

**UMBRELLA  
LANE**

SEX-WORKER WELLBEING PROJECT

*Umbrella Lane  
Needs Assessment*

*Summary September 2020*

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## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all those who engaged with this project, particularly at such a difficult time for sex workers throughout COVID-19

## The Project Team

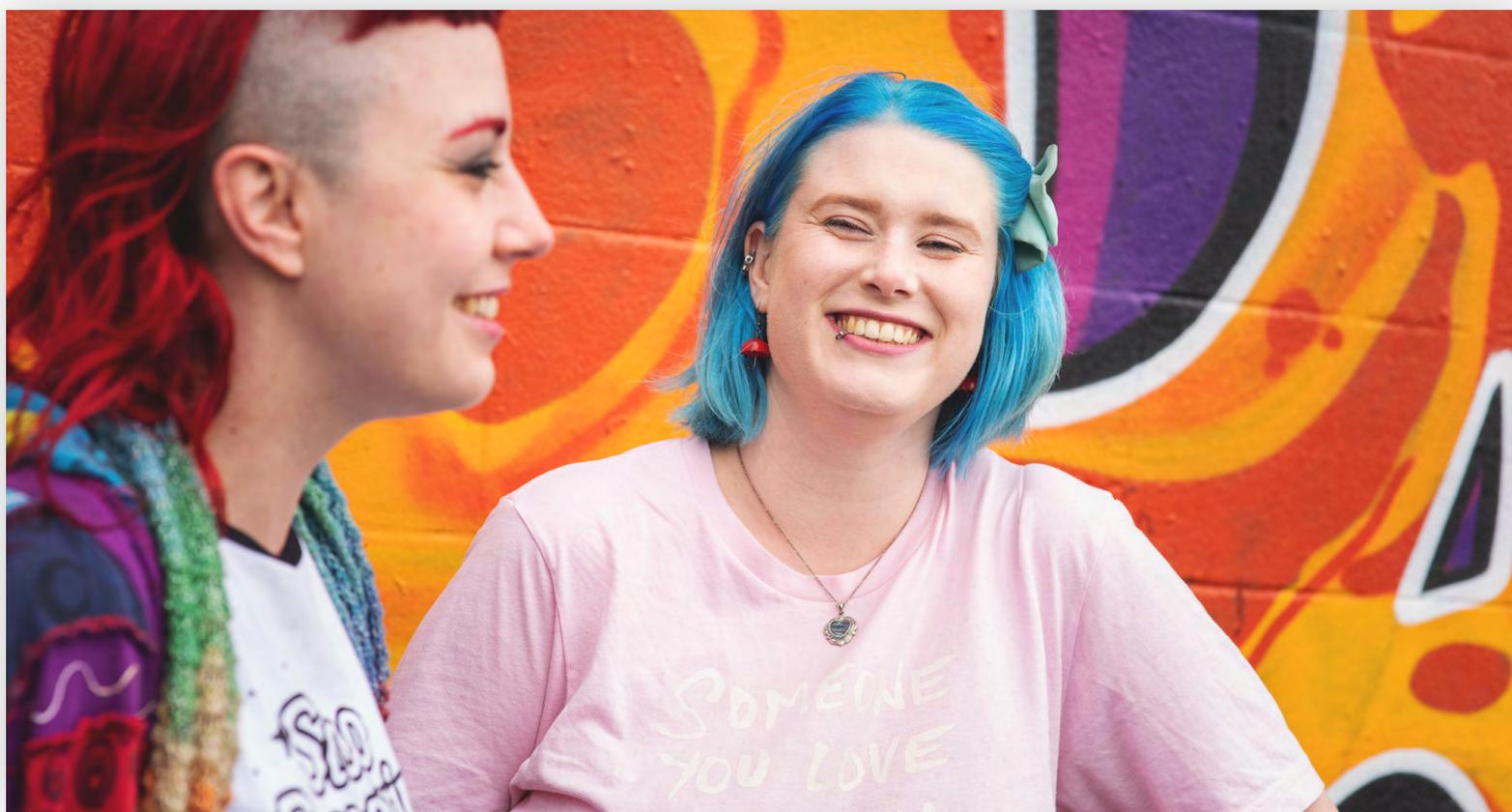
**Dr Gemma Ahearne** is a full time University Teacher in Criminology at the University of Liverpool. She has been involved in the sex industry since 2002, as a dancer, researcher, teacher and activist. Gemma has been the consultant researcher on the project.

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**Dr Anastacia Ryan** is the Director of Umbrella Lane. Anastacia began Umbrella Lane with a first Board of Sex Workers driven by a passionate belief in the transformative leadership potential of marginalised and often excluded communities. Since 2015, Umbrella Lane has worked to build community capacity, leadership and empowerment, and continues to build new sex worker led projects and services across Scotland based on consultative efforts such as this needs assessment.

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**Kathryn Jarvinen** was the Community Outreach Officer at Umbrella Lane. Kathryn designed the survey, and co-designed the research questions in addition to organising and facilitating interviews.



## Introduction



Umbrella Lane Needs Assessment was a mixed-methods research project started in February 2020 and then updated in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic. An online survey was completed by 41 participants and the Umbrella Lane Team decided to include a qualitative element in the form of interviews. As such the online questionnaire served as a valuable pilot to the interview schedule. The pandemic has presented an extremely difficult time for sex workers, and as such it has also impacted the availability of sex workers to participate in research. It is anticipated that the project's experiences of service provision will be incorporated into future services and external guidance.

Whilst sex work is a contested term and issue (Connelly et al, 2015) we are defining sex work as 'the exchange of sexual services, performances, or products for material consumption' (Weitzer, 2010, p.1; Sagar et al, 2015). We make no value judgements on whether sex work is 'good' or whether it is 'empowering' merely that it is a form of labour that people engage in.

Similarly we understand sex work as a non-homogeneous experience. We understand that people who engage in commercial sex have a variety of individual circumstances and constraints in their choices. Instead of debating 'choice' it makes sense to use 'decisions' and draw from the definition of O'Connell-Davidson, "...the agency that people... exercise in choosing between the narrow range of fates available and working for them as best they can to meet their own interests and goals" (O'Connell-Davidson, 2015).

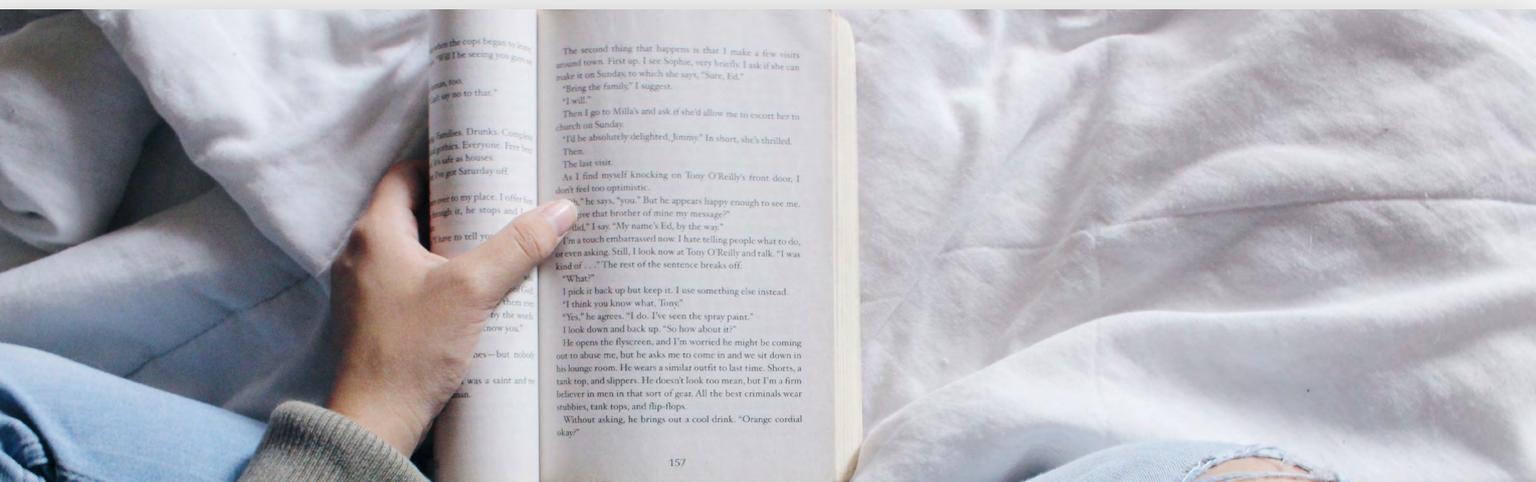
We recognise that stigma is a main barrier to those selling sex engaging with support services (Valentine-Chase, 2020) and that stigma exists in all facets of the sex industry (Ahearne, 2015, 2016; Armstrong, 2018; Simpson & Smith, 2020; Smith, 2020).



Since inception, Umbrella Lane has aimed to meaningfully consult with sex workers to ensure services are built around actual and not perceived need. Umbrella Lane has the following governing principles that underpin our research:

1. **To respect the self-determination of sex workers**
2. **To respect and promote the human and health rights of sex workers**
3. **To be inclusive to all sex workers and work from principles of equality, respect and recognition.**





## Literature Review

One of the main barriers sex workers face when seeking support is that of stigma. All facets of the industry are stigmatized (Ahearne, 2015, 2016; Armstrong, 2018; Simpson & Smith, 2020; Valentine-Chase, 2020; Stardust, 2017) and this is being heightened during the COVID-19 crisis.

Socio-historically sex workers have been seen as the vectors of disease, this was cemented via the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864–1888 (Hamilton, 1978). The acts allowed police to arrest women deemed to be prostitutes to stop the spread of sexually transmitted disease. The UK announced a 'lockdown' on activity and movement on 23 March 2020. The restrictions meant that sex workers could no longer work. The Lancet wrote in support of sex workers during this period stating: "Sex workers are among the most marginalised groups. Globally, direct sex work has largely ceased as a result of physical distancing and lockdown measures put in place to halt transmission of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), potentially making a marginalised and economically precarious population more vulnerable" (Platt et al, 2020).

BBC News reported on 24th June 2020 that Scotland is facing the "deepest recession in living memory" (BBC, 2020). Due to the feminization of poverty that already exists in society we know that women will be disproportionately impacted by the financial crisis. This is clearly a gendered issue and given that the majority of sex workers are women or trans, this indicates a need for specific funding and support for such groups. Whilst more than £61,000 of funding has been awarded to the 9 organisations involved in the Encompass Network, independent peer-led charities providing services and support to sex workers, such as Umbrella Lane have not received Government funding (Stewart, 2020).

Best practice in sex work support necessitates peer-led engagement and meaningful involvement in the decision-making process. The global sex worker rights movement has the slogan "Nothing about us without us" for good reason; too often sex workers are spoken over and for at the expense of those labouring in the industry. It is vital that organizations receiving funding to assist sex workers support decriminalization, as in a system of criminalizing buyers (broadly recognised as the Nordic Model) sex workers are often criminalized by default and find their working conditions much more punitive. The current laws on sex work in the UK mean that it is illegal to work together for safety. This is clearly a punitive law that puts sex workers at risk of serious harm. Fears surrounding the 'grey area of the law' means that many sex workers also fear using the online tools that they would prefer, such as AdultWork or other sites that they can view the rating of potential clients on.

## Research Aims



1. To identify the experiences of sex workers in accessing services.
2. To consider how support services can adapt in response to sex workers' feedback.
3. To understand how sex workers' experience the legal landscape



## Methodology

The study is mixed methods consisting of a quantitative survey and qualitative semi-structured interviews utilizing thematic analysis. The survey element was to gauge the demographic who would be interested in being interviewed and demonstrated initial responses. The survey was essential in developing the research methodology and identifying participants. The shifting nature of engagement with commercial sex, particularly in light of the pandemic, meant that the interviews were also opened up to members of the Umbrella Lane community who did not participate in the survey. In a similar vein, this meant that the survey acted as smaller pilot study and allowed the research team to reflect on access to the sex working community during this time of uncertainty.

The research is framed by a commitment to peer-led research. It was important that we used a research design that was non-exploitative and ethical (Shaver, 2005). The small research team consists of peer-researchers who are experienced in the field and committed to working alongside sex workers. In particular, Umbrella Lane staff Ryan and Jarvinen are experienced with sex workers in Scotland and as such are trusted faces. We are influenced by Participatory Action Research (O'Neill, 2001) and for a larger funded research project this would be our preferred model. However given the time restraints on reacting to the COVID-19 crisis our methodology has suited the short time frame.






## Ethics



Given this was a small study done by a sex work charity we did not gain ethical approval from an ethics committee. However it has been guided by the experience of Dr. Gemma Ahearne and has abided by the British Sociological Association code of ethics. This report will feed into the development of sex worker services and future funding bids. It is not being used for academic publications and can be seen as an open-access resource that will be shared freely with sex workers and practitioners.

**All participants were given a participant information sheet and a consent form.**



## Semi-structured virtual interviews



Due to the current pandemic the interviews were undertaken by a virtual method to comply with the government's social-distancing restrictions. We used the video-conferencing platform Zoom due to its accessibility and ease of use. We also offered phone interviews for those participants who could not access Zoom.

Our semi-structured interview schedule contained 27 questions and was devised amongst the team, learning from previous research we have been involved with. This research design suited the project as the nature of semi-structured interviews leaves space for the participants to develop and expand their answers.



Thematic analysis is being used to analyse the data as it is an effective instrument of pulling out key themes from qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2016) and the lead researcher is experienced with this mode of data analysis (Ahearne, 2016, 2017, 2019). A key benefit of using thematic analysis is the ability to identify broad themes across data; this will prove invaluable for developing further research and services.



## Survey Results

The survey was performed using the digital platform Typeform, a clear and secure way to collect and store data. There were **41 responses** to the survey which was advertised to participants via twitter and other digital apps. Not all participants answered every question.

### Age

In terms of ages of the participants

- 41.5% (n=17) are 25–34 years old
- 26.8% (n=11) are 35–44 years old,
- 14.6% (n=6) are 18–24 years old
- and 2.4% (n=1) are 55–64 years old.

### Gender

For gender identity,

- 67.5% (n=27) are cisgender women,
- 7.5% (n=3) are cisgender men,
- 7.5% (n=3) are genderfluid,
- 5% (n=2) are agender,
- 5% (n=2) are non-binary
- and 7.5% (n=3) are other.

It is important to note that answering 'other' may represent discomfort at identifying as cis.

### Nationality

For nationality the majority of the participants chose the

- United Kingdom 74.4% (n=29),
- 5.1% (n=2) choose USA,

and there were 8 responses for other countries including Brazil, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Pakistan, and Poland.



## Duration

For length of time in the sex industry

- 53.7% (n=22) said 1-5 years,
- 26.8% (n=11) said 10+ years,
- 12.2% (n=5) said 6-10 years,
- and 7.3% (n=3) said less than one year.

## Types of sex work

- 82.1% (n=32) are involved in indoor-based self managed full service work,
- 33.3% (n=13) chose online work such as webcam content, porn and selling nudes,
- 10.3% (n=4) chose indoor-based third party managed full service work,
- 5.1% (n=2) said street-based self-managed full service work,
- 5.1% (n=2) said sugar babying,
- 2.6% (n=1) said other.



## Accessing sexual health services

Questions 18 of the survey is 'Do you disclose that you are a sex worker when accessing sexual health services? Why or why not?'. **39** participants answered, with mixed results. Some participants said no, and that it was not relevant to the type of sex work they engaged in. Others expressed a fear of judgement:

"No. Fear of being judged, fear of their reaction, or awkward questions. Worry that they will treat me as a victim"

"Yes, at the sex worker clinic. I have disclosed to a GP in the past which I probably won't do again because they were very judgemental".

"No, again shame of being a sex working parent".

"Yes. I disclose the information as I am quite an open person and feel that being in a sexual health clinic should be the place to be open".

Question 19 gives the chance for participants to expand, asking 'What has been your experience as a sex worker when accessing healthcare?' This also gave mixed responses, with experiences depending upon the behaviour of individual staff.

"Really good. The clinic I go to has specific nurses that work with sex workers and they understand our work. I don't feel like I have to hold back or filter information to them"

"Pure rubbish. Judgement and blame, dread appointments".

"My doctor's understanding but only cos she worked with sex workers previously".

The results of the survey demonstrate the need for further qualitative research, which was delivered in semi-structured virtual interviews (see section below). The need for a strategy in health care to provide a consistent level of non-judgemental support is evident. Given the particular difficulties that sex workers are facing due to restrictions on social distancing and travel due to COVID-19, it is gravely urgent that sex workers can access supportive sexual health services.

## Semi-structured interviews

**12** participants were interviewed by Umbrella Lane staff via conferencing platform Zoom. The camera function was disabled, and the audio function was recorded for transcription purposes. The small sample can be justified by the fact that we interviewed during a pandemic. Whilst we cannot claim that this study is representative of all sex workers, the interviews drew textured quality data.



## Thematic findings

The data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2016). The main themes that were identified are discussed below.

### Stigma

All of the participants spoke about the stigma involved in sex work. Examples included when accessing health care, when engaging with the police as a victim of crime, friends trying to get 'mates' rates' and not respecting boundaries, having to keep work a secret from friends and family and not revealing working status to landlords. It was clear that stigma impacts many facets of their life and created barriers when trying to access support.

Sarah: "I can already tell that sometimes they don't want to do checks at the sexual health clinic because they feel like "oh why are you here again".

Anna: "There's a lot of discrimination. I think women feel uncomfortable speaking to like, nurses or other people that provide... like, that service, like tests and things. Because if they mention that they're in sex work, even if it's just camming or if it's full-service sex work, you feel like you're gonna get looked down on. And I think a lot of people in the health industry don't... um, like, they are not educated on it either, they don't understand how important like, testing and screening and access to contraception and things like that are, especially for full-service sex workers".

K: "Um, not even. It was the nurse that I was in seeing and I'd asked for a sexual health check, and she went, oh, but why'd you want one of those?".

The above extracts speak of the stigma when accessing sexual health services with some nurses appearing to be judgemental. It is concerning from a public health perspective if sex workers do not feel comfortable accessing services. This speaks of the need of education when nurses are dealing with sex work.

Anna: "I don't know. In the past when I've been to doctors, I don't tell them about my work, I don't tell them what I do. Um, just out of that fear of being judged. But when it comes to like, sex worker resources, yours [Umbrella Lane] is the only one I know of".

Anna reveals that she will not disclose her sex working status to doctors due to fear of being judged. This demonstrates the importance of peer-led training for medical professionals.

Anna: "Yeah, I think full-service sex workers definitely get more... would get more stigma than like, people that cam. Which is odd. From my experience there's a big disconnect between online sex work and like, in-person sex work because the in-person sex workers see the cam girls as like, oh, it's not real sex work, you're just being naked on the internet, like, it's not hard. And then the other way around it's like, you're a full-service sex worker so you're less than me because I don't sleep with people. Um, that's not my personal opinion, obviously, but some people do see it that way. And yeah, I think, definitely, full-service sex workers get a lot more stigma than any, any other group".



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Anna here refers to the whorearchy, that some sex workers receive more judgement than others depending on what facet of the industry they are seen to engage in. Whorephobia and stigma can come from both out with the industry and also perpetuated within, which has been theorised previously as a product of internalised whorephobia.

Amelia: "Yes, I think that if... basically, I'm kind of the opposite of people that suffer stigma 'cause I'm like a kind of middle-class white woman and I tend, in general society anyway, I tend to get treated pretty well".

This is a reminder that sex workers are not a monolithic group and as such stigma is experienced differently depending on many factors. Isla has the perceived respectability of being white and middle-class.

Laura: "I'm honestly kind of nervous to access sex worker services, I've never found any except Umbrella Lane to actually be of any assistance".

Laura spoke of her anxiety at accessing different sex worker services due to a negative experience in the past. During this engagement with a service they tried to blame sex work for her mental health needs. This demonstrates the need for peer-led sex worker organizations to train therapists on inclusive practice. Laura states that she finds Umbrella Lane to be of assistance.

Laura: "Well see I have had bad experiences in the past, and that's why I always disclose it immediately, because their reaction helps me decide whether they're going to be a good doctor for me or not, because there was one time I went to a doctor, he was an older male, he's the only male GP I've ever had who I've told this to, and he's also the only one who's reacted badly, so I went to him and I said "look I'm a sex worker, I think I need therapy, my life's not going so well, mental health's bad, etc." I had like these stomach pains, I was throwing up every day for four months at that point, and I said all this to him and he said "I think you just need to relax, and kind of grow up, and stop doing the job you're doing", basically that I was a silly little girl, and he didn't help me at all, didn't prescribe me anything, so the minute I got home I cried really really hard, because I felt like maybe I was just a silly little girl, but I was genuinely in pain...".





This speaks more broadly to the misogyny of medicine and the dismissing of women's pain and experiences. Infantilizing a patient by calling her a 'silly little girl' is unprofessional and feeds into the stigma that sex work must be the problem, rather than a sex worker presenting with other problems.

Lily: "I don't know.. if they had... I don't know, actually... I've never really thought about it if I'm honest. I don't know 'cause my GP is... I've known my GP for years, eh, so... I don't want... I suppose it's the stigma, isn't it? It's that sort of stigma that you think that people are gonna have about what we do. It's not... Do you know what? It's nobody's business, it's up to me what I do with my body, do you know what I mean".

Lily's extract speaks of the fear of stigma but also of resistance, common across sex worker narratives in this study. Diane refuses to be shamed and asserts that her body is her business.

Kate: "Yeah, for that, actually, I go for that. But it's really hard to find someone, like, find someone who hasn't, like, a judgemental... if you are a migrant, still, they are like, super judgmental".

Kate speaks of the specific stigma directed at migrant sex workers. This 'super judgemental' attitude can be understood as a product of the 'anti-trafficking' industry which has conflated all migrant sex work with sex trafficking, and as such many professionals are hostile towards sex workers who are not British. This racism is caught up in anti-immigration policies and xenophobic fears of the 'other'. It is crucial that all services receive training on migrant sex work to avoid reducing all migrant sex workers to victims of trafficking and ensure racism has no bearing on treatment of persons who are migrant.

Sabrina: "Yeah stigma sucks. And it impacts us in a negative way, because the moment that someone who doesn't really have non-stigmatising ideas about sex work, as soon as one of them meets us they go "oh, this in front of me is not a person, they are like this cartoon character that I have in my mind", and it definitely impacts how you're treated, and it's not nice".

In this extract Sabrina acknowledges the dehumanization that takes place once someone's sex worker status is revealed.

Michael: "I don't really, yeah, I don't think there's any stigma to, kind of, sex work, so much not really for our generation, they would be for your mum and dad, that kind of generation, they would really put a stigma on it".



Interestingly, male sex worker Michael does not believe there is stigma attached to sex work. This implies that some of the stigma might be gendered.



## Digital Gaze

Sex workers are increasingly operating online due to COVID-19. Although online sex work is often presented as a safer option, it presents its own challenges.

Anna: "Oh yeah! I think it's become harder to make money online when a lot of websites that sex workers used to promote themselves on or different payment apps that they used to make their money on shut sex workers down. Paypal, for instance, uh, Circle Pay, CashApp, Instagram, and I think Twitter are cracking down on it now as well".

This quotation highlights how stigma is reinforced in hostile and discriminatory practices by businesses. Sex workers are increasingly being excluded from the ability to use online payment facilities and social media platforms for advertising. Some alternatives to independent working are indoors for third parties in a brothel, parlour or agency, or street-based sex work.

Anna: "Yeah, it's crazy, I see it happen all the time to sex worker. It does feel like, in the last couple of years anyway, there's been sort of an attack on sex workers using social media to promote themselves. Um, which can make things difficult. I do think it's also become a lot more inclusive with, you know... There's a lot... a lot more visibility around trans sex workers or non-binary sex workers which has been really nice to see recently".

## Community

Participants gave a range of responses, from experiencing the sex worker community as "super welcoming" to experiencing hostility and isolation.

Anna: "Yeah, I think, umm... I think having places outside of social media where it is just for sex workers to communicate and share... like a safe space for them where, you know, you're not gonna be terminated for having, you know, your nude pictures that you wanna share with somebody or, umm...like a place where it is just for sex workers to communicate and support each other and have different resources available there. Um, maybe like, options for collaborations."

Sarah: "People are just very supportive and helpful, and there's quite a few people that'll just pop up and just offer advice. But I find it very overwhelming because people are constantly changing their names, and they're just pictures. I think if there was a central hub for all of us to communicate, instead of spamming twitter with "let's share for share", we can do that somewhere else if you know what I mean? Especially because social media is so negative around sex work, so many people get their accounts deleted and have to make new accounts, so if we had somewhere where we were safe, then we could stay connected without having to keep re-finding everyone and re-building connections".

Anna and Sarah both spoke about the competition in sex work that is fuelled by the digital culture in which people are constantly marketing themselves online. They instead want a safe forum where sex workers can discuss safer working practices and have community support. The fluid nature of the digital sex worker community is also obvious here, with Sarah desiring more stability.

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Anna: "I think, uh... I do think for some lines of sex work definitely... Like for full-service sex workers or stripping, anything that's like, in person, I think a buddy system is really, I think that would be really helpful and more like, secure for people. You know, you feel a bit more comfortable if there is someone else you know around in that vicinity...".

Here Anna talks about the need for a buddy system in order to provide a community for sex workers, echoed by Kate as particularly important for migrant sex workers. This demonstrates the need for peer-led support.

Amelia: "And I suppose that's what's nice about the meet-up group because people can talk about just general experiences or safety procedures that they put in place. 'cause I'm quite lucky I've not felt unsafe often at work but, erm, I think that it's helpful for me to hear what other people do as well so that maybe if they've had a scenario that I had not thought of, then I could be like, ok, if that were to happen, then what would I do. And even just like talking through, which I suppose is like a self-defense technique as well, talking through what would you do if this happens, and then if you already have things in place, then if something does happen, then you don't just freeze in panic".

Amelia positions the sex working community as a space for safer working practices and strategies of risk management to be discussed.

Amelia: "At the moment, uh, WhatsApp group chats. So before all this I was coming into the Umbrella Lane, uh, Tuesday meet-ups. It was Tuesday, wasn't it, most weeks. And I've got quite a few friends who worked before I started working. So when I started working I already had that support and I'm kind of pals with them outside of all this anyway so, um, I've kind of got a support network of people who know what I do and friends within the community that I met through the community as well. So, erm, I've kind of got a mixture of online people and people I know through Twitter and people I know in person".

Here Amelia discusses the importance of having an online and in-person sex work community. This is emphasised by Laura below.

Laura: "Just the way you talked about that there are events, and actual community meetings, I didn't even know that was a thing. I didn't know there was a place that would just open themselves up to all the whores. That's amazing, that's honestly soul saving in a way I never knew I had to be saved. That would honestly be great, that's what I want, even if there were meet-ups at a bar or something".





Sabrina: “Mostly community, like obviously advice and support and uhm... health supplies and what not, but those are like the nice bonuses, the most important part is the community. For me at least. Because it reduces internalised stigma, it reduces the pressures of not being able to talk about this part of your life in detail, or as much”.

The potential isolation of sex work cannot be ignored. Here Laura shows joy at being told there are community events saying the news is “soul saving in a way I never knew I had to be saved”. The sense of being able to belong to a community is powerful. Sabrina emphasises that community is important due to the stigma that exists.

Kat: “Erm, I probably seem a bit older than all the other girls. But, erm, that’s probably why I’ve not been to any of the meet-ups things, on the, the, the drop-ins... I just feel like I’d be the oldest person there but then again I don’t know.”.

Kat implies that her age is a barrier to accessing community support groups. This demonstrates the need for diversity in service provisions. Kat also speaks of her mistrust of the sex work community below.

Kat: “To be honest, I don’t really know an awful lot about it. I very much, because of the nature of the work, you don’t really have to interact with a lot of them. I hear only the views and points of views through my clients. Erm, I have only met maybe a couple of people through some work, and they’ve always been really nice people that I’ve met but then you hear stories, but I don’t know whether to believe stories because there’s always too many sides to a story”.

This mistrust might be intensified by feeling isolated from the community, but this extract also speaks to sex work as a business that can be perceived as unfriendly or elitist. This might be heightened for migrant sex workers as Kate describes below in talking about the importance of meeting other workers to navigate sex work and migration issues.

Kate: “Because I feel more comfortable. I wanted to know some sex workers work in Glasgow, I wanted to meet them. And if I need help... It is not easy if you are a migrant sex worker, you don’t know the country, how you can work, how you can stay in the country... You don’t know the escort websites. How you can work, you know? Everything is so important. So you need to meet with sex workers to learn everything from them. And yeah, I... I wanted to meet with the sex workers so it’s important for me”,





Kate: "If you are a migrant sex worker, you are super, super alone, and just you need some company. And actually I prefer only like, migrant sex workers event, they can go there and just talk to them, talk with them, and just ask them what you need. And that's the important thing. Sometimes, yeah,... you need to talk with someone, that's it, you know".

The isolation of being a migrant sex worker is a vulnerability that needs addressing. It is important that peer-led sex worker organizations have the funding to offer specialized migrant services. Male and trans sex workers also need support.

Michael: "It's just some, what's difficult, especially at the moment 'cause everyone is so isolated, um, you kinda feel very much alone at the moment but I know a lot of people are".

Michael: "For me, personally, it's just like a kind of a group meeting. I would love, I know you discussed that already but I'd like to meet up with other workers, and just meet face to face, that kind of situation, that's what I would like".

Michael: "I find them, to be quite honest, I find them quite inhospitable. They don't seem to, um... Especially 'cause I'm not particularly from this area, I've never lived in the UK for a number of years... It's almost like, this is my kind of, like, my patch. You know, it's very much, this is my patch, you shouldn't be here, you're taking money away from me, so yeah, not very good".

In the above extracts Michael talks about the importance of in-person contact with a sex worker community. Whilst there has been much media attention during COVID-19 of the isolation of elderly and disabled people, the isolation of sex workers has been ignored. For those who are already stigmatized and marginalized, the isolation during this period is compounded. Michael also speaks of his experience of the sex work community as being 'inhospitable', no doubt exacerbated by the pandemic.



## Business Strategies

Much of the discussion around community leads into developing business strategies for engaging in sex work. Here it is evident that sex workers devise strategies to maximise their earning potential and they want to develop their skills and knowledge. As such sex work can be understood as a form of skilled labour.

Anna: "But... but I know that like, for me personally, if someone would reach out to me and would say I want to get into webcamming and I don't know where to start... I'd be more than comfortable with helping them navigate that... and I think there's other people like that who want to help, they just, they don't have the... like you said, if it was set up with Umbrella Lane, people could volunteer to say, I'm willing to help out with, whatever I can help with, and then there's people you could be partnered with".

Here Anna discusses the need for a space where sex workers can support the development of work-based skills with peers.

Amelia: "Er, maybe to do with advertising, like Umbrella Lane already did a workshop on advertising which was good. I don't know whether, how much it would help me because I'm terrible at advertising and I don't like it but yeah, I think, er, I suppose things to do with working safely and like, knowing what your rights are under the law".

Sabrina: "Yes, I would love some like bondage workshops, I would love some like, even like various sexual techniques or whatever, because that's always something that one wants to learn more about. I'd also love workshops on resume building, and uhm... what else... like how to file your taxes, I know you did one like that last year but I didn't quite catch it so another one of those would be nice".

Here Sabrina discusses sex work as a business, wanting specialist advice on how to file taxes and how to build a resume.

Sarah: "Yeah, and marketing is something that a lot of people, it's scary and overwhelming, capitalism is just a mind fuck".

Amelia discusses the need for workshops on digital tools such as advertising and also knowledge of the law. This again represents sex workers as independent practitioners who develop a range of marketing skills. This demonstrates that sex work is specialised labour and that sex workers are constantly building on their skill set. This is in comparison to the stereotypes often circulated in the media of sex workers being 'trapped' in the industry and not having options. Sex workers in this research displayed a range of transferrable skills. Sarah also speaks of the need to access help with marketing and speaks of the problems of capitalism.



## Risk Management Strategies

A key theme throughout the interviews were the strategies that sex workers devise in order to navigate the risk involved in sex work. It was evident that sex workers are very aware of the 'almost violences' (Ahearne, 2016) that may occur and undertake their own mechanisms of minimizing risk to themselves.

Sarah: "I feel I have to switch out hotels on a regular basis".

This is a strategy to minimise risk of detection and to avoid harassment from clients, hotel staff and/or authorities.

Anna: "Also, like, safety concerns are definitely a worry. There's always that fear of being doxxed, having your real name out there, having... like for me, personally, everyone in my "vanilla life" that I care about, they know what I do, but I know a lot of girls who are not in that position, that sex work is a secret and I know a lot of them that struggle with, you know, being outed, or being blackmailed, um, and on, on the worst extreme of that, like, I've, I've noticed in recent years, I'm quite a true crime nerd".

Here Anna discusses a fear of digital violence, that is being 'doxxed' or outed.

Anna: "There has been a lot more, um... I know especially in full-service sex work there's a lot of murder that happens there anywhere, but it's spreading to cam girls being stalked, and strippers, and things like that, and it's very... That can be very scary. I've seen quite a rise in that, over the last three or four years, I would say".

In this extract Anna discusses risks of symbolic and physical harm to sex workers.

Amelia: "Er, when I'm working, basically, more than my physical safety, is people finding out what I'm doing, I think is my main concern. Like, I generally, I usually work either in my flat or a friend's flat and the way that I get clients is emails through AdultWork so I don't... it's obviously slightly illusory, the kind of safety that I feel by getting clients through that method but because I'm not just randomly getting a phone call and then somebody turning up, because we've usually exchanged a few emails".




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Amelia demonstrates that some of the safety that results from working indoors and screening can be 'illusory'. This is a stark reminder that some violent men target sex workers due to the belief that their stigmatized status leaves them less likely to report crimes.

Laura: "I guess I kind of had to learn this on my own so I'm quite good at it now, but I know girls I've talked to in the past they don't know how to handle difficult or rude clients, or how to screen clients so only the best behaved ones get through, I'm quite good at that now, I screen everyone on the phone before I see them, and the slightest hint of disrespect I don't see them, and I'll let them know I'm sorry I won't be seeing you, I'll politely decline or give an excuse or whatever. But that's something I had to learn on my own, and there were times with clients where they scared me, and they'd try to do something like stick fingers in my ass when I'd told them not to, or just things that I hadn't consented to, so I guess maybe kind of teaching girls how to deal with clients who want to go too far and push your boundaries, how to set your boundaries and how to keep them, and how to calm down an angry man. I'm very good at that now, but I didn't used to be, and I got in some scary spots".

Laura talks about the need to screen clients and to navigate potential risks through setting firm boundaries and identifying red flags. This is something she would like to teach to other sex workers. Here it is evident that there is a strong need for sex workers to have a safe space in which to explore safer working practices without judgement and empower one another in these practices.

Laura: "Maybe it would be nice to have a blacklist of clients, a blacklist of clients numbers that all the girls have access to, that would be a cool thing. I'm excited to come to the next event".

Laura was not aware of the various safety schemes available to sex workers which speaks to a need for education on this. There are resources such as the safety app Client Eye and charity National Ugly Mugs (NUM). NUM' Impact Report 2019/20 states that 90% of sex workers surveyed feel safer knowing that NUM exists, and that 40% have avoided a specific individual due to the alerts provided (NUM, 2010).



Lily: "Just given what I've just been through. I think, sorta like... maybe some sort of basic self-defense type stuff. Ehm, or if you know of anywhere that I can go for that.

In the above extract Lily speaks for her desire to learn self-defense. This again reminds us of the real threat of violence that sex workers constantly navigate and manage, often exacerbated by working alone.

Male sex worker Michael also talks about the risks involved in sex work.

Michael: "Yeah, 'cause I've had a couple of clients that have been... I guess, dangerous and I wasn't really aware of that so that kind of made me aware that I've got to be careful and got to be more aware to see what is going on in my particular area".

Michael: "Just to make sure that I have a good health record, that I'm clean and protected and, um, yeah, just general information as to, perhaps, what's going on in that sector 'cause there's a lot of elements to danger if, you know... so I just want to be aware of, of any elements going on there at a particular time".





Michael: "My main concern is inviting anybody into my home that I don't know, um, that I've not met before, and they're going to put me into a dangerous situation. And I kind of... you always kinda think it's not gonna happen to you, it's not gonna happen to you but like I said, a couple of times I've been in awkward situations".

In these extracts Michael talks about sexual screening as a risk management strategy and of the need to be aware of dangerous 'elements'. This also speaks to the need for risk strategies to be localised, with Michael needing to know what is going on in his "particular area". This also fits in with the need for a peer-led community.

Sarah speaks of the buddy community system as a risk management strategy.

Sarah: "It's an amazing idea, specifically like even for a nude models, chaperones, or for porn, and often you can't find a chaperone, so you can't book the shoot, so you don't get the work. So I think the buddy system is an amazing idea, like it could work so many different ways".

The realities of fear of violence are discussed by Sabrina below.

Sabrina: "Not getting raped, not getting killed, I'd say those two are pretty high on the list. Also not getting arrested, not getting kicked out by whatever location I'm in, I would say that those are all things that I think about. Definitely like safety, safety's the main one, not getting robbed, not getting kicked out, not getting a criminal record".

In this extract Sabrina talks about the risks of extreme violence, "getting raped, getting killed". The looming threat of extreme violence has been shown to haunt sex workers (Ahearne, 2016, 2019). Sabrina's other concerns relate to not getting evicted by a landlord and not being criminalized. This loaded extract demonstrates the multitude of harms that sex workers try and navigate, often alone to avoid criminalization through working together for increased safety.



## Language

**All the participants expressed concern for the language used to describe the sellers of sexual services. It was a shared view that sex worker is the most respected term, however participants interrogated the uses of language including the ability to reclaim terms.**

Sarah: "I like the term sex worker best, I think that's the most on point, the one with the least negative connotation. I know a lot of workers like the term whore or prostitute, out of the two I almost like whore better, it feels more like a term you can reclaim, kind of like bitch, whereas I feel like prostitute is a term they use on crime shows as a sensationalist thing, they're trying to sound neutral but it still sounds judgmental".

Anna: "For me, personally, I don't mind the term 'sex worker' or 'adult entertainer' or 'in the adult industry'. Erm, I don't think it's my place to say because I've never done full-service sex work but I don't like the word 'prostitute'".

Amelia: "I usually use 'sex working' and 'sex worker', um, as an umbrella term. I know a lot of people don't like it. But I think it's, for me, it's just a descriptor. It doesn't seem emotionally loaded. I say 'escort' and 'escorting' to refer to specifically what I do as a like, indoor based sex worker to kind of differentiate to other types of sex work but er, yeah, I think they're the main terms that I use".

Kate: "Oh, the sex worker! They can't say you're a whore, or a prostitute! You can say that! But no, not everyone can say that".

Kate emphasises the importance of the power dynamics of language. That a sex worker with their insider status can use terms such as whore or prostitute, but not an outsider. This is about respect and is important for all professionals who interact with sex workers.

Michael: "Yeah, that's what I have an issue with because I don't put myself under that title but yeah. I guess 'sex worker'. That's the appropriate name, yeah, sex worker".

Michael states that he does not refer to himself as a sex worker, or see himself as one, but concurs that 'sex worker' is the most appropriate term to use.

Sabrina: "I think sex worker, it is formal but it's the best one, because it's the umbrella term that has everything under it, so you're including cam girls, and you're including the strippers, and you're including the pro dommes, so you're including everyone, so that's a good one".

Here Sabrina argues that sex worker is a useful term because it is an umbrella term that includes all sex workers.





## Trafficking and Migrant Workers

Sarah: "They were clamping down on 'trafficking' but you know they just wanted less sex workers".

Here Sarah refers to a chain of hotels that were publicly calling out 'trafficking'. Sarah believes they did not want sex workers present. Street-based sex work is criminalised which pushes sex workers indoors. However the grey area of the law that sex work operates within means they are seen as 'undesirable' by many in society. In effect 'clamping down' on sex workers merely displaces sex work to more dangerous locations (Hubbard, 1998).

Sarah: "I feel a lot of the time those are people who services are trying to 'rescue'".

Sarah expressed concern that many services want to 'rescue' migrant sex workers under the guise of trafficking but not support them.

Amelia: "I think it would be good to learn more about that and in what way, if somebody was trafficked, then, like, if they came in and accessed a peer-led organisation, like, what could we do to help them. And like, find out what it was that they were wanting".

Laura: "A lot of my new clients come to me and they say "oh thank god you're not one of the Romanians, because those girls are so scared", so that's sort of my only experience with migrant sex workers, and I worry about those girls, and I don't know what to do to help them, but I do have a lot of clients say to me that those are the majority of the girls on the website, and like they seem like they don't want to do it, that's the only personal experience I have of that, I don't know how true that is".

Here, Amelia and Laura discuss their concern for women who have potentially been trafficked. Laura also expresses that clients say 'thank god' that she is not a trafficked sex worker, noting what appears as concern also from clients about forced labour in sex work. This "concern" however, may also be related to racism, as noted by Sammy:



Sammy: Yeah, probably the migrant sex workers from what I hear from my clients. Erm, they don't want to go with a 'foreigner', as they call them. They want to stick with Scottish girls and that's why it's quite important that you make sure you say that you're Scottish so you get those clients. I know that sounds totally racist but it's obviously just what someone likes better".

Migrant sex workers appear to be dehumanized on two counts, firstly that their consensual work is conflated with trafficking and secondly that racist clients can openly dismiss 'foreigners'. This represents the hostile landscape of anti-immigration policies and discourse.

Sarah: "100%, and educating people on the fact that sex work does not equal trafficking, but trafficking often equals sex work, because trafficking is everywhere and it exists in every facet of capitalism, it's not just sex work, it's capitalism that creates a use for trafficking".





## Law



All participants expressed opinions surrounding the law, specifically the problems with the confusing and complex nature of the existing law.

Sarah: "I mean I want decrim, and I don't think it's good that we have that law about brothel keeping where two or more people in a flat constitutes a brothel, I think that's bullshit. I would much prefer to join a friend in their working flat than to go to a hotel, not just to save money but also because it would feel safer, and it would feel like a less sterile environment, and maybe more fun. I think there's maybe less chances of being outed or found out by authorities, I truly really think there's no disadvantages to decrim".

Sarah recognises that the law currently influences sex workers to work alone, whereas she would rather work with a friend for safety. This can also be read as a risk management strategy.

Amelia: "So hopefully that will continue. But, er, yeah... I suppose it's like with a lot of things that there'll be laws that aren't great but they are not enforced equally across all groups so some people are like, oh, it's not a problem because it doesn't affect me! And it's like, well, it's affecting all these people".

Sammy: "Current laws around sex work... Obviously the current law about having to work on your own is... I can see why it exists. You don't want lots of crazy brothels in your local neighbourhood but it also, erm, isn't good because you get girls all working alone or girls working in their flats alone... erm, so for their safety".

Amelia and Sammy make the point that laws will impact different sex workers disproportionately. From those based on-street who are soliciting under the current law, to those working indoors with friends as a safety strategy.





Laura: "I lived with another whore for four years, and at the end of the four years when she was moving out someone told us it was illegal for us to live together. Because we were technically running a brothel. I don't really think about the laws, I guess, I wish it was legalised because it would be easier for underprivileged girls to gain access to valuable services, and if it was legalised, maybe trafficking would be lessened. That's all I really have to say about the laws".

Michael: "Well, I believe that you're allowed to do it but not accept any money? Is that, is that, is that correct? Is that correct?".

Misunderstandings and lack of information about the law is worrying and demonstrates a need to inform sex workers about their legal status and associated rights, with more accessible information being made available to sex workers. Not understanding the law places sex workers in a very vulnerable situation where they could end up being criminalized or exploited by third parties who take advantage of the lack of awareness of the laws. The current law also means that sex workers cannot work with others as a mechanism of safety.

Sabrina speaks about services' positions on the legal status of sex work.

Sabrina: "Well I'd have to know that they were pro-decrim, because if they're not pro-decrim then I would not trust them, because they don't have my best interests at heart so I'm not going to give them any information that they could use against me".

This extract demonstrates that some sex workers are aware of the legal position of sex work and the political landscape. It suggests that services and organizations should be transparent about whether they support decriminalization or not.

## Police

Several of the participants had opinions about the policing of sex work, based on perception or actual experience of engagement. Whilst sex workers have a complex relationship with policing due to much state violence (Mac and Smith, 2020) the participants in this study shared mixed views and experiences.

Anna: "No, no, I don't think at all. Like you see it in, in criminal cases all the time, if it's a sex worker that's, you know, that goes missing, especially if it's a sex worker of colour or a trans sex worker, it's, it's just not a priority. People see it as well, you chose that line of work so you face the consequences of it which is awful".

Anna expresses concern that sex workers are not seen a priority by police. This links into stigma, with Anna asserting that people think that if you choose sex work then you must accept the consequences. Yet Faith does express a trust in reporting violence to Police as a means to reduce risk of escalation.

Anna: "I think if you go to the police in the first instance it might stop something worse happening later down the line".

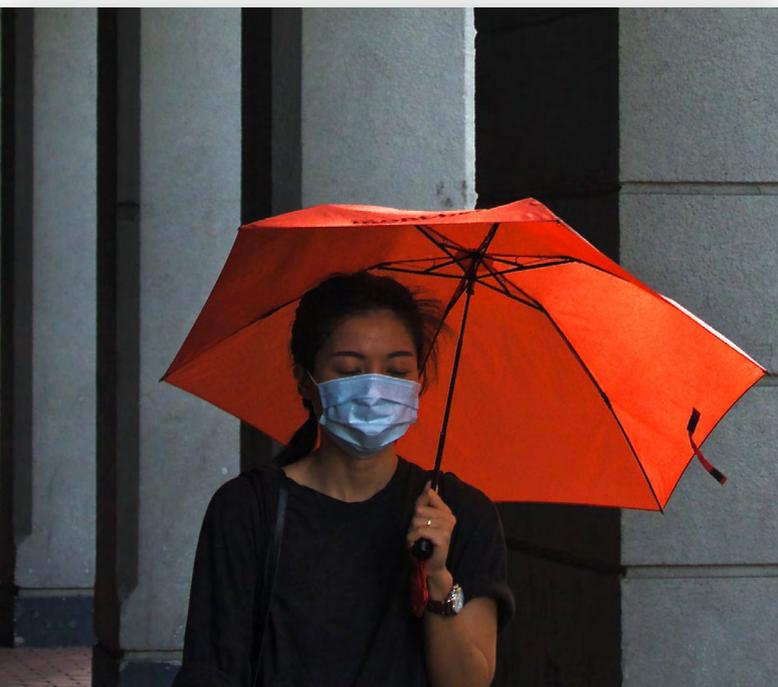
The above extract positions the police as a safety mechanism, that if a potential harm is logged it can serve to protect later on. This demonstrates the importance of sex workers being able to engage with the police on their own terms.

Anna: "That's really, that's insanely helpful! I've had customers on webcam, they've not done anything specifically... but it's just, like, they get incredibly clingy and angry if you're not giving them attention and things like that. It's, it's a lot of red flags".

This quotation fits into the broader debate of gendered violence and threats. It also demonstrates the importance of safety schemes and apps.

Lily: "That's the one thing, you know, I would, y'know, in fact, I was talking to the liaison officer today, and I said to her, y'know, with the experience I just had, dealing with them, now it was, unfortunately the liaison officer who was meant to come and see me got called away on something else...so it was two police officer who came around that didn't have any experience with a sex worker, however, they were fantastic, they really were fantastic! But I would encourage anybody, even if they don't want to make it an official, still report it! You've got to report it, you know?".

Michael: "But again, more protection. But I have been to the police before and they were very helpful so I'm pretty happy with how it is at the moment".





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Lily speaks of her positive experience of the police, repeating 'they were fantastic'. This goes against much research that only talks about the negatives of the policing of sex work. The mention of a sex work liaison officer also suggests that engagement with the police is possible and can produce fruitful results. Further liaison options for sex workers who were particularly frightened to report violence and the police were noted in the form of sex worker organisations

K: I understand why sex workers who are trafficked would not want to go to the police or would be too frightened to, so I think a service such like Umbrella Lane would be really nice kind of liaison-wise for that.

Lily also speaks of reporting crime as a safety net strategy, repeating "Report it! You've got to report it you know". Making her experiences official through the reporting of a crime can be seen as validation and future protection. Michael discloses that he has had positive experiences with the police too which demonstrates a potentially positive shift in policing.

This positive shift in policing and responding to sex worker complaints however was not the experience of Lucy when asked if she had experienced negative treatment based on her sex worker status:



Lucy: Yes, actually, by the police. Um, I phoned them when my ex found my AdultWork profile and threatened me. He threatened to out me to my mum, to my brother, to the community... he also threatened, said he would come down on me like a ton of bricks. He then started accessing all my social media and tried to contact me and threatened me through that and it was just awful. They treated me as if I had done something wrong and they even phoned social services on me. They dropped it straight away. Erm, [inaudible], I found it so traumatic and upsetting; I think if anything would happen again, I wouldn't phone the police, I wouldn't feel supported by them as a sex worker whatsoever.

The diversity of sex worker experiences in relation to police perception and engagement show a need for further work to be carried out in relationship building and trust. Considering sex workers are often targets of violence, often carried out by serial sexual predators who pose a serious risk, it remains essential that sex workers are supported to report crimes against them. The police, sex worker organisations and reporting mechanisms such as National Ugly Mugs, clearly have a continued role to play in enhancing the safety of sex workers and facilitating their access to justice.



## Conclusions



- This research demonstrates that stigma is a barrier for accessing health care.
- The study shows that migrant sex workers face hostility and isolation as a result of the 'anti trafficking' narratives. This results in migrant sex workers and victims of trafficking being further isolated.
- Language is important when talking about sex work. All participants stated that they do not like non-sex workers referring to them as a 'prostitute'.
- The sex workers in this study utilised a range of risk management strategies to navigate dangers.
- Sex work is a skilled job and participants demonstrated strategies of upskilling through the opportunities presented by way of workshops or peer-shared knowledge. This also demonstrates that sex workers have transferrable skills that can be developed should they choose to move on to other forms of work.
- Participants disclosed mixed experiences with the police, but a desire to engage with reporting crimes against them. Benefits of sex work liaison officers and other facilitators of engagement were mentioned. This suggests that further engagement with the police is possible.
- The research findings show that participants are concerned about their lack of knowledge surrounding sex work and the law. Those interviewed are also supportive of decriminalization so they can work together as a safety strategy.
- Whilst physical violence towards sex workers is discussed frequently, this research demonstrates an increased anxiety regarding digital crimes such as doxxing and how online sex workers are victims to stalking and harassment (see also Sanders et al, 2017).
- Peer support and community-only spaces are important for reducing isolation.



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