

# TDI *Explainer*

## Issues around sex work

Sex workers are a group who are particularly vulnerable to sexual and non-sexual offending. This Explainer contextualises that risk and discusses harm reduction strategies.

### **Most aspects of sex work are entirely legal**

In all parts of the United Kingdom it is legal for men, women and non-binary people to sell sex. Certain aspects of that sale, though, are illegal:

- Soliciting (by both sex workers and by customers)
- Advertising in phone boxes
- Living off another's earnings from sex work ('pimping')
- Managing brothels
- Trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation

In Northern Ireland, it is illegal to purchase sex, meaning the customer is criminalised while the sex worker is not. As of late 2020, Scotland is in consultation about bringing in the same law.

### **The impacts of this legal situation**

Because certain aspects of sex work are illegal, historically the relationship between sex workers and legal authorities has not been especially positive. Sex workers have avoided reporting crimes against them for fear that they will be prosecuted for illegal aspects of their work—for example, sex workers who work out of the same house for safety could be treated as operating a brothel. As a result, sex workers have historically been particularly vulnerable to sexual offences.

**91%**

**of sex workers reported being victims of hate crimes between 2013 and 2014.\***

**47%**

**reported being victims of crimes—most commonly harassment and the removal of condoms (a form of rape).\***

**Those involved in outdoor, or street, work are more likely to suffer violence than those involved in indoor work. \*\***

\* Campbell, Rosie and Sanders, Teela (2016) 'Violence against sex workers' IN Adams, Niki, Brady-Clark, Megan, Michales, Heston and Wills, Rosie (eds) *Decriminalisation of prostitution: the evidence; report of Parliamentary symposium*, 3 November 2015, House of Commons. London: English Collective of Prostitutes.

\*\* Deering, Kathleen N, Amin, Avni, Shoveller, Jean, Nesbitt, Ariel, Garcia-Moreno, Claudia, Duff, Piti, Argento, Elena and Shannon, Kate (2014) A systematic review of the correlates of violence against sex workers *American Journal of Public Health* 104:e42-e54

**Remember: Sex work is a form of work, and sex workers are entitled to the same protections as anyone else.**

## Harm reduction

Over the last few years a lot of work has been done to improve the historically poor relationship between Police and sex workers through an official policy of harm reduction. This is from the National Police Chiefs' Council's 2015 'National Policing Sex Work Guidance':

"The policing of prostitution [sex work] continues to present difficult challenges. A victim centred approach which considers the needs of both individuals and communities is key whilst utilising the appropriate resources and legislation, when every other avenue has failed.

Those who abuse, exploit and attack sex workers must be rigorously investigated and prosecuted."

### Child sexual exploitation

As we outlined in previous Explainers, children cannot consent to sex. This means there is no such thing as a 'child sex worker'.

All children who are selling sex or being sold for sex are being sexually abused.

This means that anyone buying child sex, or exploiting children for sexual purposes, is an offender.

### Modern slavery and trafficking

Adults can be vulnerable to control by others through violence, threats or coercion.

These will often be those with existing vulnerabilities, such as undocumented migrants, who feel they cannot report their situation without risking legal repercussions themselves.

The control and exploitation of others, for sexual or other purposes, is a form of slavery.

## Further questions you might want to think about:

What different vulnerabilities are there for different types of sex worker? How can we spot the signs of abuse? What can we do to keep sex workers safe?



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For over 25 years we have been at the forefront of the field, providing training, research, consultancy and public protection schemes to individuals and organisations across society.

If you've found this explainer useful, you may be interested in learning more through one of our training programmes. Contact us at [info@tdi.org.uk](mailto:info@tdi.org.uk) to find out more.