



Supporting Safer Sex Work

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A broad spectrum of people work in the sex industry across the UK. This includes people of all genders, ages, nationalities, ethnicities, sexual orientations, health and socio-economic statuses; it also includes people who work and study in further and higher education.

This briefing is designed to provide more information to enable those who are working in, or considering entering, the sex industry to make informed and empowered decisions. It builds on established UCU policy to work towards decriminalising sex work (see Annex A).

The reasons why people choose to enter into sex work are varied and complex. For many in post-16 education, inadequate maintenance support and poor pay and conditions in the sector mean finding additional income is an economic necessity. This has only been intensified by the ongoing cost of living crisis and cuts to public services which have disproportionately impacted on women and marginalised communities. For others, though, it is a conscious lifestyle choice linked to sexual liberation.

UCU does not seek to encourage people into sex work – the choice of whether or not to enter into this type of work is a deeply personal one. Instead, the union is recognising the reality that faces many of our members and their students, and working to make them safer by acknowledging the risks and signposting support, as well as challenging the damaging stigma which is attached to sex work.

What is sex work?

Sex work is an umbrella term for a broad range of activity – from posting images online (e.g. on OnlyFans) to face to face work. It can refer to (but is not limited to) escorting, lap dancing, stripping, pole dancing, pornography, webcamming, adult modelling, phone sex, and selling sex.

Is sex work legal?

Sex work is not illegal in the UK, but it is still criminalised in various ways. For example, sex workers who work on the street can be picked up on soliciting or anti-social behaviour order charges, and sex workers who work together indoors for safety can be charged with brothel keeping.

The Crown Prosecution Service focuses on the prosecution of those who force others into prostitution, exploit, abuse and harm them. Their joint approach with the police, and with the support of other agencies, is to help those involved in prostitution to develop routes out. For more information about the law, see:

Prostitution and Exploitation of Prostitution | The Crown Prosecution Service (cps.gov.uk)

 cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/prostitution-and-exploitation-prostitution

Sex Workers and the Law Booklet (2017 Edition) | Release

 release.org.uk/publications/sex-workers-and-law-booklet

UCU policy is to decriminalise sex work as this would allow for regulation and collectivisation which would enhance the safety and working conditions of sex workers.

What are some of the risks of sex work?

Restrictions on secondary employment, and bringing the organisation into disrepute

In addition to understanding the legality of sex work itself, it's important to understand how engaging in sex work can impact on other employment.

Many contracts of employment include a clause restricting the ability to work a second job without written permission. Most also state that secondary employment (or indeed any other employee activity) must not bring the organisation into disrepute; because of the stigma surrounding sex work it is likely that work of this nature could fall foul of this type of clause.

Read the small print of your employment contract to ensure you're aware of how undertaking any sex work might affect your other sources of income.

Intimate image abuse

The rise of social media and has made it easier for sex workers to share content with clients, but it has also increased the risk of it being shared without permission. Intimate image abuse is the act of sharing intimate images or videos of someone, either on or offline, without their consent with the intention of causing distress. This can include so-called ‘sextortion’ where someone threatens to share content unless they receive payment.

If you’ve experienced intimate image abuse you can get advice and support from the Revenge Porn Helpline (details below).

Physical safety

If you’re undertaking any face-to-face work with clients, you can take a range of steps to protect yourself. This might include telling a friend where you’re working, carrying a whistle or personal alarm, and checking updates from sex worker collectives about potentially violent clients to avoid.

The UK Network of Sex Projects has produced some helpful safety guidance for all types of sex work which can be found here:

www.nswp.org/sites/default/files/Keeping%20Safe%20-%20Safety%20advice%20for%20sex%20workers%20in%20the%20UK.pdf

If you find that you are subject to harassment or stalking by a client, you can report it here: gov.uk/report-stalker

Finding Help and Support

The following organisations and resources can provide useful information to those considering entering the sex work industry:

SWARM (Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement)

A collective founded and led by sex workers who campaign for the rights and safety of all who sell sexual services.

 www.swarmcollective.org

Global Network of Sex Work Projects:

 www.nswp.org

ECP (English Collective of Prostitutes)

An organisation of sex workers with a national network throughout the UK.

 prostitutescollective.net

National Services Support for Student Sex Workers

An organisation run by former and current sex workers offering support to individuals involved in all aspects of the sex industry.

 supportforstudentsexworkers.org

National Ugly Mugs (NUM)

Reporting scheme to help protect people involved in sex work from violent and abusive individuals.

 uglymugs.org/um

Pineapple Support Society

Free and subsidised emotional support and professional therapy for adult industry performers.

 pineapplesupport.org

Revenge Porn Helpline

service supporting adults (aged 18+) who are experiencing intimate image abuse, also known as revenge porn.

 revengepornhelpline.org.uk

SAAFE (Support and advice for Escorts)

A collective of independent escorts offering advice and support to all adult industry performers.

 saafe.info

Annex A - UCU Policy

UCU has a policy on supporting self-organised sex workers in their call for decriminalisation of sex workers through collective working and improved safety for sex workers. This follows a motion passed at Congress in 2017: ***Education, sex worker safety and collective organising*** - Halesowen College

Congress notes:

- 1) as many as 1 in 20 students are involved in work in the sex industry
- 2) recent NUS findings that students work in this area for primarily financial reasons
- 3) the high proportion of LGBT and disabled students represented in sex work
- 4) the impact of FE cuts and rising tuition fees in blocking exit from the sex industry.

Congress believes:

- a. that sex workers, like all oppressed groups, have the right to organise collectively.
- b. that criminalisation of sex work prevents collective working and increases risk to sex worker safety.

Congress resolves:

- i. to work with the NUS and any other relevant group to highlight the impact cuts and fees have in trapping workers in the sex industry, and campaign for free access to education.
- ii. to support self-organised sex workers in their call for decriminalisation of sex work to allow collective working and improved safety for sex workers.

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