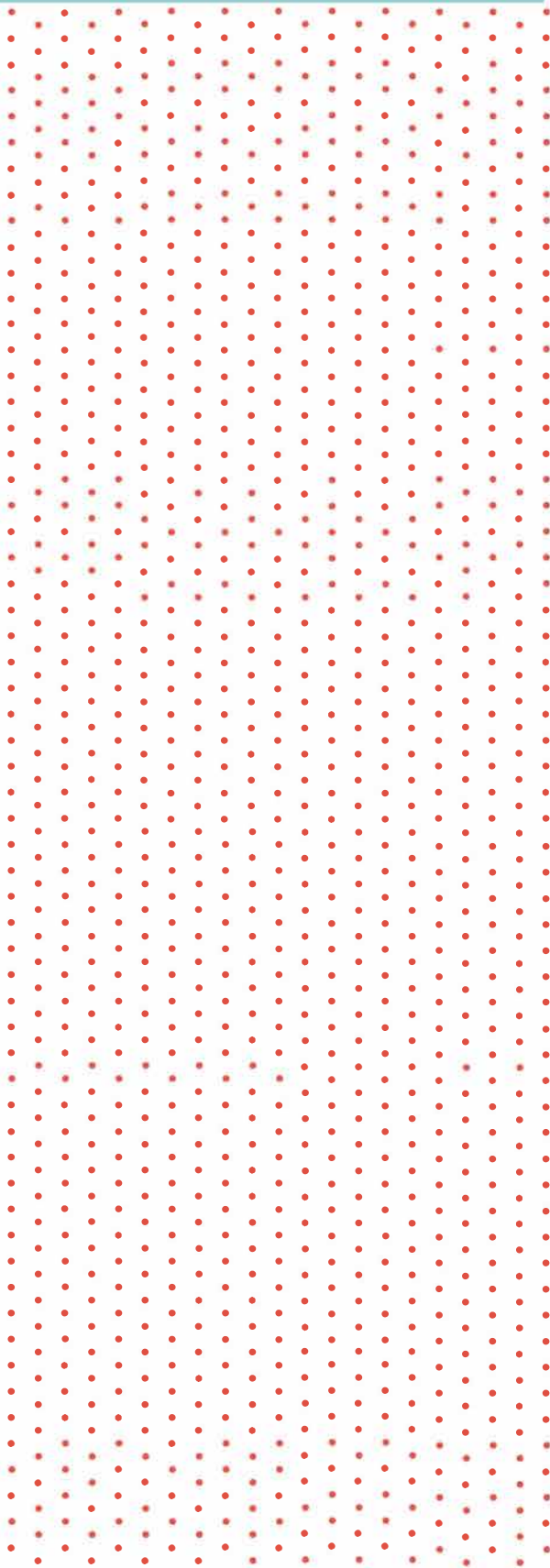
**Umbrella Lane** is a peer-led, community project that aims to create a positive space for all sex workers in Scotland. They run weekly informal drop-ins in Glasgow for coffee, chat and support.

Twitter: [@UmbrellaLane](https://twitter.com/UmbrellaLane)

Facebook: [@umbrellalane](https://www.facebook.com/umbrellalane)

Email: [umbrellalane@outlook.com](mailto:umbrellalane@outlook.com)





**Women Against Rape (WAR)**, founded in 1976, is a grassroots multi-racial women's group which offers support, legal advocacy and information to women and girls who have been raped or sexually assaulted. WAR supports survivors when they report to the police, seek protection from further attacks, or are preparing for court; applying for compensation, or claiming asylum from rape. The organisation has consistently supported sex workers' campaign for the decriminalisation of sex work.

Website: [againstrape.net](http://againstrape.net)

Twitter: [@AgainstRape](https://twitter.com/AgainstRape)

Email: [war@womenagainstrape.net](mailto:war@womenagainstrape.net)

**Black Women's Rape Action Project (BWRAP)** provides services and runs campaigns focussed on winning justice, resources and protection for women of colour, immigrant and asylum seeking women who have survived rape, racist attacks and other violence. They work with rape survivors in detention and prison, providing daily self-help information and support.

Website: [againstrape.net](http://againstrape.net)

Email: [bwrap@rapeaction.net](mailto:bwrap@rapeaction.net)

Twitter: [@bwrap1](https://twitter.com/bwrap1)

**Decrim Now** is a new campaigning organisation dedicated to improving the lives and working conditions of everybody who sells sex in the UK. They welcome contact from anyone who is looking for more information about the case for decriminalisation of sex work or who wants to get involved in advocacy work.

Website: [decrimnow.org.uk](http://decrimnow.org.uk)

Twitter: [@ukdecrimnow](https://twitter.com/ukdecrimnow)

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