

SUPPORTING STUDENTS IMPACTED
BY THE SEX INDUSTRY

A HANDBOOK FOR UNIVERSITIES

“It is incomprehensible to me that any educational institution would promote any aspect of the sex trade as an option, instead of equipping students to avoid its harms and provide non-judgmental holistic and tailored support to those currently involved and those who want to exit.

For learning institutions committed to taking their responsibilities to safeguard the welfare of their student body seriously, I strongly urge you to read this handbook and act on its recommendations. In addition, please listen to survivors and examine the overwhelming evidence base of the harms and long-term effects of this sexist, misogynistic, racist and oppressive system. Reject an approach that seeks to camouflage exploitation and abuse as empowering and that accepts the sexual commodification of people, while protecting the power of those who choose to exploit!”

Diane Martin CBE. Diane has over 25 years’ experience as a practitioner in the women’s sector, specialising in improving policy and practice and developing services for women involved in or exited from prostitution, including 15 years of founding and managing a specialist exiting service. She is the Chair of ‘A Model for Scotland’ and a Vice Chair of ISTAC (International Survivors of Trafficking Advisory Council to ODIHR). She is also a Survivor of prostitution in London and of being trafficked to the Middle East.

“To promote the selling of sexual acts as anything other than an age-old patriarchal control strategy is to fail on many fronts. It is to fail our young women by colluding with the historical social forces that have always sought to exploit them, by glibly repackaging those forces as ‘progressive’, ‘modern’ and ‘empowering’. It is failure-as-collusion to endorse the abuses which the restricted set of choices poverty imposes on some young women as valid, reasonable or worthy of promotion. It is also to fail our young men – who take behavioural and ethical cues from the institutions they form part of – by adding to the already-toxic sexist atmosphere on many campuses. A university promoting prostitution as a viable option for economically disadvantaged young women will symbolically condone every misogynistic trope that can be found in our culture. Assaults, rape, coercion, drink-spiking and image-based abuse are already rife in our universities. Addressing that unacceptable reality is where the duty of socially-responsible places of learning lies, not in officially bolstering the endemic commodification of women’s bodies.”

Michael Conroy is the founder of Men At Work and creator of the ‘Men At Work: 10 Dialogues’ resource for those working with boys and young men.

NORDIC MODEL NOW!



<http://nordicmodelnow.org>



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FOREWORD

It is an honour to be invited to write the foreword of this handbook: *Supporting students impacted by the sex industry: A handbook for universities*. The work on the handbook, like all the activities at Nordic Model Now! was volunteer led, and all the work they do is co-created together with women who have lived experience of prostitution. The politics of incorporating marginalised voices into narratives that are shaping our world is a theme central to my work.

I first heard prostitution called ‘sex-work’ by a male left-wing academic activist. This term arises out of academia and for nearly two decades I would use this language. But then I came across the work of survivors, particularly Rachel Moran who wrote a book, *Paid For*, about her life in prostitution in Dublin. She argues against the use of the term ‘sex-work’ because, as she explains, it’s neither *sex* nor *work* – but paid abuse. You literally give the prostitution-buyer an opportunity to access your body for a specific period of time.

Gradually I uncovered more information by listening to survivors. I didn’t know about the mega-brothels in Germany populated with the poorest women from Romania and Bulgaria. I didn’t know about the rise of human trafficking in every place where prostitution is legally permitted. I didn’t know about the life histories of the women involved, many of whom experienced child abuse: sexual, physical, and/or emotional. I didn’t realise there were so many girls from care homes entering prostitution, or the disparities in racial ethnicities, nor about the criminal gangs who control the women, or the pimps, hoteliers, and drivers who all take a cut from their earnings. I didn’t know about the physical and psychological difficulties of women in prostitution. Nor did I understand that many of these women suffer post-traumatic-stress. Nor did I know about punternet, and other sites where men rate women they have paid for, and give reviews, and often ridicule and downgrade them or describe them as ‘robotic’ and not up for it. I didn’t know that many exited women are unable to enjoy sexual closeness, even years after they have left prostitution.

Students who believe they can avoid such harm by participating in prostitution indirectly, there is something you should know. Webcam prostitution also has significant psychological effects. The boundaries of webcam performers are pushed repeatedly, with debased activities achieving a higher price. Moreover, webcam activities can be recorded by the viewers, shared and uploaded to porn sites. The chances of stopping or gaining redress for such leaks are close to zero.

The promotion of prostitution at a university – for example, through the pro-prostitution toolkit produced by Leicester University – is a sign of our times and a culture of low expectations. We are rapidly losing the ability to come up with a meaningful politics informed by empathy, reciprocity, and mutuality as fundamental to our relationships with each-other. Instead, even our universities are in the grip of a dehumanising politics, with young women the primary casualties.

Just think, we've spent decades trying to promote equality of status, and rail against depictions of women as sexual objects for male gratification, and yet the objectification and commodification of women are being formalised at a university.

Women today experience sexual violence in multiple ways: from rape while sleeping, to spiking, date rape, and revenge porn. Universities should be addressing sexist and objectifying attitudes and behaviour, not promoting them.

My academic research explores, among other things, the making of 'sex robots' which are pornographic representations of women and girls. Today, women's value is approximated by how closely she mimics pornographic imagery. The twin of prostitution is porn, and they feed into each. Men pay for experiences they have seen in porn – graphic and violent subordination of women.

Young people should experience university as a positive milestone in their lives, an important rite of passage that will open up new horizons and aspirational possibilities. This is what universities should strive to offer.

This ground-breaking handbook is an important contribution to this debate and it provides a vision for how universities can respond humanely to the accelerating normalisation of the sex industry and the financial precariousness of students.

KATHLEEN RICHARDSON

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1. INTRODUCTION

We have developed this handbook in partnership with women who have lived experience of the sex industry, professors, support workers, psychologists, healthcare professionals, lawyers, and social workers, with three key aims. Firstly, to help higher education professionals navigate the challenges raised by student financial hardship at a time of accelerating normalisation of the sex industry. Secondly, to help them develop the confidence to provide students who are involved in the sex industry with appropriate support without endorsing the industry itself. Thirdly, to help universities develop policies and educational programmes in this area.

The 2021 Student Money Survey found that approximately 3% of students are involved in the sex industry and 9% would consider it in an emergency.¹ This means that in a university with 10,000 students, about 300 might be actively involved in the sex industry, and two or three times that number might consider it a fallback option. There is evidence that problematic pornography consumption rates are even higher, particularly among male students. A study published in early 2021 found the rate to be 17.2% among male medical students.² All of these students deserve the highest quality of services and support.

The University of Leicester has developed a student sex work policy and toolkit and is seeking to roll them out to other higher education institutions in the UK.³ Many people are worried that this approach could be interpreted as sanctioning or even promoting a deeply sexist and damaging industry and will lead to more vulnerable young people being drawn into the industry and harmed and disadvantaged by that experience. There is also concern about the impact of this approach on students' understanding of consent and on the general relations between the sexes, at a time when girls and young women are subject to staggering levels of sexual harassment and sexual crime.⁴

This handbook presents a vision for an alternative approach. We provide a realistic understanding of the sex industry, the short- and long-term impact of involvement within it, and how best to support those who are caught up in it. We highlight the hypocrisy of a culture that habitually gives men a free pass for sexist behaviour while blaming the

¹ <https://www.savethestudent.org/money/surveys/student-money-survey-2021-results.html>

² <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2631831821989677>

³ <https://le.ac.uk/criminology/research/student-sex-work>

⁴ <https://www.change.org/p/revoke-leicester-university-s-student-sex-work-toolkit>

women and girls who are hurt by that behaviour, and we question whether framing ‘stigma’ as a major cause for many of the problems that women experience in the sex trade is an adequate explanation.

We look at the responsibilities universities have under the Equality Act 2010 and its Public Sector Equality Duty to work to prevent the discrimination and further disadvantaging of students who are young, female, LGBT+, disabled, Black, Asian, from minority ethnic groups, or alone in a foreign country, and to work towards improving the relationships of those from all the protected characteristics, including between women and men generally. We argue that any efforts to bring about positive change on university campuses in respect to sexist attitudes and behaviour are doomed to failure unless sex education programmes directly address the sex industry and porn consumption.

We hope that this handbook will spark a conversation and help universities consider their responsibilities critically and holistically. While the UK and national governments might tie universities’ hands in terms of fees and fiscal responsibility, that doesn’t obviate the necessity for universities to consider what more they could do to help financially disadvantaged students that doesn’t involve them selling access to themselves physically, sexually, mentally, and emotionally.

Universities must consider the implications of any overt or implicit sanctioning of the sex industry. Any money students earn within it is likely to go towards paying for university accommodation, food, and other necessities in university-owned or franchised facilities and stores – meaning that the proceeds will inevitably end up in university coffers. Is profiting from students’ involvement in the sex industry compatible with personal and institutional ethical values?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

This handbook has been written by the women of Nordic Model Now!, a secular feminist grassroots group that includes survivors of the sex trade and women who have many years’ experience of supporting people who are involved in the sex trade. We are all volunteers who fit this work around paid work and family and other commitments.

In addition, the handbook includes testimony (‘survivor voices’) from many other women and one man who have lived experience of the sex industry. Most of their names have been changed to protect identities. With thanks and gratitude to Abi, Alice, Andrea Heinz, Chrissy, Christina, Courtney, Dana, Debbie, Elle, Esther, Harriet, Jen, Laura, Megan, Ophelia, Peter, Rebecca, Sarah, and Tara.

Our thanks also to the many people who helped with expertise, ideas, support, reviewing chapters or the whole document, feedback, and suggestions.

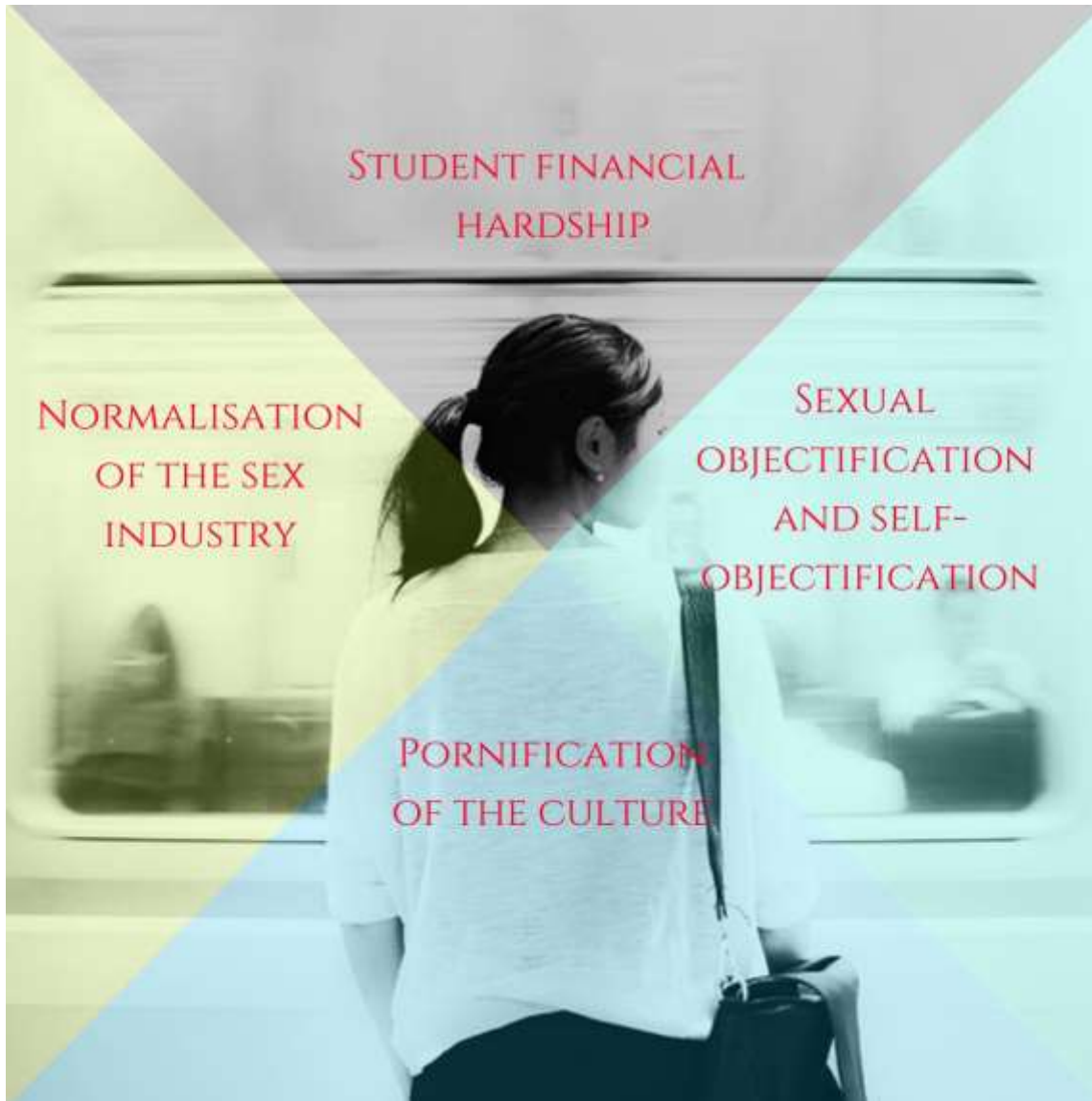
TERMINOLOGY

This document avoids using the ‘sex work’ and ‘sex worker’ terms because they are euphemisms that imply, against all the evidence, that prostitution and related practices (like webcamming and lap-dancing) are normal jobs. Instead, we talk about students who are ‘involved in the sex industry’ when we mean students who are engaged in prostitution, webcamming, lap-dancing, etc. We do not include within this term those who consume, organise, or profit from other people’s involvement in any aspect of the sex industry, such as clients (punters), pimps, brothel keepers, advertising platforms, and landlords.

CONTENT WARNING

This handbook contains material that, at times, is graphic and explicit in detail and language, and which may be triggering to some readers, such as sexual violence survivors. Discretion is advised.

2. WHY NOW?



STUDENT FINANCE

Changes in university and student funding over recent decades have resulted in a situation very different from that remembered by many older graduates who had the benefit of free university tuition and grants for living expenses.

Arrangements now vary between the four countries of the UK. In England, free tuition and grants for living expenses have long gone and have been replaced by loans. Under 2021-22 rules, students can get a loan of up to £9,250 for annual tuition fees and a means-tested maintenance loan up to a maximum of £12,010 for students in London, less for students elsewhere. Over three years, this works out at a total of £63,780.

Loans start accruing compound interest (currently at RPI plus 3% – higher than many mortgages) on the day that they are paid out, meaning that when students graduate, the money owed is already considerably more than the amount they received. Repayments are made through the PAYE system at 9% of taxable income above a threshold (currently £27,295 but there are hints it is to be reduced). Many, perhaps most, students will never manage to pay off the debt because compound interest will increase the outstanding balance faster than they can repay the capital.

This is a feminist issue because women are likely to earn less than men, to take more career breaks, and are more likely to work part-time and to be single parents. The additional 9% collected through the PAYE system is effectively a tax on everything they earn over the threshold for most of their working life and is likely to cause women in particular considerable financial hardship for decades to come. It is not surprising therefore that students would want to minimise the loans that they take out under this system.

Even with a full maintenance loan, many students will struggle to break even due to the inexorable rise in accommodation costs. Research by the National Union of Students (NUS) and Unipol tracked the rents of purpose-built student accommodation. They found that rent increases have outstripped inflation and that average rents represent an ever-growing percentage of the maximum loan – reaching 73% in 2018/19 – up from 58% six years earlier.⁵

Student loans for living expenses are usually assessed on parents' or partner's incomes. Only students who are deemed 'independent' or whose parents/partners are on a low income are entitled to the maximum loan. The parents/partners of other students are expected to make a financial contribution to make up the difference. However, some parents and partners are unable or unwilling to do this.

In short, this means that most students now need to supplement their income with paid work. A student welfare officer at York University was quoted in *The Guardian* as saying: "Many have to work full time in retail every week to pay their way. It's having a horrific impact on their wellbeing and academic attainment. I meet students every day with issues that, when you look into it, comes back to accommodation."⁶

Consider an 18-year-old female student – let's call her Sky – from a disadvantaged background arriving at university and realising that she simply cannot survive on what's

⁵ https://www.unipol.org.uk/getmedia/ead8ba2b-d770-4127-83e2-0dc93835e2d8/AccommodationCostSurvey_2018_FullReport_WEB.PDF.aspx

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2019/aug/17/6000-a-year-for-a-room-if-i-were-a-student-id-probably-go-on-strike-too>

left of her maintenance loan after paying her halls of residence rent. Her family back home are barely getting by and there's no way she can turn to them for help. She really is on her own. She looks for work and the only thing she can find is a full-time job in a supermarket. She's not sure she can fit it around her lectures, seminars and lab sessions. But then someone suggests 'sex work.' They say she could earn ten times more per hour than she could in the supermarket and she can choose her own hours. It seems like a no-brainer.

Everything she's seen in the media about the sex trade has portrayed it as a real job that isn't much different from waitressing – except you earn more and it's way cooler. No one tells her how being intimate with an endless succession of men she doesn't fancy will make her feel; nor that some of these men will be obnoxious or even violent; nor that she might only be able to bear it when under the influence of drink or drugs; nor what it will do to her mental health over time.

THE NORMALISATION OF THE SEX INDUSTRY

Since the 1970s the sexual exploitation of women and girls has been industrialised, normalised, and globalised.⁷ In many countries, including the UK, the sex industry now contributes a significant proportion of official GDP.⁸

This is a result of a combination of neoliberal economic policies that prioritise profits regardless of the human and social cost, and efforts by those who benefit from the sex industry to sanitise and obscure the brutal reality – including through the promotion of the 'sex work' and 'sex worker' terminology.⁹

While the change in language from 'prostitute' to 'sex worker' might appear to give dignity to the women involved, it is little more than a smokescreen that does nothing to change the reality. For this reason, it is vehemently disliked by many women with lived experience of prostitution.¹⁰

Unfortunately, the language promoted by sex industry lobbyists is now dominant in most mainstream media outlets, universities, government departments, and NGOs – and the sanitised view that language promotes also prevails. The 'sex work is real work' mantra is repeated endlessly. Magazine articles, films, news items, podcasts, social media

⁷ Jeffreys, S. 2009. *The Industrial Vagina*, Routledge, Abingdon.

⁸ <https://www.ft.com/content/65704ba0-e730-11e3-88be-00144feabdc0>

⁹ Ekman, KE. 2013. *Being and Being Bought: Prostitution, Surrogacy and the Split Self*, Spinifex Press, Melbourne.

¹⁰ <https://web.archive.org/web/20191104201453/http://www.catwinternational.org/Home/Article/587-over-300-human-rights-groups-and-antitrafficking-advocates-worldwide-weigh-in-on-sex-work-terminology-in-media>

accounts, and novels promoting this view are widespread, and the feminist understanding of the system of prostitution as inseparable from the economic marginalisation and systemic subordination of women is presented as a quaint relic from an earlier unenlightened era.

When mainstream culture presents prostitution as a ‘real’ job and a rewarding, glamorous, empowering and edgy option, how can young women, like our hypothetical Sky, hope to make a truly informed choice about whether to become involved in it? In the situation in which she finds herself, is framing her options as a free choice meaningful anyway?

The culture is actively grooming girls and young women as fodder for a predatory capitalist industry that needs a continuous supply of young female flesh, and it is simultaneously grooming young men as its unquestioning and entitled customers.

We must ask who benefits in this reality.

THE PORNIIFICATION OF CULTURE

During the same period that saw the replacement of government university subsidies with a fee-based model and the reframing of prostitution as ‘sex work’, an accelerating commercialisation of mass culture has occurred and it is now largely controlled by corporations whose primary purpose is no longer providing news and analysis but selling the audience to advertisers. Pornography has moved further and further into the open, with the result that much of current mainstream culture would have been considered porn just 30 or 40 years ago.

Porn itself has become increasingly violent, misogynistic, and racist – and easily available. More than 10 years ago, academic research into the most popular porn films found that 88% of the scenes contained physical aggression directed at women, such as gagging, strangulation, spanking, and slapping.¹¹ Things have got worse since then.¹²

Artist and author, Suzzan Blac, recently spent several years researching and documenting the porn on Pornhub – which she chose because it is the most popular mainstream site, is free to view, and has 115 million hits a day. After watching numerous films of women being sexually and violently abused, humiliated, degraded,

¹¹ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1077801210382866>

¹² https://cease.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/210607_CEASE_Expose_Big_Porn_Report.pdf

raped and tortured, she came to the conclusion that “these are not sex videos; they are crime-scene videos.”¹³

This is the material that children are seeing from ever earlier ages and that large numbers of boys are addicted to by the age of 12.¹⁴ This is the material that many men masturbate to on an almost daily basis.

History has shown that dehumanising, degrading, and objectifying human beings is always the first step in committing violence against them. When a human being is dehumanised and objectified, treating them with contempt becomes second nature.

Is it any wonder then, that reports of sexual crimes against women and girls have tripled in the last ten years – the same years that have seen the expansion of porn via the internet into most homes, and smartphones into most pockets, including schoolchildren’s?¹⁵

There is now an epidemic of sexual harassment and abuse of girls and young women in schools and colleges.¹⁶ A survey commissioned by the European Commission in 2015 found that “teenage girls in England reported the highest rates of sexual coercion, with about one in five (22%) saying they had suffered physical violence or intimidation from boyfriends, including slapping, punching, strangling and being beaten with an object.”¹⁷

Porn is normalising violent and aggressive heterosexual sexual practices that were uncommon just a few decades ago. For example, a sexual health study concluded that exposure to online pornography has resulted in the normalisation of “coercive, painful and unsafe anal heterosex” among young people in England.¹⁸ Doctors have reported increasing numbers of girls with catastrophic internal injuries caused by anal sex.¹⁹ There is evidence that girls and young women are being pressured to not only accept anal sex when they might prefer not to, but also to pretend to enjoy it.²⁰

This is having a disastrous impact on girls and young women – it is robbing them of their right to develop and explore their own sexuality on their own terms and in their own time. It is eroding their sexual and personal boundaries, and even making them feel

¹³ <https://youtu.be/vQYMFyUh6k>

¹⁴ <https://www.netnanny.com/blog/the-detrimental-effects-of-pornography-on-small-children/>

¹⁵

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1005630/Tackling_Violence_Against_Women_and_Girls_Strategy-July_2021-FINAL.pdf

¹⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges>

¹⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/feb/11/teenage-girls-coerced-sex-survey>

¹⁸ <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/4/8/e004996>

¹⁹ <https://nypost.com/2019/01/16/teen-suffers-life-changing-injury-trying-to-imitate-porn/>

²⁰ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/lisa-taddeo-the-politics-of-anal-sex-052txhmx8>

they have no right to set their own boundaries. The culture is grooming them to accept a life of objectification and service to men's needs rather than their own.

SEXUAL OBJECTIFICATION & SELF-OBJECTIFICATION

Pornography and our hypersexualised culture are representing, on an unparalleled scale, girls and young women as objects for men's sexual use rather than as full and autonomous human beings – suggesting that their sex appeal and sexual characteristics are the only values that matter. As children are exposed to this from birth, it can be understood as a form of child sexual abuse perpetrated by the culture itself.

This is teaching girls from ever earlier ages to see themselves through the male gaze; to see themselves as objects of men's desire. This is known as self-objectification and has been linked with a number of mental health problems, including eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression.²¹

Amy Grantham, a third-year sociology student, describes it like this:

“For most of my existence I have been catering to some spectator whose opinion I have held to a higher regard than my own. This internalised male gaze is so nuanced that I didn't even register I was doing it. But I was and it was affecting everything. Every aspect of my daily life from what I ate, how I dressed, the personality I presented (always the 'cool girl'), the hobbies I had, the songs I listened to, the media I consumed; were all subconscious decisions that I believed would best align with and please these 'powerful all-seeing men'.”²²

Social media platforms, such as Instagram, have morphed from a way of sharing experiences into a vehicle for sexual objectification and self-objectification. Conformity with these values is driven by social media algorithms and the mutual giving and withholding of 'likes' and 'shares'.²³

Multiple research studies have shown that self-objectification negatively affects concentration and cognitive ability. One study demonstrated this very vividly:

“While alone in a dressing room, college students were asked to try on and evaluate either a swimsuit or a sweater. While they waited for 10 minutes wearing the garment, they completed a math test. The results revealed that young women in swimsuits performed significantly worse on the math problems than did those

²¹ <https://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report>

²² <https://theeverydaymagazine.co.uk/opinion/womens-greatest-performance-the-internalised-male-gaze>

²³ <https://cand.co/social-media-is-destroying-a-generation-of-young-people-especially-women-e52269846ee2>

wearing sweaters. No differences were found for young men. In other words, thinking about the body and comparing it to sexualized cultural ideals disrupted mental capacity. In the emotional domain, sexualization and objectification undermine confidence in and comfort with one's own body, leading to a host of negative emotional consequences, such as shame, anxiety, and even self-disgust."²⁴

This strongly suggests that any engagement in the sex industry – including its non-contact forms such as webcamming and stripping – has a significant negative impact on women's cognitive abilities.

We need to ask whether the current phenomenon of large numbers of young women unquestioningly supporting and promoting policies that would lead to a rapid expansion of the sex industry and the sexual commodification of women – in contradiction of their own best interests – could be viewed as an extension of deeply internalised self-objectification caused by these cultural forces.

Survivor voices: Rebecca

I am a 29-year-old white, middle-class female who now works in academia. I worked in the sex industry from the age of 17 to 21. I started in lap dancing clubs and then moved on to both agency and brothel prostitution (although I will say that prostitution does take place in lap dancing clubs in my experience). At the time I was working I probably would have said that I saw prostitution as my 'informed choice'. I focused on the benefits (e.g. meeting new people, money, glamour, excitement, not having to work a regular job, etc.) and was not aware of the slow, insidious, accumulative effects it was having on me. Nor had I really examined the reason why I had even reached the decision that this was a viable or, seemingly, appealing option for me in the first place. (Hint – I was a victim of childhood sexual abuse, something that will, without a doubt, make you feel that your body is both worthless and, paradoxically, the only object through which you can gain worth and approval.)

This is what angers me about this 'sex-work' debate. People rarely think about why middle-class, well-educated women, enter prostitution to begin with. Childhood sexual abuse does not discriminate against class and it has been shown to have occurred in exponentially disproportionate rates in women working in the sex industry, women from all backgrounds, working at all levels of this industry. This is not a fact that is

²⁴ <https://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-summary.pdf>

questioned, however, and, instead, these women are held up as shining examples of the successes of both prostitution and, ironically, female ‘empowerment’. In my opinion, however, the statistics on women in the ‘sex industry’ who have survived childhood sexual abuse are enough to build policy on.

This brings me on to the second point which annoys me in relation to this debate, the effects of it. Nobody speaks to these ‘happy hookers’ after they have left prostitution. This is when the effects of it catch up with you. You simply cannot forget years and years of swallowing down your consent, of swallowing down what is, at best, disgust, irritation and boredom during sex and, at worst, anger, humiliation and terror.

After you have lived through that, it is fundamentally impossible to have anything near a happy, healthy and ‘normal’ life. By this I mean, a life where you can, at a very basic level, trust and connect to others, men in particular, and, alongside this, feel OK about your own body, humanity and worth. These things, will be constant everyday battles.

Since leaving prostitution I have struggled with chronic depression, flashbacks, anorexia and self-harm. I have not been off psychiatric medication or out of therapy. I have never been able to enjoy sex or be in a loving relationship. The sex industry, by which I mean the legally sanctioned rape, humiliation, devaluation and degradation of women, has robbed me of all these things.

I was ‘lucky’ in that I was able to leave and that I did leave when I did. I was unlucky in that, what woke me up to the urgency of needing to leave was a customer choking me until I passed out, doing god knows what to me and then leaving me lying alone and unconscious on his kitchen floor for god knows how long.

3. UNIVERSITY POLICY & CODES OF BEHAVIOUR

The majority of undergraduate students arrive at university in the very first stages of adulthood – at 18 or 19 years of age, and often 17 in Scotland. Research shows that the adolescent brain does not reach full maturity until approximately 25-30 years of age, with the areas of the brain that assist cognitive abilities and self-control lagging behind the areas that govern emotion.²⁵ This explains young people's tendency towards risk-taking. For many students, university is their first time away from home, and some come on their own from overseas. For all these reasons, students are a particularly vulnerable group.

The general vulnerability of students has been increased by the rate of change that we are living through, including the trends outlined in the previous chapter. Universities have a responsibility to respond to these trends and to help students navigate them as safely as possible.

Universities need to consider what they can do to minimise student financial vulnerability – for example, by ensuring that food and accommodation costs are kept to the absolute minimum, making bursaries available for impoverished students, and investing in excellent financial advice, and services to help students who need to supplement their funding find part-time work. The overarching aim should be that no student has to resort to the sex industry because of a lack of other options.

It is widely recognised that sexual misconduct is at an all-time high in universities²⁶ and that many universities are failing to deal with this effectively.²⁷ Care needs to be taken to ensure that any policy relating to the sex industry does not inadvertently exacerbate the rape culture within the community – for example, by implicitly condoning the sexist and abusive attitudes that are intrinsic to the sex industry. Furthermore, universities would be abrogating their safeguarding and student welfare responsibilities if they didn't point out the dangers and harms of the sex industry.

²⁵ <https://www.lawscot.org.uk/news-and-events/legal-news/brain-not-fully-developed-until-age-25-research-reveals/>

²⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/oct/29/research-reveals-rapes-and-assaults-admitted-to-by-male-uk-students>

²⁷ <https://accountableeducation.org/>

It would make sense therefore to consider any policy around the sex industry to be an integral part of the university's wider response to combatting sexism, encouraging respectful and healthy relationships, supporting students' mental and physical health, and addressing the needs of students in financial difficulties.

KEY POLICY POINTS

This section sets out key points that any policy related to the sex industry needs to address. Later chapters of this handbook provide greater depth on some of these themes.

- All students, including those who are involved in the sex industry, must be treated with respect and dignity.
- Provision of tailored and non-judgemental support for students who are involved in the sex industry that respects their current reality – whether they want to remain in the industry or to leave it.
- Students who want to remain in the industry might need help dealing with things like shame, stress, drug or alcohol addiction, PTSD, physical health issues, and violence or coercive control from partners or other third parties.
- While students should not be pressurised into leaving the industry, they need to know that support is available to help them leave, should they wish to do so. This support needs to include trauma-informed counselling or therapy and to address the key barriers to exiting, including: (a) the lack of an adequate alternative income; (b) drug and alcohol addiction; (c) coercion of a third party, who may be their boyfriend or intimate partner; and (d) homelessness or housing issues.
- Pastoral care teams must be well-informed about the harms and risks of the sex industry and trained in supporting young people who are involved in it.
- Students who are involved in the sex industry must not be penalised through 'morality clauses' and similar – and, where relevant, universities should work to remove such clauses.
- All advice around the sex industry must be founded in reality and clearly set out the risks and dangers, rather than presenting a sanitised and politicised vision based on misleading notions, such as that the sex industry is not significantly different from service industries, like retail and catering.
- Recognition that the most disadvantaged young people are disproportionately likely to be drawn into the sex industry and harmed within it. This means that it is an issue of inequality and potential discrimination against young women, and people who are

of minority ethnicities, disabled and/or LGBT+. Universities therefore have an obligation under the Equality Act 2010 to ensure they do not take any action that would normalise the industry and risk more disadvantaged young people being drawn into it.

- Recognition that the sex industry: commodifies, objectifies, and dehumanises women and girls; impacts young people's understanding of consent and their ability to form healthy, mutually satisfying relationships; and damages the general relationships between the sexes.
- Recognition that many young people become involved in the sex industry through the coercion of third parties, some of whom may be their intimate partners, and that this can be part of a pattern of coercive control in intimate relationships.
- Recognition that any form of inducement of another person into the sex industry and/or benefiting in any way from another person's involvement in it is unethical and, in many cases, constitutes a serious criminal offence.
- Recognition that buying sexual services is incompatible with the egalitarian ethos that the university seeks to promote.
- Provision of specialist support for students who are seeking to reduce or stop porn consumption and/or to stop buying sexual services.
- The promotion of healthy and open dialogue and debate about the sex industry with measures to ensure that critique of it is not shut down through false notions that doing so constitutes an attack on those involved in it.
- Ensure that students are informed about the vast profits that the sex industry makes and who would be the main beneficiaries of deregulation of the industry.
- Ensure that the interests of those who would benefit from the deregulation of the industry are not able to dominate research, debate, and policy or to silence other voices.

CODES OF BEHAVIOUR

Most universities have some form of code of behaviour for staff and students – sometimes with names like ‘dignity and respect’ – with definitions of unacceptable behaviour. Some, quite rightly, have multiple pages on antisemitism and Islamophobia with detailed definitions and examples, but only a few short lines on sexual harassment and violence with no detailed examples. Given that sexual harassment and violence are known to be widespread and are overwhelmingly perpetrated by men towards women,²⁸ this is inadequate and could constitute sex discrimination.

It is widely recognised that the scale of sexual harassment and gender-based violence among young people is connected to the normalisation of the sex industry, the widespread use of porn, and the pornification of the culture outlined previously.²⁹ This needs to be addressed in university codes of behaviour and any ‘consent training’ and similar that universities run.

Universities should consider explicitly defining some sex industry related behaviour as explicit breaches of their code of conduct. For example:

- Viewing pornography on any device or in any form anywhere other than in private living quarters.
- Encouraging or coercing someone (including an intimate partner) into involvement in the sex industry.
- Benefiting in any way, including financially, from another person’s involvement in the sex industry.
- Paying or attempting to pay (with money or other benefits) a student for sexual services or favours.
- Using the sexist and derogatory language associated with prostitution (such as, tart, whore, slut, slapper, slag, ‘ho’, etc.) at, about or towards any student, woman, or girl. This applies to all communications – including online communications and in-person.

²⁸ <https://www.everyonesinvited.uk/>

²⁹

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/976730/The_Relationship_between_Pornography_use_and_Harmful_Sexual_Attitudes_and_Behaviours-literature_review_v1.pdf

4. WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT WHEN WE TALK OF THE SEX INDUSTRY?

By ‘sex industry’ we mean all forms of commercial sexual activity, including prostitution, pornography, and ‘sexual entertainment’.

While women do view porn, the vast majority of consumers are male, rising to close to 100% for prostitution and direct contact forms of ‘sexual entertainment’, such as private lap dances. The majority of those providing the sexual activity for payment are female, estimated at 85% across Europe.³⁰ As such, the sex industry is highly gendered and it is not possible to understand it without framing it in gendered terms. On an individual level, the sex industry works to feed men’s sense of entitlement and women’s lack of self-worth. On a societal level, it works to maintain male hegemony and female subordination.

We can roughly group the various practices into three categories:

- **Prostitution.** The Oxford Dictionary defines prostitution as: “The practice or occupation of engaging in sexual activity with someone for payment.”³¹ Prostitution can be based on the street, in a brothel, hotel, or other premises, and can involve outcalls to the client’s home or hotel room, as well as escorting, sugar dating, and accompanying men to sex parties.
- **Pornography.** This includes making and performing in pornography, webcamming, OnlyFans, and similar (although live streaming is not considered pornography under English law). The numbers using webcamming and OnlyFans rose rapidly during the Covid-19 lockdowns.
- **Sexual entertainment.** This includes stripping, lap dancing, pole dancing, and sex phone lines.

In reality there is considerable cross over – with many women who do webcamming, lap dancing or porn also doing ‘full service’ bookings (i.e. prostitution), and vice versa.

³⁰ <https://tampep.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/TAMPEP-2009-European-Mapping-Report.pdf>

³¹ <https://www.lexico.com/definition/prostitution>

All of these practices come with significant risks and dangers for the mainly women ‘providers’ – because the men who pay are not always decent, well-adjusted people and the fact they are paying creates a sense of entitlement and an imbalance of power.

WEBCAMMING

Webcamming involves live streaming sexual acts in online chatrooms – mostly on specialist sites. The chatrooms can be public or private and the shows are interactive with performers and consumers communicating through text, speech and two-way cameras.

Popular myths suggest that webcamming is a harmless, easy way to make lots of money, that it can be sexually empowering for women, and that women can easily maintain control of their content. These myths lure women into the industry, only for them to discover when it is too late that the reality is somewhat different.

It’s harder to make lots of money than it may look at first glance. The hosting websites typically take 40-65% of performers’ earnings, with the banking systems through which the payments pass typically taking an additional 7-15%.³² Male consumers often apply pressure on performers to do ever more explicit, dangerous, and even lethal practices.³³ This means that it can be hard to make much money unless you ditch your initial boundaries about what you are prepared to do.

There is no way of preventing consumers filming live streamed content, taking screenshots, or using specialist software to record it without your knowledge, and then using the recording for nefarious purposes, including selling it, uploading it to porn sites, and blackmail – now or in the future. Consumers are also known to research performers’ identities with the aim of harassing and stalking them.

There is an emotional cost to being dependent for an income on entitled and often sexist men paying to view and use you as a sex object or commodity. This can not only reduce your cognitive ability but also induce trauma reactions.³⁴

³² <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/features/webcamming-sex-work-revolution-no-one-willing-talk-about-a7485176.html>

³³ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10046949/Publican-killed-jail-police-quiz-death-webcam-girl-inquest-told.html>

³⁴ <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2020/10/24/3-dangerous-myths-about-webcamming-debunked/>

Survivor voices: Abi

Abi started webcamming when she was at university. It seemed so much smarter than doing a menial minimum wage job and she was dismissive of her parents' concerns. What did they know anyway?

However, it wasn't long before it went badly wrong. One of her 'clients' identified her and started stalking her. It was so terrifying that she had no choice but to turn to the police. They were initially helpful but he remains at large and a very serious threat – so now she can't do anything online with a public profile because of the risk that he will find her. She has maximum privacy settings on all her accounts and has to avoid some platforms completely.

She's now graduated and is building a career – but is unable to post a portfolio of her work online because of the continuing risk that he poses. Similarly, she can't advertise freelance services or have a LinkedIn account, which is a real disadvantage in the field she works in – because that's a key way employers find contractors and potential employees.

ONLYFANS

OnlyFans is a platform for paywalled content, including sexually explicit material. 'Creators' post exclusive content that only their paying 'fans' can access. It has lowered the bar to entry into the world of selling explicit content online: setting up as an OnlyFans content creator is only a small leap from running an Instagram account.

All the same myths about webcamming are repeated about OnlyFans but with even more razzmatazz. However, the chances of making much money are even slimmer – and it comes with similar risks.³⁵

While the top accounts make as much as \$100,000 a month, the majority make little. Research found that: "The top 1% of accounts make 33% of all the money. The top 10% of accounts make 73% of all the money. Most accounts take home less than \$145 per month (after commission). The modal monthly revenue is \$0.00, and the next most common is \$4.99."³⁶

³⁵ <https://www.iamatreasure.com/blog/only-fans>

³⁶ <https://xsrus.com/the-economics-of-onlyfans>

The researcher goes on to say that most creators probably lose money:

*“Being an independent explicit online content creator is by many accounts exhausting. Your “fans” are not merely fans, they’re paying customers. To keep that sweet money flowing into their bank accounts, content creators often have to work harder and harder to satisfy their patrons.”*³⁷

Unless you can bring a large following from Instagram or similar with you to OnlyFans, takings are likely to be slim. But bringing followers from a personal Instagram account has real dangers – of stalking, of future employers, colleagues and potential partners identifying you, and so on. The Revenge Porn Helpline advises being anonymous and using separate devices and accounts for all personal and sex industry activities.³⁸

To achieve a following and make more than a pittance, most OnlyFans ‘creators’ have to invest large amounts of time in promotion:

*“I learned quickly that the only way to make money on OnlyFans when you don’t have an established following on other social media is to promote constantly. That means dragging yourself to the internet’s hell where men who would pay to see your bikini-clad body might sit: sex-related Reddit and Twitter threads.”*³⁹

The chances are high that you could make more money per hour working in a supermarket.

Other successful OnlyFans creators can promote your profile – for a fee using a referral code – meaning that OnlyFans is also a pyramid scheme. It not only lowers the bar to entry into the sex industry, but also to pimping.⁴⁰

After investing in equipment (e.g. a quality webcam, microphone, and lighting kit) and huge amounts of time, many creators realise they are making practically zilch. Having taken their clothes off for random strangers on the internet, at this point some women might think about turning to ‘full service’ prostitution – which comes with an additional raft of dangers. However, this is against the OnlyFans rules and may see you thrown off the platform, losing your growing following, and being left with even fewer options.⁴¹

³⁷ <https://xsrus.com/the-economics-of-onlyfans>

³⁸ <https://revengepornhelpline.org.uk/how-can-we-help/other-help-and-support/online-privacy-tips-for-sex-workers/>

³⁹ <https://graziadaily.co.uk/life/real-life/is-onlyfans-safe-uk/>

⁴⁰ <https://graziadaily.co.uk/life/real-life/is-onlyfans-safe-uk/>

⁴¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/aug/03/onlyfans-isnt-revolutionising-sex-work-and-using-it-ruined-things-i-once-did-for-personal-pleasure>

SUGAR DATING & ESCORTING

Sugar dating or sugaring is an arrangement where a younger person (the ‘sugar baby’) provides companionship and usually sex to an older person (the ‘sugar daddy’) in return for gifts or money. Escorting is similar but with less emphasis on the age difference and more on the expectation that it will involve sex.

As with webcamming and OnlyFans, the reality does not usually match the sales pitch. Many men who use sugaring sites are not the “refined, exceptional, modern gentlemen” the site marketing materials may suggest they are. They may have ulterior motives that can be hard to spot and the very nature of the arrangement inevitably increases their sense of entitlement and contempt for the woman, who is reduced to a commodity that he is paying for.⁴²

The ‘arrangement’ is similar to what is called the ‘girlfriend experience’ in the wider sex industry. Many women who have been there say that it can be harder to bear than when men simply pay for a sex act. At least then you only have to grit your teeth for the duration of the act. In sugaring and the girlfriend experience, you have to feign interest, affection and sexual availability over hours and sometimes days or weeks. He’s not just expecting sexual release but the illusion of a love affair, and it’s up to you to provide it.⁴³

Rae Story describes it like this:

“Towards the end of my work as an ‘escort’ I was thoroughly exhausted. The brothel work had been brutal on my body, but the ‘independent escort’ work had exhausted my spirit. Whereas once I just ran the gamut of garden-variety sexual activities with, at best, a distant smile and a ‘good day to you,’ I now had been obsessing over my appearance, my apartment, my advertising, and my ‘image’ as well. I’d been made to adopt the most insidious of all contracts: The Girlfriend Experience – winsome, involved, overly nurturing, and available. Intelligent enough to understand but never enough to contradict. Lying to ‘clients’ about my background, my views, and my habits in order to demonstrate a pleasing personhood for the paying male ego.”⁴⁴

⁴² <https://crimereads.com/the-dark-side-of-sugar-dating/>

⁴³ <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2019/11/22/open-letter-to-all-the-sex-buyers-everywhere/>

⁴⁴ <https://www.feministcurrent.com/2016/02/22/whoreburbia-gentrification-sex-work/>

Like all sex industry encounters, there is a risk that he will be violent or turn out to be a pimp who wants to use you as his personal meal ticket.⁴⁵

Survivor voices: Dana

When I was escorting, the “manager” told us to lie about being students and to make up stories about faculties and life goals. Punters love to think they are “helping a student” rather than paying for sex.

But in reality, this lifestyle is hardly compatible with pursuing an academic degree. My friends in the industry all suffer with addictions, anxiety, chronic depression, PTSD. I remember waking up and staring at the ceiling for hours before I could get up and face my daily routine. This mental situation doesn’t fit the energetic, upbeat, explorative state of mind you need in the academy.

Most women I knew, who entered the sex industry while students, dropped out within a year.

STRIPPING & LAP DANCING

Strip and lap dancing clubs in the UK are invariably profoundly precarious and exploitative workplaces for women, providing no job or income security. They have to pay ‘house fees’ to the club for each shift they work, with no guarantee that they will recoup all or any of it. 70% report losing money. Shifts can be cancelled and women dismissed for any or no reason. This means that clubs displace the financial risks onto the women while securing their own commercial success.⁴⁶

Women make money by private ‘dances’, which may involve grinding your practically naked body against your fully dressed customer’s groin. Typically, the women receive only about 20% of what the man pays for it. The clubs take on more women than are needed so that they have to compete with each other for each private dance. Women can be ‘fined’ for a long list of infractions, such as missing her turn to pole dance, being late, wearing the wrong clothing, or breaking one of the many, often petty, rules.⁴⁷

If you don’t make enough money one night to cover the house fees, the debt is held over so that if you make more the next night, the club deducts what you owe, and you may

⁴⁵ <https://epigram.org.uk/2020/02/24/the-sour-reality-of-sugar-dating/>

⁴⁶ <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272406345>

⁴⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/mar/19/gender.uk>

still go home with nothing. Women can find themselves trapped in a situation where they have to continue at the club in order to pay off their debt to the club and can never refuse a 'dance' regardless how obnoxious the client. These pressures lead some women to start 'full service' prostitution.

Like other areas of the sex industry, the work revolves around presenting and maintaining yourself as a sexual object for the benefit of random men, pandering to their egos, and accepting the kind of behaviour that would be considered sexual harassment in other workplaces. Men assaulting and stalking the women is common. All of this can take a heavy physical, mental, and psychological toll on the women.

Survivor voices: Elle

Feeling so empty, feeling so bare
Leave my heart at the door and I'm ready to work.
I walk round in circles, I'm not really there.
It's all a big act, though no one would care.
The way that they look, the way that they stare.
It makes me feel dirty, I just cannot bear.
Why do I do this? It goes round my head.
I know it's for money but inside I feel dead.
I want to escape though I have no way out.
It's what I am good at, what I know inside out.
I've no way to describe, the way that I feel,
how hollow and empty it is in my world.
To them I'm just naked, a dancer a thing.
Inside I'm a person and I'm needing one thing.

'FULL SERVICE' PROSTITUTION

Most 'full service' prostitution takes place indoors in the UK. Regardless of the venue, it involves sexual intimacy with a man you don't fancy, who in normal circumstances you might not even want to sit next to on the bus.

In a 2012 study of men who buy sex, one man said: "Men pay for women because he can have whatever and whoever he wants. Lots of men go to prostitutes so they can do things to them that real women would not put up with." (Notice that he doesn't consider the women involved in prostitution to be "real women".) Nearly half of the men interviewed clearly agreed with this because they said they believed that once they had

paid, they were entitled to do whatever they wanted to her – regardless of what she wanted.⁴⁸

There is a myth that the prostitution advertising sites, like AdultWork and Vivastreet, provide features for screening clients. Once again, the reality does not match the myth.

Like Airbnb, these sites usually have a mechanism that allows both participants to review each other. But this is not failsafe because, unlike Airbnb, only the advertisers are required to supply photo ID when they register – punters are not. This means that if a punter gets a bad review, there's nothing to stop him creating a new profile, which is not usually possible for the advertiser. In other words, the reviewing mechanism has a built-in imbalance of power.

Punter reviews determine how much women can charge in the future and how many punters they will attract. Punters use this to their advantage – for example, to coerce women to engage in more painful and risky acts or to give discounted rates. Independent punter forums (such as UK Punting) provide further opportunities for men to retaliate against women who do not please them. Sometimes groups of men use these platforms to make coordinated attacks on individual women.

Many adverts on these sites display contact details openly and punters do not have to register or even login to see them. Anyone can get in touch to book an appointment without any prior screening – meaning that the screening mechanisms, such as they are, are bypassed.⁴⁹

Even if the reviewing mechanisms were more robust, it would not be failsafe. Steve Wright killed five women involved in street prostitution in Ipswich in 2006. He was known as a 'regular' which made them feel safe. Horrifically, his victims didn't live long enough to warn the other women. This is obviously an extreme example, but it illustrates the fact that it's not usually possible to identify a man who might pose a risk – any more than a woman dating a man can know whether he will turn violent or controlling.

Given this reality, it's easy to see why some women might opt for an established brothel. However, most of these operate with a similar business model to lap dancing clubs, with 'house fees', 'fines' for infractions of the rules, and women having to compete with each

⁴⁸ <http://i4.cmsfiles.com/eaves/2012/04/MenWhoBuySex-89396b.pdf>

⁴⁹ https://43b7aa2e-6040-4325-8d69-b57333b95a64.usrfiles.com/ugd/43b7aa_2aa3793584184082877ba83216ca7912.pdf

other for bookings. In practice, this means that women have little or no possibility of refusing punters or unpleasant or dangerous sexual practices.

The truth is that prostitution is the most dangerous occupation of all. Women involved in prostitution have the highest murder rate of any social group.⁵⁰ They suffer a staggering amount of violence.⁵¹ A meta-study found that violence is a prominent feature of prostitution regardless of the setting, that social exclusion is the leading cause of entry, and that prostitution usually deepens a woman's social exclusion.⁵²

Many women find the reality so unbearable that they turn to drink or drugs – which can add to their problems and make getting out harder. It is also likely to affect their studies.

At first, and particularly if she suffered economic deprivation as a child, the thrill of having money can make it all seem worth it. Dr Vednita Carter, who was in prostitution herself and now runs a not-for-profit organisation in Minnesota that helps women exit prostitution, illustrated this when she was in London in 2019. She said that when she asks the young women she works with what they like about prostitution, they talk about how good it feels to have money. But when she asks them how they feel when they get down on all fours and take his penis into their mouth, they start to cry.⁵³

Survivor voices: Tara

I never had any plans to end up in prostitution. I was living in a homeless hostel after my relationship broke down due to my then boyfriend's drug use. I asked a girl at the hostel where she was getting her money from. She told me it was a massage parlour, and I would only have to go further if I wanted to. She lied.

In my first week, I was assaulted by a punter when I refused to have sex without a condom, and threatened by the 'madam' when I tried to turn down another punter I found repulsive.

The brothel itself was pretty tacky looking – probably exactly what people imagine when they think of one. It was in a backstreet, signposted as a 'gentleman's spa,' and

⁵⁰ <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/home-affairs-committee/prostitution/oral/30023.html>

⁵¹ <http://prostitutionresearch.com/prostitution-trafficking-in-nine-countries-an-update-on-violence-and-post-traumatic-stress-disorder/>

⁵²

http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/303927/A_Review_of_the_Literature_on_sex_workers_and_social_exclusion.pdf

⁵³ <https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/women-colour-stand-against-sex-trade>

was fooling no-one. I later found out the reason it didn't get raided or shut down was because some of the local police were regular punters.

The main room functioned as a lounge and underneath was a sauna and communal hot tub, which was for punters only. Off to one side was a small room with a large screen which continually had hardcore porn playing. Upstairs were a string of small rooms which all contained a massage couch and a mirror that covered most of one wall. On the top floor were two 'VIP' suites which had double beds, private hot tubs and a selection of sex toys. Getting a punter to pay to take you into the VIP suite was the only way to make any decent money, as house fees were so high.

Competition was also high among the women and this was something I was never good at. There was one woman who seemed particularly natural at 'hustling' and she always got the most punters even though she was not the most attractive.

When I asked her about this, she told me quite matter-of-factly that her 'natural ability' was a result of being sexually abused as a child, followed by an early entry into prostitution. Sex had always been the only thing she had to trade. She laughed at my shock and told me to get used to it as I would hear much worse if I stuck around. As I was then still largely doing my best to numb out my own experiences of abuse, I made no attempt to look at any potential similarities between my story and hers. I just felt desperately sorry for her.

Not one woman I met at the brothel was particularly happy to be there. Not the girl who was pregnant to a boyfriend who had left her and who cried nearly every shift; nor the woman who was addicted to plastic surgery because she was convinced she was ugly; nor the one who was being exploited by a much older and abusive boyfriend who kept offering us all 'adult modelling' work. He'd hang around outside and target us as we came off shift until eventually the 'madam' told the security guard to threaten him.

I never met the actual owner. I heard he was a 'mean bastard' and was told to keep out of his way if he visited. That immediately filled me with panic, but thankfully I never met him. The 'madam' who oversaw us was intimidating enough. A former sex worker herself, she seemed permanently miserable and acted as though she hated us all, but especially the clients.

The only thing that was pleasant was the occasional solidarity between the women. On quiet shifts we would often get into deep and intimate conversations, quickly revealing

personal stories, hopes and fears. The intense situation we were in promoted a kind of bonding that sometimes erupted in catfights.

One woman in particular took me under her wing and would repeatedly tell me to 'get out before it's too late.' When I told her this was only a temporary measure, she shook her head and said, 'We all said that, love.'

I started drinking heavily. Subjecting myself to the pawing, groping and often physical violence of the punters would have been impossible to bear when I was sober.

I left after six months, and never went back – but the scars from that time have never left. I've had a lot of therapy.

Survivor voices: peter

I began working as a prostitute when I was 18 and still do it today. I was let go from my job and signed on to benefits but because I was under 21, I was only given the minimum of £252 a month to live on. After debts etc. I would have around £100 to last me for the month so selling the one thing I had to men was my only option until I found a job.

It makes me feel sick that I have to sell my body in order to survive but knowing that my story could help someone else who is going down the same path makes it a little easier.

I can still feel their hands on me. Every day when I shower, I feel them looking at me.

As a man I don't know what else I can do in a society that makes men feel silly or weak for speaking out when they need help. There are many young men like me who need support but don't get any and turn to things like prostitution or crime to get by.

I was studying for a university course when I started, but wasn't eligible for a student loan because I was a distant learner. So even when I try and achieve my dreams it's taken away. I just needed help and wasn't given any.

Survivor voices: Ophelia

I quickly realised the clients actually expect you to orgasm, or at least give a good enough impression of it. I truly thought the men would see it as a transaction, that they would realise your 'heart' wasn't in it, that you'd do the job, you'd have sex with them and that would be enough. But they actually expect you to be overcome with passion and desire for them! They'll give you oral for like ten minutes and stay there until you fake it, even though they know you've just been with a different man five minutes before them!

The hardest 'adjustment' for me mentally was that prostitution wasn't just about providing sex for a man paying you, it was about making them think you've orgasmed too and you really want to have sex with them for horny reasons, not cash reasons.

BOYFRIENDS, DRUG DEALERS, & PIMPS

Boyfriends and partners are often part of the dynamic that leads women into the sex trade and keeps them there. For example, it is not uncommon for one or both partners in a relationship to develop a drug habit and for one of them to pressure the other into the sex industry to fund it.

Because we live in a sexist society in which boys are socialised to feel entitled and girls are socialised to be compliant and to put everyone else's needs before her own, in practice this usually means a male partner pressuring his female partner in this way. However, this is not always the case and similar dynamics can occur regardless of sex or gender.

This dynamic is a form of pimping. It is illegal and is classed as human trafficking under international law.⁵⁴ Pressuring someone into involvement in the sex industry and profiting from their involvement is profoundly unethical. It is the lowest and most exploitative form of capitalism.

It is, however, an easy way to make a lot of money and this is why there are so many predatory individuals, mostly but not always men, who prey in this way on vulnerable young people, especially girls and young women. Some operate as drug dealers and

⁵⁴ <http://prostitutionresearch.com/trafficking-prostitution-and-inequality/>

work to deliberately get young women addicted to illegal drugs and then pressure her into the sex industry to pay for them.

Others pose as boyfriends ('loverboys') and take advantage of young women's inexperience and vulnerability to convince her it is a loving relationship. It's not long before he needs her to help pay off some debts and suggests some form of prostitution. He insists it's just for a few days or weeks until he's sorted the problem – except it usually doesn't end there and he becomes violent if she tries to stop or leave.

Sometimes the initial contact can be made through prostitution advertising, sugar daddy, and dating websites and apps.

Survivor voices: Chrissy

I had no worth so moving to the sex industry was easy. At first, I felt empowered and in control. I liked the money. I liked the other girls. The brothel owner gave me special attention so I stupidly thought I was special.

My partner at the time would drop me to work six nights a week. I thought he must really love me to be so open about my career choice.

I remember one night as an escort, sucking some guy's dick who looked the spitting image of my father. I cried all the way back to the brothel. Feeling sick and dirty and full of shame.

It didn't take long for the false sense of control to wear off. I had no choice on who I had to fuck or how they wanted to fuck me. They called the shots. My body was no longer my own.

I tried to leave several times but my partner reminded me of the whore I was and would always be. So I would go back. He liked the money. He liked the drugs. He liked the girls I brought home for him.

I did finally get away, first from the brothel and eventually from him. But I'll never be who I should have been because someone sold me the lie of taking control.

Survivor voices: Megan

I met Paul* on a dating app when I was in my early twenties. He invited me to accompany him to some parties. I was particularly low at the time, so the idea sounded

just what I needed. When he said he'd pay me £75 an hour to attend these parties, I thought, even better. All it involved, he said, was dressing up nicely, complimenting two or three men, having a drink with them and providing them some company. It didn't occur to me it would involve sex.

I met him and he drove to a B&B near Heathrow Airport. I remember feeling confused... what kind of party would be at a B&B? He told me to wait in the car and then he got out and talked to another man, Charlie.* When Paul got back in the car, he explained, "Charlie will give you £150. £75 of that is yours and £75 is mine. I will wait in the car. Take some condoms just in case".

This was the first sign that sex would be part of the deal... But Paul assured me it was 'just in case' and that whatever happened would be between consenting adults, but to make sure I returned after an hour.

I didn't feel like I had a choice. I was with two men I didn't know and was over an hour away from home. I followed Charlie to his room. It was quickly apparent that sex was an obligation, not an 'option.' I had no say in it. Charlie did what he wanted, took photos, and at the end, shook Paul's hand and said he ought to keep me, as if I belonged to him.

Meanwhile and without my knowledge, Paul had created an online profile for me as an 'employee' of his 'agency' and uploaded the photos Charlie had taken. Paul then took me on to two other places and by the third, I'd learnt the ritual. Take the money, do whatever the man wants for the time allocated, however disgusting or uncomfortable, then give 50% of my earnings to Paul, who would eventually drop me home. On the way he would demand unprotected sex on the basis that he needed to 'test me out' or because I owed it to him as he was making me a lot of money.

You'd think that after that, I'd have found a way to not do it again – but Paul knew my address, had all my contact details, and was very manipulative. After seeing him a few times, believing he cared about me, I opened up a little about my difficult personal situation to which he responded that 'all his girls were messed up'. I even learnt that one of them had taken her own life, about which he was blasé and showed little care for her or the three children she left behind.

For the next nine months, Paul booked clients for me regularly and my life became a cycle of being paid for sex and crying on my bed wishing for my life to end.

* Names have been changed.

RACISM & STRUCTURAL OPPRESSION

The sex industry is not only profoundly sexist but also profoundly racist. Preeminent researcher of the industry, Dr Gail Dines, describes the porn industry as “breath-taking in its contempt and loathing for people of colour”. She describes, for example, how porn fetishizes and commodifies racial stereotypes of Asian women as naive, obedient, petite and innocent, and African American women as aggressive and mouthy. She says: “racial conflict is constructed, articulated, and exploited as a way to enhance the sexual debasement of women.”⁵⁵

Huschke Mau was, with interruptions, engaged in prostitution in Germany for ten years. She is now a passionate campaigner against the sex industry and is the founder of Network Ella, an organisation of prostitution survivors.⁵⁶ She talks about the racism within the prostitution system – how racially discriminated women enter prostitution in disproportionate numbers and how the system itself fetishizes ethnicity. She describes mega-brothels in Germany where the women are on different floors according to their ethnicity – Romanian women on one floor, Asian women on the next, African women on the next, and so on. She describes this as an apartheid system and points out that the racist language that punters use against women is visible for all to see on punter forums.⁵⁷

We must ask whether an industry that routinely gets away with the kind of overt and degrading racism that is no longer accepted in mainstream society can ever be safe for women and particularly for women of colour and minority ethnicities.

Contrary to myth, prostitution has not always existed. There is no evidence of its existence prior to the establishment of patriarchy. Prostitution arose alongside slavery as a method of dividing and subjugating women.⁵⁸ Subsequently it has been used by elites in the furtherance of their aims of domination, including in Europe during the transition to capitalism and in the European colonisation of the Americas and the global south.⁵⁹

The links with domination and colonialist history are still visible. For example, indigenous women remain hugely overrepresented in the sex industry in Canada.

⁵⁵ Dines, G (2010) *Pornland: How porn has hijacked our sexuality*, Beacon

⁵⁶ <https://huschkemau.de/en/>

⁵⁷ <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2021/03/09/the-nordic-model-vs-full-decriminalisation-what-do-sex-trade-survivors-say/>

⁵⁸ Lerner, G (1986) *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Oxford University Press

⁵⁹ Federici, S (2004) *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the body and primitive accumulation*, Automeia

Activists have linked prostitution with the residential school system and insist that the reality for indigenous women will not improve while prostitution has free rein.⁶⁰

In the United States, women of colour are also greatly overrepresented in the sex industry. In many downtown Black neighbourhoods, white middle class men cruise the streets in luxury cars, looking for Black girls and young women to pay to use and abuse sexually. This echoes back to the white man's right to unlimited sexual access to Black women and girls during the long centuries of slavery.⁶¹

In Britain, where until the Second World War the population was almost exclusively white, a similar dynamic existed between the social classes, with middle- and upper-class men having an implicit right to sexual access to women of lower social classes.

In Victorian Britain and throughout the British empire, prostitution or starvation were the only options for spinsters and widows of all social classes who had no family support or failed to obtain or keep paid work. The threat that prostitution was the only fallback option was a powerful force keeping women subjugated to husbands, fathers, and employers.⁶² There were many more options for men to earn a living wage.

The system of prostitution has always been and remains a key part of the mechanism for subordinating women *en masse*. Any attempt to normalise it and the wider sex industry would be a catastrophic retrograde step for women and all disadvantaged minorities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PHYSICAL HEALTH

Historically, most concern about the health of women involved in prostitution has revolved around a desire to protect the male punters from infection with sexually transmitted infections (STIs) rather than protecting the women from infection by the men. This is demonstrated by the fact that in many periods and places, there has been mandatory testing of the women but not of the male clients. The feminist objection to any form of mandatory testing of women involved in prostitution is an absolute rejection of this hypocrisy.

Women involved in full-service prostitution are at risk of infection with gonorrhoea, chlamydia, trichomonads, genital warts, herpes, HPV (a known precursor of cervical cancer⁶³), syphilis, hepatitis, HIV, and cystitis. Anal sex and coprophilia (aka

⁶⁰ <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/real-change-for-aboriginal-women-begins-with-the-end-of-prostitution/article22442349/>

⁶¹ <https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/women-colour-stand-against-sex-trade>

⁶² Jordan, J (2001) *Josephine Butler*, Hambledon Continuum

⁶³ [https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/human-papillomavirus-\(hpv\)-and-cervical-cancer](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/human-papillomavirus-(hpv)-and-cervical-cancer)

scatophilia/scat) bring risks of infection with additional infectious diseases, including giardia, shigella, and hepatitis A and E.⁶⁴

The natural environment (pH levels, microbiome, and vaginal fluids) of the vagina can be destroyed by frequent rinsing, douching, and use of lubricants, creams, and spermicides. This reduces the body's natural defence mechanisms and increases the risk of infection.

Injuries to the vagina, anus, and rectum, such as tears, abrasions, and fissures caused by overextension and overuse, are common. Mechanical trauma can cause damage to the abdominal and pelvic areas and can lead to incontinence of urine, faeces, or both, as well as severe pain and infertility. And of course, on top of this there is a risk of unwanted pregnancy.⁶⁵

61%

The percentage of women involved in prostitution who were found by a 2018 study to have sustained head injuries.

Many practices that have been popularised by porn are dangerous, especially for women because of their smaller average physical size and strength relative to men. For example, fisting, when practiced by a man on a woman, can result in injuries and even a damaged or broken pelvis. 'Deepthroat' can cause fatal asphyxiation and, when performed on a woman whose head is hanging over the side of a bed, can result in spinal injuries or a broken neck.

Strangulation and other practices that reduce the blood flow to the brain are always perilous, even when not fatal, and can cause many problems including brain injury, stroke, seizures, motor and speech disorders, and paralysis.⁶⁶ Research has established that brain injury before the brain is fully developed (at around age 25-30) can be more devastating than brain injuries later in life.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/shigella-dysentery-on-the-rise-among-gay-and-bisexual-men>, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fecal%E2%80%93oral_route

⁶⁵ <https://prostitutionresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Physical-Damage-Prostitution-Bissinger-2019.pdf>

⁶⁶ <https://psyarxiv.com/c6zbv/>

⁶⁷ <https://www.lawscot.org.uk/news-and-events/legal-news/brain-not-fully-developed-until-age-25-research-reveals/>

Such dangers are increased when certain recreational drugs are used, by anaesthetising you to the levels of harm being inflicted and/or by impeding men's ejaculation and driving them to more extreme acts in an attempt to resolve this.

In addition, punters are often violent and deliberately or accidentally cause many different kinds of injuries, some of which are more obvious than others. Many women report that punters beat and kick them, including on their heads, and attempt to strangle them. A 2006 study found that women who have been involved in prostitution have traumatic brain damage at levels comparable to victims of torture.⁶⁸ A 2018 study found that 61% had sustained head injuries in prostitution.⁶⁹ This is a similar rate to that found in boxers.⁷⁰

It should be obvious from all of this that even with condom use, full-service prostitution can never come close to conforming to the health and safety standards that apply in normal workplaces.

Survivor voices: Harriet

People think prostitution is about having consensual sex for money. It's not. Those men don't want to pay for that. They paid me and then used me however they wanted. I was beaten with objects until I bled; spat at; anally raped; gang raped; passed around at sex parties like a toy, men slipping off their condoms; I was shouted at, threatened, choked, told to look like I enjoyed it or he'd take the money back. I was scared every single second. But the only thing that scared me more was being street homeless, so I saw no choice other than to put up with it until I could clear my rent arrears.

Survivor voices: Laura

You have to shag a strange variety of random men you would never dream of touching in real life. Ugly, smelly, all different ages, including very old men. Also, men treat you as a piece of meat and fuck you really hard so that it hurts, and pushes your boundaries; it is a standard daily experience in a brothel.

⁶⁸ https://www.shs-conferences.org/articles/shsconf/pdf/2012/02/shsconf_shw2010_00029.pdf

⁶⁹ <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1104&context=dignity>

⁷⁰ <https://bjsm.bmj.com/content/37/4/321>

Survivor voices: Esther

No matter how many times you endure ‘deepthroat’ with your head hanging over the side of the bed, you never get over your innate fear of being upside down, with gravity, the weight of your own head and the force of an 84 kg testosterone-fuelled man’s entire power acting against your ability to alter your position to avoid danger to yourself. A man with the self-control of an elephant in musth is engaged in an act for his own enjoyment which intentionally restricts your breathing.

I used to try bracing myself to take some of the man’s weight through my upper arms, but this was only possible because I’m tall and used a gym. It used to amaze me to see men of presumed intelligence trying to push my arms away so that their whole weight was against my face with my head lolling and my neck at risk of serious or fatal injury if they stumbled or lost their balance in any way.

That innate response, like your gagging reflex, evolved for a reason. You will internalise your fear of it. It will add to your expectation of death or serious injury.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MENTAL HEALTH

The mental, psychological and emotional impacts of prostitution can be even more devastating than the physical consequences and can last a lifetime.

Dissociation is a common coping mechanism when anyone is exposed to experiences that are so overwhelming that it is not possible to process them in the normal way. This can lead to trauma responses, particularly when such experiences are frequent, as they typically are in prostitution.

Dr Tal Croitoru, an Israeli EMDR therapist who has worked with women who have experienced prostitution, describes how it works:

“When the sexual contact doesn’t happen out of desire but the woman forces herself to do it to make money, she might try to disconnect herself from the situation. This causes a dissociation of the body and the spirit, the memorization of the event is done by abnormal brain circuits, the information of time and space is

not recorded and later the person will relive the same panic, the same anxiety at the slightest evocative sensation.”⁷¹

Croitoru considers that PTSD is so common in women who have lived experience of prostitution that it can be considered the norm.

Judith Lewis Herman is an American psychiatrist who has spent her life specialising in the treatment of trauma and is the author of the ground-breaking book, *‘Trauma and recovery: the aftermath of violence – from domestic abuse to political terror’*. In a letter to the New York Times on 9 May 2016, she wrote:

“For many years, I was the training director in a treatment program for patients with psychological trauma. A considerable number of our patients reported histories of having been used in prostitution. These were among the most severely traumatized people we saw, and they suffered from extreme forms of PTSD. The stories they told were horrifying, even to our seasoned clinicians who had borne witness to many horrors.”

Multiple peer-reviewed studies have confirmed this and found a very high incidence of PTSD symptoms among women with lived experience of prostitution – ranging from 47-68%.⁷² This is double the rate that you would expect to find in soldiers returning from active service in a war zone. In addition, the PTSD that these women suffer is typically more complex than that found in combat veterans.

A Swiss study conducted a standardised assessment of the mental health of women involved in prostitution in a variety of settings. It found very high rates of mental disorders and that these were correlated with the high levels of violence from pimps and punters.⁷³

In one study, 75% of women in escort prostitution had attempted suicide. In another report, women involved in prostitution comprised 15% of all completed suicides.⁷⁴

⁷¹ <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2019/05/21/an-emdr-therapist-on-what-shes-learned-working-with-people-whove-experienced-prostitution/>

⁷² <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31679445/>

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/286750917_Violence_and_post_traumatic_stress_disorder_in_a_sample_of_inner_city_street_prostitutes

https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J189v02n03_03

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/289782226_Posttraumatic_stress_disorders_in_prostitutes_Resu_lts_of_a_study_in_Hamburg_in_the_context_of_an_international_project

⁷³ http://www.collegium.ethz.ch/fileadmin/autoren/pdf_papers/10_roessler_sexwork.pdf

⁷⁴ Letter from Susan Kay Hunter, Council for Prostitution Alternatives, Jan 6, 1993, cited by Phyllis Chesler in *‘A Woman’s Right to Self-Defense: the case of Aileen Carol Wuornos,’* in *Patriarchy: Notes of an Expert Witness*, 1994, Common Courage Press, Monroe, Maine.

Women who have been involved in non-contact areas of the sex industry, such as stripping, lap dancing, and webcamming, are not immune from such psychological impacts. Presenting yourself as a sex object and being treated as one, enduring harassment from punters and their continuous pressure to do ever more, and the exploitative conditions of the industry can all take a very heavy psychological, mental, and emotional toll.

47–68%

The percentage of women involved in prostitution who have been found by multiple studies to have PTSD.

Not surprisingly given this reality, there is evidence that many women who are involved in the sex industry drop out of university entirely because they find it impossible to combine the lifestyle with academic studies.

Survivor voices: Courtney

It took me a while to stand objectively back from the industry, to see it more clearly. But like an in-denial addict, things had to get really bad first. Eventually I became forced to see, that whilst involved in prostitution I had begun to reject life outside of it... friends, hobbies, values and opinions. I saw how I had become anxious, depressed, self-hating, panicky. I saw how my life became nothing more than me oscillating between being drunk to cope with working, and working to afford being drunk. I saw that I no longer cared about myself at all.

I saw friends who had previously been reasonably stable have mental breakdowns, and rages at the smallest perceived slight or discomfort. Increasing deficits in social coping, it seemed to me, were the result of years of having little boundary between them and the 'outside' world. Of having almost no ability to discriminate who could touch them, who could use them. One friend poured bleach into her vagina, thought daggers were coming out of the pupils in her 'client's' eyes and eventually just disappeared. Confronting these distresses meant confronting my own. The distresses of the industry, covered in its supposed 'glamour', 'sexual liberty' and 'freedom'.

After slipping closer to thoughts of suicide I decided to try and escape. It was my 'back against the wall' moment. However, I had an apartment I had to pay for, debts mounting up, anxiety so severe I could not even get on a bus or go in a shop. Out of desperation I rang a charity that aimed to support women in getting off the streets, but

to their own frustration, they did not have the funding or the facilities to do anything more than listen to me cry down the phone.

Survivor voices: Debbie

Fifty years ago, I worked in a strip club, then a massage parlour, then one of those upper crust places with champagne and swimming pools.

Still not over it. Still feel the shame, dissociation from the body, broken in pieces, lack of trust, feeling as if I cannot let anyone really know me because if they did, well, that would be the end of that relationship – as superficial as it is, it's better than utter aloneness.

Prostitution and the pornography that supports it destroy women. Why is that so hard to understand?

Also, it's impossible to assess the damage while you are in it because then, you would not do it. So obviously, you lie to yourself and everyone else. Lying becomes the norm. A hard habit to break, that lying. Especially to your children.

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS

If you've read the previous sections, it should be clear that all areas of the sex industry come with significant risks for those involved. Many people believe that the risks are so grave that nothing can reduce them to a level that would be considered reasonable in a workplace in a modern democratic society. This alone is a reason for students to consider every possible alternative option and for universities to do everything in their power to ensure that students have viable alternatives.

Some people claim that working in small collectively-run brothels would be safer for women. However, the German experience suggests that even this is unsafe. Of the 124 murders and attempted murders of women involved in prostitution in Germany from January 2000 to July 2017 that were known and recorded on the 'Sex Industry Kills' website, about 50% took place in legal "prostitution apartments," where women operate

in small groups. Working with other women in an apartment did not keep these women safe.⁷⁵

For those involved in the sex industry, there are various organisations that provide advice and support to mitigate some of the risks. For example, the Revenge Porn Helpline provides advice for protecting your online identity, including: using a separate name for everything and never telling a client your real name; not revealing your face or any identifying features (such as tattoos) in photos and webcamming sessions; using separate devices for work and personal use, and ensuring they are protected with different passwords.⁷⁶

Further advice about general digital safety is available online – we particularly recommend ‘A DIY Guide to Feminist Cybersecurity’ at hackblossom.org.⁷⁷

A number of organisations provide general safety tips for those involved in prostitution. These are chilling and prove beyond any doubt that it is not a job like any other. Typical tips include: keeping your eyes on your client and their hands at all times; not accepting drinks or food that isn’t in an unopened sealed container straight from the shop; not wearing necklaces, scarves, shoulder bags or back packs because they might be used to strangle you; and taking a course in de-escalation techniques like those used in hostage situations.⁷⁸ All of this suggests that prostitution has more in common with Russian Roulette than a normal job.

Focusing on harm reduction alone can therefore give service providers a false sense of achievement while actually doing little other than contributing to maintaining women in intolerable situations. While harm reduction measures have a place, those involved in the sex industry need viable alternatives and routes out. And work must be done to prevent students getting drawn into the sex industry in the first place.

⁷⁵ <https://sexindustry-kills.de/doku.php?id=prostitutionmurders:start>

⁷⁶ <https://revengepornhelpline.org.uk/how-can-we-help/other-help-and-support/online-privacy-tips-for-sex-workers/>

⁷⁷ <https://hackblossom.org/cybersecurity/>

⁷⁸ <https://web.archive.org/web/20210302135853/http://uknswp.org/um/safety/essential-safety-for-sex-workers/>

GETTING STUCK

Once a woman gets embedded in the sex industry, it can be difficult to get out. This is another reason why young women might want to first consider every possible alternative option.

Typically, the most immediate barriers to exiting the industry are (a) the lack of an adequate alternative income; (b) drug addiction; (c) being under the control of a pimp, often their ‘boyfriend’; and/or (d) homelessness. Other longer-term issues can include physical and mental ill-health, including PTSD and crippling anxiety, and the lack of a social network outside of the industry milieu.

Research carried out in the UK found that the majority of women can leave relatively quickly when given support and motivation that is positive, proactive, and includes practical help with addressing the immediate barriers mentioned above.⁷⁹ Many women also benefit from long-term trauma-informed person-centred therapy.

While women should not be forced to exit prostitution and wanting to exit should never be made a condition of accessing services, women need to know that exiting is possible and that there are dedicated exit-focused services to help them should they wish to do so.

Survivor voices: Esther

In the same way that abusive men isolate women with whom they have relationships, you will soon find that almost everyone you associate with on a regular basis is either in the sex trade or a punter.

Social isolation is one of the biggest barriers to exiting the sex trade, along with issues arising from poverty, inequality, substance use, and lack of housing and employment opportunities.

In this ‘affirming’ bubble you may convince yourself that you are ‘empowered’. But have you noticed that men never describe themselves like that? When you’ve got real power, you don’t need to convince yourself or others that you are ‘empowered’. Power speaks for itself.

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http://www.researchgate.net/publication/303791910_Addressing_Prostitution_The_Nordic_Model_and_Beyond

Survivor voices: Alice

Nobody really prepares you for this, when you enter into prostitution. They tell you about ‘burn out’, vaguely, dismissively. But not the details. If it happens you just need time off, they’d say. And so you would, at first, take just a few days. Then a few weeks. Then months. Then you’d realise that you were not just suffering from a transient inertia, but headed towards all out atrophy. I saw it many times over the years in prostitution; women becoming depressed, anxious, hallucinatory. Suicidal, even.

Like me, some of us end up homeless, if we left the brothel we live in, or the pimp ‘boyfriend’ or we simply lost our homes when we stop making the rent. Prostitution, if it is anything, is a choice between homelessness and having men we don’t like, do things we hate, to bodies we don’t know how to love.

For this reason, those in prostitution have a tendency to boomerang in and out of it, like the jaded wives of an unfaithful or cruel husband. We pack our bags, we leave in a triumphant storm. But we find few options available to us. The benefits system is bureaucratic and inhumane. We have little or no work experience and subsequently we find it hard to get a job. We are saddled with anxiety and low self-esteem and are fearful of new people, new places, new ways of doing things.

Dejectedly, we head back to the very places that caused our malaise. We may try and put a fresh spin on it, dress it up in our own creative propaganda. It wasn’t that bad. We could do it differently this time. At least it would put a roof over our heads. I still now, amidst daily trials to re-integrate into society – to find paid work and a stable home – think to myself “would it be so terrible if I went back?”

This is what the ‘Rights Not Rescue’ campaigns fail to understand; support services should not just be for women who have left prostitution, they are for women who fear having to return to prostitution.

Support services that would offer temporary accommodation, help in applying for crisis loans or disability benefits, counselling, advocacy and advice. But few such services exist and the ones that do are scattered and have limited scope due to the paucity of funding. Unlike in France, where the government has ring fenced a pot of money for such exit services, there is no such funding in the UK, and the domestic violence refuges that exist are themselves facing funding cuts and closures. Part of the movement towards the Nordic Model is in recognising that women often struggle to leave prostitution, and are forced by circumstance to return to it again and again,

against their wishes. And it is the only model that prioritises this kind of funding, for this kind of support.⁸⁰

STIGMA

There is a common myth that the stigma that surrounds the sex industry is the cause of many of the problems that women involved in it experience and so getting rid of the stigma would improve things for the women. Some people argue that the best way of removing the stigma would be to normalise prostitution, to decriminalise or legalise it, and treat it as a normal job.

On the surface, this can sound compelling – until you look at the practical results of decriminalising and legalising the industry. Chelsea Geddes, who was engaged in prostitution in the legal brothels in New Zealand for many years after it decriminalised prostitution in 2003, says:

“Of course, we’re still stigmatised when the men who pay to bypass sexual consent have been decriminalised and our pimps who financially exploit the situation are legitimised as just regular business operators and entrepreneurs. The only way to think it’s OK to abuse us this way is to dehumanise us and believe we deserve it. That it’s our ‘choice’ and therefore our fault.

We will never be de-stigmatised under New Zealand’s current prostitution policy.”⁸¹

Jacqueline Gwynne, who for two years from 2008 was a receptionist in up-market brothels in Melbourne, where prostitution was legalised in 1994, says:

“The women are still ostracised and marginalised, and most of them live a double life where they keep their life within the sex trade secret – to the extent that many cut themselves off from family and friends outside of the industry. The stigma exists because prostitution is degrading and no regulation can change that.”⁸²

⁸⁰ <https://nordicmodelnow.org/what-is-the-nordic-model/>

⁸¹ <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2018/10/12/why-stigma-against-women-involved-in-prostitution-persists-in-new-zealand/>

⁸² <https://nordicmodelnow.org/myths-about-prostitution/myth-legalising-prostitution-reduces-the-stigma/>

Huschke Mau, who was in prostitution for years under Germany's legalised system, says:

*"We see that legalisation covers up the abuse that happens. Prostitution is a "job like any other" here but the stigma still remains on the women. The punters are not ashamed. But to be a prostitute is still very shameful."*⁸³

This suggests that sanctioning the sex industry does not reduce the stigma associated with women's involvement in it. Instead it suggests that the stigma is intrinsic to the sexism and double-standard that epitomises the sex industry. It suggests that a more hopeful approach would be to work to reduce the size of the industry and to discourage young women's entry into it and young men's use of it.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MEN

The sex industry feeds men's individual and collective sense of superiority and entitlement to sexual access to women. All the myriad forms of the sex industry present a picture of a multitude of interchangeable young women who are sexually available and willing or even desperate to fulfil a man's every whim. The flip side of this picture is that taking advantage of this is what makes a man a man and there is often considerable peer pressure for men to do so.

Even when a young man has no desire to buy sex himself, he's unlikely to escape porn and so-called sexual entertainment. Suppose one of his mates is getting married and a trip to a lap dancing club is part of the stag do. He is confronted with a mass of scantily clad and hyper-sexualised young women vying for his attention with the aim of providing him with sexual satisfaction in a private dance – for cash.

The young women do not fancy him. They are simply desperate to be paid and the only way they'll be paid is if they get men to buy a private dance. But how is he to know that? Did anyone ever explain the lap dancing club business model to him? Of course not. He can't imagine pretending to be sexually interested in another person when he's not. It's beyond his comprehension.

A similar scenario is repeated endlessly – in the webcamming chatrooms, in the brothels, on AdultWork and Vivastreet and similar, and perhaps increasingly on standard dating sites. Gradually he comes to think that women – or at least some of them – are superficial, always ready for sex and are only interested in money. Perhaps he comes to see them as a lower order of being and that men really are superior. He might even come

⁸³ <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2021/03/09/the-nordic-model-vs-full-decriminalisation-what-do-sex-trade-survivors-say/>

to think that women owe him sex. This is the logic that the sex industry teaches boys and young men and that now pervades mainstream culture.

This is worrying because research has long shown that men believing that they are superior and entitled to sexual access to women is associated with violence against women and girls.⁸⁴ And we are witnessing an epidemic of male violence against women and girls, including on university campuses. We are also witnessing a rise in extreme misogyny among young men, as epitomised by the ‘incel’ movement documented by Laura Bates.⁸⁵ It is simply implausible that all these things are not connected.

The sex industry is not in men’s best interests any more than it is in women’s best interests. A Harvard University study on men’s life satisfaction tracked 700 men over 75 years and came to the overwhelming conclusion that it is the quality and warmth of personal, family, and community relationships throughout their lives that was the single most important factor in determining the men’s happiness and life satisfaction, and even their physical health and financial stability.⁸⁶ Engaging in the sex industry as a consumer or sex buyer is anathema to developing warm and empathetic human relationships.

Universities have an ethical responsibility to ensure that they do not condone the sex industry and inadvertently encourage the young people they teach and mentor to enter it or to become its consumers. Messaging about the sex industry must be uncompromising and clear that it is a predatory industry that devours our humanity.

Survivor voices: Sarah

I used to think that men bought sex because they couldn’t get it consensually for whatever reason. After my small experience in prostitution, I realised that most of them could get it for free – they just don’t want to. They don’t want the give and take. They don’t want to have to consider their partner or their needs. They just want to be the centre of it and have every little wish and whim indulged. They are like emotional babies. I have remained single ever since, despite pleas from ‘nice’ guys and ‘good men.’ I know there are good men, but I can just never go through anything like that again.

⁸⁴ https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Michael-Flood-4/publication/24345795_Factors_Influencing_Attitudes_to_Violence_Against_Women/links/09e41502d7be455aa5000000/Factors-Influencing-Attitudes-to-Violence-Against-Women.pdf

⁸⁵ <https://www.newsweek.com/misogyny-manosphere-spreading-playgrounds-terror-threat-1555462>

⁸⁶ <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2017/04/over-nearly-80-years-harvard-study-has-been-showing-how-to-live-a-healthy-and-happy-life/>

Survivor voices: Jen

Many of the men I know treat me as though every interaction is a transaction even though they are supposed to be my friends. They don't treat me like they treat their male friends, to whom they can be quite kind and generous. That is, the sex is always in the foreground and so they treat you like you're a candy dispenser. If they just push the right button, sex will be dispensed because it will be owed.

These men count every favour they do (stuff they freely do for their male friends) and expect a result (if they offer you a lift somewhere, if you ask them for help with some mundane task). There's no emotional content to the relationship and your whole purpose is sexual. And it's not that they're driven by sexual desire either. It's something else. It's cultural. It's about control, status and bragging rights. Women always owe them. Women are there to serve.

5. A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO STUDENT FINANCIAL HARDSHIP

Most people go to university to expand their creative and intellectual viewpoint, to improve their long-term prospects, and to open up interesting career possibilities. It makes sense, therefore, for students to take the long view when considering how to finance it.

Universities have a responsibility to ensure that students have a realistic understanding of how involvement in the sex industry could potentially undermine their short- and long-term aims and that they have all the information they need to weigh up the risks.

IS THE SEX INDUSTRY REALLY EASY MONEY?

There's no such thing as a free lunch, as the saying goes – and if it sounds too good to be true, another one says, it probably is too good to be true. And yet few people challenge the trope that a young woman can make ten times as much money in the sex industry as she could in the retail or hospitality industries.

We've already looked at some of the downsides of the sex industry – the ever-present risk of violence, of being stalked, the damage to cognitive ability and health, the slow erosion of mental and psychological wellbeing, and the exploitative business models rife in the industry – but what about the downsides in terms of future career and earning potential?

You might be able to make more in the sex industry, hour for hour, than in a minimum wage job in retail, for example. But realistically, could you ever put that you've done webcamming or any other aspect of the sex industry on your CV? Not in almost any field – not least because in this sexist world, some men would consider you fair game and harass you or worse. You can put almost any other job on your CV and, no matter how lowly, future employers are likely to value the skills and experience gained and to consider it a positive thing that you worked to put yourself through university.

In most jobs you start at the bottom, on the lowest wage and with the least responsibility. But as you show initiative and reliability and gain experience, you might be promoted or get a raise. After a year or two you could well be earning more than you did at the beginning. And after you get your degree, it could help you get another job that's closer to your ambitions and goals.

The trajectory in the sex industry is typically the opposite. Usually, women make most at the beginning (any brothel receptionist will tell you that punters overwhelmingly want the youngest and ‘newest’ girl and are prepared to pay more for that). Punters value youth but also naivety and inexperience. As time goes by, women typically find it gets increasingly difficult. As Rae Story put it:

“Women in prostitution are sometimes fond of saying, “As long as I have my body, I have an income.” But the reality is often not like that: women got sick with mental health problems, became overcome by drug addiction, depression, or PTSD. Women who, at first, had enormous enthusiasm for giving the punters what they wanted (because it gave them a fickle, flimsy sense of being ‘good’ at something) became cynical after bad experiences, were no longer able to be as amenable to buyer’s demands (and, therefore, lost money), or simply couldn’t charge as much as they aged.”⁸⁷

The longer you stay in the sex industry, the greater these effects are likely to be. A woman, like our hypothetical Sky, who starts in the sex trade while she’s an undergraduate may find that at first she does indeed have a higher disposable income than a fellow student, let’s call her Mia, who got a part-time job in retail.

A few years after graduation, however, the tables are likely to be reversed. In her second year in the retail job, Mia was promoted to shift supervisor. Four years later, she’s earning decent money in HR at a major employer, which the retail job and her progression within it helped her to secure.

Sky, on the other hand, couldn’t find a job when she graduated and so she continued doing what she knew. She’s now been in the sex trade for seven years and has never had an ordinary job. She has nothing to put on her CV and is suffering from anxiety and depression. Her situation has sometimes felt so hopeless she’s considered suicide several times. She’s now in touch with an organisation that specialises in helping women out of the sex trade. This has helped her gain some perspective and stop blaming herself so much. She now sees that she didn’t have a chance because no one explained this predictable trajectory when she was starting out at university. Instead, everyone insisted that “sex work” is a normal job. She found out the hard way that it’s not. She wishes she’d got a job in retail like Mia.

⁸⁷ <https://www.feministcurrent.com/2016/06/20/rae-story-prostitution-neoliberalism-middle-classing-prostitution/>

Survivor voices: Esther

The principal Office for National Statistics (ONS) investigator responsible for analysing UK spending on prostitution said in evidence to the Home Affairs Select Committee in 2016 that the estimated gross annual income earned from prostitution by the 72,800 people involved was £5.09 billion, with an estimated income of £1.23 billion after costs. That's a net income that works out at 24.2% of gross.

With that gross/net ratio the ONS estimates that the women involved were seeing an average of 29 clients a week and charging them a mean rate of £67 in 2009, rising to £78 in 2015, before dropping to £73 in 2016. This amounts to £16 per client after costs, rising to £19 in 2015, before dropping to £18 in 2016.

You may be wondering what are these 'costs' that so exceed the rate of taxation.

The main one is 'protection' money for the pimps, brothel-owners, traffickers, escort agencies, and commercial sex industry websites along with those they keep on their contacts lists. These people invariably claim that they are uniquely positioned to keep you 'safe', but in reality, they themselves are either your greatest source of danger and harm or they actively facilitate it.

Another major cost is renting the space where you see punters, and maybe also live. That is usually high, particularly if you want to locate yourself in a postcode associated with 'glamour'. Then there are the clothes you wear to meet punters, which of necessity will require replacing on a regular basis.

Notice that the ONS investigator didn't include in his calculations the damage to the physical and mental health and wellbeing of the women involved in prostitution, nor the cost to the NHS and other providers of treating them or assisting in their recovery. You may want to include this in your personal calculations, however, because damage to your physical and mental health is likely to reduce your earning power in the years and decades ahead.

You will find punters are confident that the women they pay for sex have health issues resulting from substance use – although they invariably lack curiosity about the details, lest it ruin their fantasy. Such is their confidence that they will ask you to obtain substances for them because you are a 'friend' with whom they have a 'special connection'.

This same ‘special connection’ will also be a means through which they will attempt to manipulate you into lowering what you charge.

A ‘friendly’ pimp whose business also involves servicing your ‘friend’s’ need for substances, will remind you that you need to keep up with the competition. This means removing whatever boundaries you may have started out with about what ‘services’ you are prepared to provide.

OTHER LONG-TERM CONSIDERATIONS OF INVOLVEMENT IN THE SEX INDUSTRY

Provided you steer clear of assisting in the running of a brothel and drug offences, the chances of getting a criminal record are fairly slim in the online and indoor sex industry. However, if you report an attack to the police or you come to police attention in some other way, your involvement in the sex trade is likely to be recorded on the Police National Computer (PNC) and stay on your record for your entire lifetime.

While records that fall short of a criminal disposal are usually filtered out during the routine Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks that standard employers use on hiring employees, a number of organisations have direct access to the PNC for a variety of purposes – including vetting candidates for positions in the police, judiciary, national security, and other high-level positions.

Some very sensitive positions also require candidates to make a declaration about whether they are potentially vulnerable to blackmail. A hidden history in the sex industry would mean you have to answer ‘yes’.

Students who are considering entering the sex industry should be advised to consider how such risks may impact their lives in the decades ahead. Are they sure they won’t follow a legal career and aspire to be a judge? What about a political career? Or being a police officer or in the intelligence services? Might they need a firearms licence at some point in their life?

In addition, many professions in the UK and abroad have strict codes of conduct about upholding the reputation of the profession and not participating in behaviour that could put others at risk. It is possible that involvement in the sex industry might contravene such codes.

Life is prone to taking many unexpected turns. Those who have a background in the sex industry are unlikely to be able to reach many positions.

There can also be other impacts years down the line. There have been cases of children being bullied at school when it came out that their mother was involved in prostitution, and of women being recognised by old punters who contacted their employers and sought to get them dismissed. There's the ongoing danger that some women face from their old pimps. Potential future partners might find out and use it against you, and if you tell them upfront, they might reject you.

All of this shows that the sexist double standard is alive and well. Women are judged for involvement in the sex industry but men who are punters and even pimps invariably get off scot-free. No amount of railing against 'stigma' or opening up the sex industry ever further is going to change this. By its very design, the sex industry is inherently unequal. It feeds men's entitlement and advantages while entrenching women's disadvantages. This is why many sex trade survivors are opposed to the campaign to decriminalise the industry.

Survivor voices: Christina

Exiting sex work is easier said than done. After years of working in brothels I had very little to put on a CV and my experience of working life outside sex work was minimal and outdated.

After struggling for a couple of years to even get an interview, I managed to find a job in a bar. I was terrified my past would come back to haunt me and eventually it did when a customer found out my guilty secret. People who had once been friendly towards me became cool and distant. I felt humiliated and ashamed. I went home one day and couldn't face going back.

After months struggling to get by on benefits, I found a job as a receptionist at a brothel I used to work at. The environment was often degrading and traumatic but it somehow felt a lot less intimidating than normal life. I guess I never realised just what I was signing up for on my first shift in a brothel. It's only years later when the sacrifices start to outweigh any financial benefits. Unfortunately, the way out isn't quite so easy as the way in and the longer you stay on the fringes of society, the harder it becomes to bridge those gaps.

FINANCIAL EDUCATION & ALTERNATIVE SOURCES OF INCOME

71% of students responding to the Save the Student's 2020 money survey said they wished they'd had a better financial education and 25% weren't aware of the numerous scholarships, grants and bursaries available for funding their education.⁸⁸ This is an indictment of both universities and the education system that together allow young people to be so unprepared for university and independent adult life.

Reports in the press suggest that a significant number of young people arrive at university without a clear understanding of how the student loans system works, of when and how often they will be paid, or of how they will be required to pay it back.⁸⁹ As a result, some students burn through their first loan instalment rapidly and are then thrown into crisis when they find they have nothing left to live on until the next instalment comes through months later. Many students are unaware that universities provide a money advice service and so don't turn to it when they begin to run into problems and before they are entrenched.

Universities therefore need to take a proactive role in helping students manage their money and apply for alternative sources of income and suitable part-time work. They could make financial education and advice part of the student orientation programme. They could create and widely distribute well-designed leaflets and posters setting out basic information about student finance, budgeting, when and where to seek advice, how to apply for bursaries and grants, options for local employment, etc. Stalls at Freshers' Week with knowledgeable and sympathetic staff and workshops during the first term might also help students manage their finances successfully and avoid financial catastrophe.

TOWARDS A MORE SUSTAINABLE LIFESTYLE

Since the 1980s and the dominance of unfettered neoliberal capitalism, consumption and materialism have morphed in the popular imagination into the prime indicators of success. Conversely, a lack of material means has morphed in the public perception into being a personal failure.

The pronounced gendered way this manifests was epitomised in the TV series, *Sex and the City* in the late 1990s, with designer wear and accessories being *de rigueur*. TV

⁸⁸ <https://www.savethestudent.org/money/student-money-survey-2020.html>

⁸⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2021/jul/03/the-hardest-lesson-ive-learned-at-uni-is-how-to-handle-money>

series like *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* have continued the theme, with the addition of ever more extreme makeovers and plastic surgery.

Girls and young women who arrive at university from poorer communities can find it challenging to find themselves in a milieu where students from wealthier backgrounds may disport designer handbags, for example, and perhaps subtly ridicule students who have cheap imitations. This can add to the pressures on young women who are unable to afford such gear.

Universities can play a role in helping young people to critique this hyper-commercialised culture and to join the dots between it and the environmental devastation that young people are quite rightly so concerned about – and to encourage a less materialistic culture.

There are many inexpensive possibilities that could help students save money while nurturing a different mindset and increasing sustainability, such as swap shops and table top sale events for clothing, books, kitchen equipment, and bedding. Storage options could be provided so that rather than students abandoning their duvets and toasters on the street when they leave at the end of the summer term, they could be stored and provided to others at the start of the next year. Repair workshops, food co-ops and classes in cooking cheap and nutritious food could also help students live well on less.

6. SUPPORTING STUDENTS

Students who are involved in the sex industry and those who are struggling to kick a porn or sex buying habit need high-quality support. This chapter starts by covering some of the challenges that might arise and what being non-judgemental might look like in practice. It then provides practical tips and a detailed example.

CONTEXT

If you've read this handbook through from the beginning, it should be evident that entry into the sex industry is complex. Reducing it to a narrative based on straightforward choice as if it were no different from choosing between retail jobs in Sainsbury's or Primark, for example, does no one justice.

The notion that 'sex work is real work' is similarly unhelpful. In no other job are you required to allow a series of strangers to use your body for their sexual gratification while you flatter their ego and deny and hide your own natural and involuntary feelings, including fear, anger, disgust, and humiliation, and for this to take place outside of all the social conventions that govern normal human interactions.

It is widely recognised that a significant majority of girls and women who enter prostitution have suffered childhood sexual abuse.⁹⁰ The American Psychological Association describes the inner psychological processes that explain this connection:

*"Of special interest is the relationship between childhood sexual abuse victimization and sexual behavior. A common symptom of sexually abused children is sexualized behavior. The sexually abused child may incorporate the perpetrator's perspective into her identity, eventually viewing herself as good for nothing but sex. The constricted sense of self of the sexually abused child and the coercive refusal of the perpetrator to respect the child's physical boundaries may result in subsequent difficulties in asserting boundaries, impaired self-protection, and a greater likelihood of being further victimized as an adult, including becoming involved in prostitution."*⁹¹

Many children and young people are now exhibiting similar difficulties without having been abused by an individual. The pornification of mainstream culture and early access

⁹⁰ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/2149593/>

⁹¹ <https://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-full.pdf>

to hardcore porn are themselves acting as perpetrator.⁹² We may now need to consider that the entire cohort of young people have been victims of childhood sexual abuse – with the majority oblivious to this fact. Acknowledging and facing up to childhood sexual abuse can take years or even decades and is sometimes impossible.⁹³ There is no reason to expect that it would be different when our very culture, and Pornhub, XVideos, and similar are the vectors of the abuse.

This, along with the normalisation of the sex industry, has groomed young people as fodder for the sex industry – as participants and/or consumers – even if they do not recognise this.⁹⁴ This means that young men’s use of porn, for example, can no more be considered a free and fully informed choice than young women’s entry into the sex industry.

Imagine being a young person attempting to negotiate this world where even respected authorities like universities and psychology faculties suggest that “sex work is empowering”, that “buying sex is helping out a poor student”, and that anyone who objects is moralistic and judgemental.

What would these attitudes and messages lead you to think if you were a young woman who finds that she hates having sex for money with men she doesn’t fancy, or that webcamming is hellish, or if you were a young man struggling with a porn habit, or even if you were just uncomfortable with the sex industry?

Would it not lead you to think there was something wrong with you? If there’s nothing wrong with the system, there MUST be something wrong with you, right? And so the victim blames themselves.

But equally, many young people have internalised these attitudes so deeply that they might react with fury if anyone suggests that the sex industry is dangerous and predatory, and that neither consuming it nor becoming involved in it is in your best interests.

Promoting notions that getting involved in the sex industry is a free and informed choice and “sex work is real work” must be seen, in this context, as abdication of adult responsibility. It should also be seen as a form of victim blaming – as it locates sole responsibility in the least powerful actor and exonerates the powerful industry profiteers

⁹² https://bravehearts.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Research-Report_Overview-of-research-into-the-effects-of-viewing-pornography-on-children....pdf

⁹³ <https://www.washington.edu/news/1998/06/22/remembering-and-forgetting-childhood-sexual-abuse-its-how-events-are-encoded-in-memory-and-how-people-view-themselves-not-repression/>

⁹⁴ <https://victimfocusblog.com/2020/06/30/dr-jessica-taylor-explains-the-real-reasons-why-you-cant-spot-grooming-behaviour/>

and lobbyists, the consumers, and the adults and institutions who have failed to restrain the industry and to educate and warn of its risks and dangers, and to ensure that young people have access to alternative economic means.

It has long been observed that there is often a gulf between how women see the sex industry while they are involved in it and how they see it after they have successfully exited.⁹⁵ Whilst you are in it, your livelihood depends on upholding the illusion that you enjoy it and can make lots of money that way. This is an integral part of what you are paid for – service with a smile so that the (mostly) male consumers can feel free of guilt and not be troubled with the ambiguity that would inevitably follow if they understood how it really made you feel.

How could you carry on if you let yourself confront this reality and let it fully enter your consciousness? There can be a strong psychological imperative to deny your own unhappiness and the harms involved. This is a human coping mechanism. But years later, when you've managed to build a life away from the industry and you look back, you might see very clearly how harmful and damaging it was and that the sex industry is inherently abusive and exploitative. As Debbie put it earlier:

“[I]t’s impossible to assess the damage while you are in it because then, you would not do it. So obviously, you lie to yourself and everyone else. Lying becomes the norm. A hard habit to break, that lying...”

These dynamics pose challenges when providing support to those involved in the sex industry or caught up as consumers of it. These dynamics also explain why promoters of the sex industry and lobbyists for its expansion insist that we must only listen to “current sex workers” and not those who have exited – lest awkward truths be exposed.

Survivor voices: Megan

One of the biggest barriers in supporting women exploited by the sex trade, in my view, is the denial. Of the former ‘sex workers’ I know they all say that at the time, they believed they were strong and free and liberated because they were choosing this.

But upon leaving they realised the opposite was true.

⁹⁵ Raymond, J G (2013) *Not a choice, Not a job: Exposing the myths about prostitution and the global sex trade*, Potomac Books

Survivor voices: Laura

I went to get help from a project to try to exit [prostitution] and they kept talking about it as a lifestyle choice. They dismissed all of the medical problems I have and the pain I was in. So I disengaged from the whole system, everything, and went it alone. People like me are hidden; you don't see us.

'SEX WORK' AS AN IDENTITY

Another challenge when supporting those involved in the sex industry is the notion that being a 'sex worker' is a fundamental identity, rather than simply an occupation, and that this must be affirmed and 'sex workers' require special treatment – for example, specific protection under hate crime legislation.

This notion is popular among those who insist that “sex work is real work” – although an explanation of why, if it's a normal job, you would need to have such special protection is seldom elaborated. After all, no other occupational group makes such claims. If further explanation is provided, it is usually that it's necessary because of the 'stigma' associated with 'sex work' and people's irrational hatred and targeting of the people involved.

There is no doubt that those involved in the sex industry are victims of staggering levels of violence, abuse, and mistreatment. However, there is substantial evidence that this is intrinsic to the industry itself, which is predicated on inequality and dehumanises those involved, reducing them to commodities that (mostly) men can pay to use and abuse at will, free from normal social conventions. This sets up those involved as targets or 'fair game'. Evidence suggests that legalising or decriminalising the industry does not change this – the women involved are still murdered and subjected to violence at distressing rates.⁹⁶ A more hopeful approach would be a concerted effort to shift the burden of stigma from those involved to those who consume, facilitate and profit, and to reduce the size of the industry.

Of course, universities and service providers should treat those involved in the sex industry with the utmost respect and consider them a vulnerable group. However, enshrining 'sex work' as an intrinsic identity is likely to have unintended consequences, including legitimising and normalising the sex industry and therefore increasing the

⁹⁶ <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2021/03/09/german-ex-police-officer-demolishes-common-arguments-against-the-nordic-model/>

numbers of young women who are drawn into it. It would affirm the sex industry's position as a neutral and permanent feature of society and might make it hard, if not impossible, to critique the industry without claims of violating 'sex workers' identity.

It is understandable that claiming a special status or identity as a 'sex worker' might be attractive to young people who are caught up in the industry. It is hard to survive in the sex industry without convincing yourself it is a free choice and a normal job. To conceptualise your involvement as a heroic challenge to heteronormative sexuality and to have that validated externally might help keep alienation and cognitive dissonance at bay. But ultimately this is likely to entrap you ever further in the industry.

Forcing therapists, welfare officers, and student counsellors to collude with such notions would constrict the service they can provide. We are aware of at least one formal complaint brought against a therapist for gently suggesting that a client who was involved in prostitution might like to consider other options. The client claimed that this was a violation of her identity as a 'sex worker'. This is a disturbing trend that must be resisted.

Generally, good student welfare and therapeutic counselling practice does not take the presenting problem entirely at face value, but rather as a starting point for challenge or exploration. For example, when someone presents with an eating disorder or substance misuse problem, a therapist would not collude with the client's subjective view of herself as obese, or as needing to maintain the addiction; the beliefs would be addressed, worked with, and if necessary, challenged. Sometimes, dealing with the underlying difficulties and past trauma can lead to an amelioration of the presenting problem and/or the client spontaneously realising ways to move towards resolution.

It is important that students involved in the sex industry are not deprived of high-quality services that take such a holistic approach, by false notions that the sex industry is a normal job that students freely choose and that prioritise affirming the student's identity as a 'sex worker'. Similarly, false notions of 'kink shaming' and similar should not prevent students who are seeking help with a porn or sex buying habit from receiving high-quality services.

THERAPEUTIC VS. ETHICAL NEUTRALITY

The University of Leicester student 'sex work' policy and toolkits place great emphasis on staff providing non-judgemental support to students who are involved in the sex industry. Conspicuously lacking, however, is any discussion of what non-judgemental means in practice – particularly when students disclose behaviour that is illegal or that might put themselves or others at risk.

In her brilliant essay, 'Hidden in Plain Sight: Clinical Observations on Prostitution', Judith Lewis Herman includes an interesting case study on this theme:⁹⁷

"Katarina is a 24 year old mother of a 2 year old son. In the course of her treatment, she had successfully ended a relationship with a pimp and was living in a small apartment with a new boyfriend, who, like herself, was a recovering addict. She supported herself by providing home daycare for several children. Daily contact with the children reminded her of how profoundly neglected she had been as a child and how deeply she longed for both attention and material possessions. She acknowledged that she missed the extravagant spending that was part of her life in prostitution, even though she recognized that her pimp controlled all the money and that she herself had always been desperately poor.

Just before Christmas, Katarina reported that while in a store with her son she had impulsively stolen a bracelet. Her initial feeling of entitlement and triumph had quickly given way to shame and regret as she realized how seriously she had put herself and her child at risk. She was very relieved that she had not been caught, but getting away with shoplifting didn't feel right either; now she couldn't even stand to wear the bracelet.

The therapist was glad Katarina had confided in her, and told her so, but also made it clear that she did not approve of stealing. She asked whether Katarina had considered returning the bracelet. This idea came as a complete surprise to the patient, who had never entertained the possibility that she could make things right. Her eventual choice to return the bracelet gave her a new sense of agency and self-respect.

In this case, the therapist was able to maintain the distinction between moral and therapeutic neutrality. To clarify the distinction: moral neutrality means declining to take a stand on the abstract question whether stealing is right or wrong. Therapeutic neutrality means declining to take a stand regarding the patient's inner conflicts about stealing. Here, the therapist was able to convey a clear moral position against shoplifting, while maintaining a confidential and accepting stance toward the patient. This allowed the patient to explore her conflicted feelings about what she had done and come to her own resolution of her dilemma. The

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https://www.researchgate.net/publication/264869474_Hidden_in_Plain_Sight_Clinical_Observations_on_Prostitution

therapeutic alliance was enhanced, to the mutual satisfaction of patient and therapist, and the therapy progressed well.

In other cases, however, where crimes against persons rather than property crimes are at issue, neutrality of any sort may be impossible to maintain. If the patient's behavior is putting others at risk, the therapist may be morally or even legally obligated to take a stand, even at the cost of violating confidentiality or jeopardizing the therapy relationship.”⁹⁸

This example illustrates that accepting and not judging the person does not mean losing your ethical compass. It is possible to retain a critique of the sex industry while providing high-quality support to those caught up in it. It could be argued that by retaining such a critique, you would be in a better position to offer realistic support.

We are unequivocal that those involved in prostitution should not be subjected to moral or ethical judgement or sanction under behavioural codes or the law. However, this does not apply to students who coerce their partner into prostitution and live on their earnings, for example.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

- Honour each person's dignity and view them as a whole and complex human being, rather than as a collection of personal problems or through the lens of what they do.
- Always follow standard university protocols around safeguarding, disclosures, and confidentiality.
- Understand the dangers and harms of the sex industry and do not minimise or trivialise them.
- Understand the limits of your own competence and know when to refer onwards.
- Adopt a trauma-informed approach.⁹⁹ For a good introduction to this, we recommend: Thompson, L. and B Willetts. (2019) 'Towards a trauma-informed approach with people who have experienced sexual violence', in Watson, J. (ed.) *Drop the disorder – challenging the culture of psychiatric diagnosis*. Monmouth: PCCS Books, pp.160-167

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https://www.researchgate.net/publication/264869474_Hidden_in_Plain_Sight_Clinical_Observations_on_Prostitution

⁹⁹ <https://www.madintheuk.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Healing-Psychological-Trauma.pdf>

SUPPORTING STUDENTS ALREADY INVOLVED IN THE SEX INDUSTRY

The University of Leicester toolkit urges staff to “ensure” that students are safe within their “work” in the sex industry.¹⁰⁰ This is pure hubris – because, as shown earlier, the sex industry is inherently dangerous. There are measures that students can take that can reduce some of the risks involved, but nothing can eliminate them entirely – or bring them into line with those involved in a normal job. It is therefore important that those involved in the sex industry understand that help to exit is available should they want it.

DO:

- **DO** ensure that students are aware that help to exit is available should they want it.
- **DO** recognise that students involved in the sex industry are at higher statistical risk of suicidal ideation.
- **DO** ensure that students have access to, and are aware of, a full range of services, including specialist support for those involved in the industry, financial and budgeting advice, part-time employment opportunities, sexual health clinics, rape crisis and domestic violence support, etc.
- **DO** challenge gently and don’t collude with incongruence. When working at depth, gently ‘notice’ any incongruence. For example, if the student says that they like their experience in the sex industry and it’s really helping them, but they’re visibly upset or shaking while saying so – notice that incongruence and gently reflect it back. For example: “I can hear you saying it’s really helping you but I can also see you crying while you say it”.
- **DO** be aware of narratives. Support is not about promoting a political agenda. Be aware of the agendas that you have and be careful not to apply them to the person seeking help. If a student comes looking for help to exit the sex industry and your response is to tell them how empowering ‘sex work’ is, they have nowhere left to turn.
- **DO** recognise the power you hold. Despite our best efforts, we often hold power over the people we’re supporting – whether that is based on age, race, sex, sexuality, position of authority, perceived wisdom and experience, or levels of vulnerability. This power should not be used to unduly influence people seeking help and support.

¹⁰⁰ <https://le.ac.uk/-/media/uol/docs/offices/edi/student-sex-work-toolkit-final-december-2020.pdf>

- **DO** listen to all the voices. Incongruence implies a split, and one voice may dominate. Many women who have exited the sex industry speak about how when they were in it they would say how much they wanted to do it and found it empowering, etc. It was only when they had gained some distance that they could acknowledge how harmful and damaging it had been to them. However, that pain, hurt, and torture was present during their time in the sex industry and would have been present, albeit quieter, alongside the dominant voice claiming empowerment.
- **DO** ensure the student is aware of safeguarding policies and procedures. These should be clarified at the beginning so that the student can make their own choices and enact their own power in terms of what to disclose.
- **DO** have patience. Relationship-building takes time. Building trust takes time. Building strength in that more congruent voice takes time.
- **DO** use open questions. This allows the student to open up more fully and decreases the risk of you imposing your own agenda. It's harder to lead a person when questions are open rather than closed.
- **DO** allow space for exploring the existence of trauma. We know that large numbers of individuals within the sex industry have a history of past trauma and sexual violence. This can be difficult to hear. If you're not able to offer a space to explore that, refer on to relevant services.
- **DO** help the student to take power back over their own life. Give them the resources and support they need to self-refer to other services and to guide their next steps. Being drawn into the sex industry often erodes personal agency and autonomy. People can be left feeling powerless and struggle to make decisions and choices for their own lives and struggle to trust their own judgements. Don't try to rescue and do it for them. Rather, help them reconnect to their own power.
- **DO** maintain awareness of boundaries. Sexual violence and involvement in the sex industry involve repeated boundary violations. As a result, many people are left with difficulties in recognising or managing boundaries in other aspects of their lives and are vulnerable to further boundary violations. This can sometimes mean that people may push your boundaries despite your efforts to help them. This can be frustrating (head back up to 'patience'), but it can be a way that people might test whether they can trust you in the early stages of the helping relationship.

DON'T:

- **DON'T** put pressure on students to exit the sex industry.

- **DON'T** suggest that involvement in the sex industry can be empowering or that it is a normal job.
- **DON'T** suggest the student is simply not suited to involvement in the sex industry.
- **DON'T** work from your own 'frame of reference' – which means you're not truly listening to what the person is communicating. Helping is not a political agenda. Stay with what that person is saying rather than replying from your own point of view. Don't reframe their experience to fit your perspective.
- **DON'T** ignore safeguarding procedures. Safeguarding must not be ignored because of a political agenda. The inherent risks of the sex industry must not be ignored because of a political agenda. The vulnerability of people involved in the sex industry must not be ignored because of a political agenda.
- **DON'T** aggressively challenge a person's reality, even if you're aware that they're being incongruent. Accept what a person is telling you even if you're aware that part of their experience is being silenced. If a person does not respond to gentle challenging, move on and accept their reality for that moment. You've planted a seed.

Example: Jenny, a 19-year-old student who has been involved in the sex industry for the last four months, approaches her university lecturer, Amelia, for help and support.

Jenny: I wanted to talk to you about something, but I don't want you to tell anyone else.

Amelia: Of course. It can just be between us.

[*Comment:* Amelia cannot promise total confidentiality without breaching safeguarding policies and procedures. This would have been a good moment to explain to Jenny the limits of confidentiality.]

Jenny: Thank you. OK... So, erm, I've been... I was struggling for money this year and my friend said this would be a good way to make money, and so I've been, erm...

[*Jenny's voice gets quieter and she visibly starts to shake.*] I've been online, camming and done other stuff in real life too. And I dunno, just need some help.

Amelia: OK. So, you're a sex worker. That sounds like an empowering option. What do you need help with?

[*Comment:* Amelia has used her own perspectives of the sex industry here to frame her response to Jenny. At this stage, we do not know Jenny's feelings about her own experiences. We can see that Jenny is shaking and her voice has gotten quieter. This may

be the result of shame, nerves, or trauma she may be experiencing. We do not know. If Jenny was seeking help to exit and deal with the trauma of being in the sex industry, Amelia's response would not only have been painful, but would have prevented Jenny from asking for that help. Amelia has also missed the difficulties that Jenny was experiencing financially.]

Jenny: I... I don't want to do it anymore. Some of the things I've done... [Jenny's voice breaks and she gives a nervous sounding laugh.] It's like... the choking and stuff... it's a bit scary sometimes – but it's not that bad. [Said in a more cheerful, forced voice.] I'm used to it.

Amelia: There's a website where you can track anyone dangerous and avoid them. That can help you keep safe.

[*Comment:* Here Amelia is focusing on ways in which Jenny can keep herself safe, which is a helpful thing to do. However, if Jenny's safety is a cause for concern, why hasn't Amelia safeguarded this? Jenny said that she doesn't want to be involved in the sex industry anymore but Amelia's solution involves Jenny staying in the industry with vague attempts to make it safer. Jenny has said that she's scared and has particularly mentioned "choking" (which as has been explored previously is a huge risk) and then dismissed these feelings with "it's not that bad".

There is a clear incongruence between Jenny's words and her demeanour and tone of voice. If Amelia had picked up on this, she might have noticed that it **is** actually "that bad". It might have been helpful here for Amelia to have noticed that incongruence, for example: "You say that it's not that bad but you also said that you want to stop and you're scared and mention choking specifically."

The phrase, "I'm used to it" suggests a possible history of sexual violence that has, again, been missed by Amelia. If it had been noticed and gently explored, Amelia might have been able to refer Jenny on to a suitable service for addressing this and the sense that she deserves to be sexually abused.]

Jenny: Er, yeah, I'll check it out.

Amelia: Is there anything else I can help with?

Jenny: No. I guess that's it.

[*Comment:* Amelia hasn't noticed that she missed what Jenny came about – financial difficulties, wanting to leave the sex industry and being scared. It appears Jenny has made the decision not to share any more – she may have stopped due to Amelia's response. It seems that Amelia has been clouded by her political views and has not truly

heard what Jenny said and what she communicated non-verbally. Amelia has also not fulfilled her professional obligations regarding safeguarding and student welfare.]

Amelia: Well, if you need anything else, just stop by any time. In fact, here is my number, call me whenever. It'll save you going to student services and having to tell this to anyone else.

Jenny: Thanks, I will. [With a genuine smile.]

[*Comment:* This is a clear boundary violation. As discussed earlier, those involved in the sex industry, especially those with a history of sexual violence, are vulnerable to further boundary violations. Jenny appears pleased, likely because her initial wish for confidentiality has been maintained.]

This fictionalised example shows a member of staff who is too entrenched in their own political views to truly hear what someone asking for help is really saying. This, of course, can also happen in reverse: A student who sees their experiences on the whole as positive and the member of staff pushes them to leave the sex industry.

It is always important to separate the support offered from our political motivations – regardless of where our politics lie. Otherwise, the voices of abused, marginalised and vulnerable people may be lost in the cacophony of the political sphere.

It is equally important to uphold safeguarding policies regardless of the context and how loaded it may be, and to make use of professional curiosity when we have a concern that has not been fully voiced.

Survivor voices: Dana

It is indeed important to not be judgemental towards women in the sex trade. Blaming them for their situation or inability to exit are examples of toxic judgement. But saying, “Do what’s right for you” to a woman at the bottom of the social ladder can seem more like indifference than a lack of judgement.

Many women in the sex trade suffer from poor self-esteem and low self-efficacy. They need someone to believe in them, someone who sees in them a human being. They need someone who has confidence in their ability and can offer practical advice and help. Rather than reassuring them that they are doing what is right for them, it is better to tell them that they deserve more.

Decades after I got out of prostitution, I still remember vividly someone telling me, “You deserve more”. It really shook me at the time, but it gave me the strength to get out. I have no respect for those who said it was my “right” to sell sex and that it is just a “business”. They know very well that sucking a dick to pay the bills is not something they want to do or see their children doing.

SUPPORTING STUDENTS WHO WANT TO KICK A PORN OR SEX BUYING HABIT

It is now widely recognised that problematic porn consumption is widespread, especially among young men, and that it is detrimental to mental and physical health and is associated with sexual offending.¹⁰¹ Buying sex is similarly associated with a propensity for sexual offending.¹⁰² It follows that any attempts to reduce sexual offending and harassment on campus are likely to have limited success without addressing porn consumption and sex buying.

Problematic porn consumption is recognised by the World Health Organisation as a compulsive sexual behaviour disorder and research has correlated it with addiction-related brain changes.¹⁰³ Many people find that they cannot control their pornography use even when they’re aware that it is negatively affecting their relationships, work, and behaviour and is causing sexual problems. There are also concerns that the rise in suicides of young men that we are currently witnessing might be connected to problematic porn consumption.

All students need to be aware that non-judgemental help for this is available. Unfortunately, that is not always the case, as reported in a recent article in *The Guardian*:

“James tried to get help at university, when using pornography to ease the pressure of deadlines only further stole his time, harming his studies. He found a relationship counsellor. ‘I was gearing up to talk about my porn addiction for the

¹⁰¹ <https://link.springer.com/epdf/10.1007/s40429-021-00390-8>

¹⁰² <http://prostitutionresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Comparing-Sex-Buyers-With-Men-Who-Do-Not-Buy-Sex.pdf>

¹⁰³ <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapsychiatry/fullarticle/1874574>

first time ever, and I was really nervous, and the woman was like: 'Why don't you just stop watching it?' She was so dismissive. ''¹⁰⁴

Universities should therefore:

- Ensure that student welfare and relationship counsellors are trained in working with students struggling to reduce or stop porn consumption and sex buying.
- Support the development of therapeutic groups and peer-on-peer initiatives for students struggling with these issues.
- Ensure that these services are widely publicised.
- Consider lobbying the government to introduce age-verification on online porn as a preventive measure that would reduce the numbers of students arriving at university with problematic porn consumption with all its associated difficulties and impacts on the community.

Some of the more general recommendations listed previously also apply to supporting students with problematic porn and sex-buying behaviour.

¹⁰⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2021/sep/06/sex-isnt-difficult-any-more-the-men-who-are-quitting-watching-porn>

7. COMBATTING SEXISM & SUPPORTING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

In recognition of universities' duty of care, Universities UK set up a task force in 2015 to address the prevalence of sexual harassment and violence on university campuses along with other forms of harassment and hate crime. Its recent report found that universities need to have a **robust prevention strategy** and that more progress has been made in institutions that have strong support from senior leadership. The report acknowledges that changing a culture that is accepting of sexism and other ingrained negative behaviours requires widespread attitude change, and that this is necessarily a long-term process. It recommends programmes, including consent education, for bringing about such change and emphasises that these need to involve more than single one-off sessions. It also found that online programmes are generally ineffective.¹⁰⁵

Although the report acknowledges concerns that children are learning about sex and relationships from online pornography, there are no recommendations about how to address this. The evidence is unequivocal that porn consumption is associated with attitudes that underlie verbal and physical sexual aggression against women, including rape and sexual harassment and assault.¹⁰⁶ Research into men who buy sex has found similar results.¹⁰⁷

As porn consumption is recognised to be widespread among young men, it would seem that any efforts to bring about positive change on university campuses in respect to sexist attitudes and behaviour are doomed to failure unless programmes directly address the sex industry and porn consumption.

WHY SEX EDUCATION MUST ADDRESS THE SEX INDUSTRY

The sex industry is a global capitalist industry that commodifies human beings for other people's sexual and ego gratification. It has infiltrated mainstream culture on a grand scale and is sold to the public, and young people in particular, as glamorous and

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2021-07/changing-the-culture.pdf>

¹⁰⁶ <https://link.springer.com/epdf/10.1007/s40429-021-00390-8>

¹⁰⁷ <http://prostitutionresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Comparing-Sex-Buyers-With-Men-Who-Do-Not-Buy-Sex.pdf> <http://i4.cmsfiles.com/eaves/2012/04/MenWhoBuySex-89396b.pdf>

empowering – but this is an illusion. As this handbook has set out, it is intrinsically sexist, racist, exploitative, and fraught with danger. Most of the profits go to the pimps and the individuals behind the brothels and the technology companies that enable the advertising, chatroom, and porn sites, most of whom use extreme business models that make Amazon’s look philanthropic in comparison.¹⁰⁸

The sex industry, including online porn, continually produces, reproduces, and reinforces sexist attitudes and behaviour. Women are portrayed as objects to be used and abused in every way possible and not as whole, complex human beings. Just as in other areas of the sex industry, in porn, women often cover up negative feelings and simulate pleasure. Consumers are trained like Pavlov’s dog to get off on this and to believe that women enjoy it and do not have the right to set their own boundaries or to complain at mistreatment. They are taught to see women’s only value as shoring up men’s egos, being used for sex, and cleaning up after men in any and every way.

It is unreasonable to expect young people to navigate this reality safely without guidance or education. Such education must be approached sensitively because porn consumption and acceptance of the “sex work is real work” myths are widespread among young people, having been thrust upon them without their consent while they were still children.

There is evidence that young people are calling out for leadership, education and guidance on these issues. A recent survey of 1,000 UK students found that more than a third said they’d “learned more about sex from pornography than from formal education” and **a majority wanted universities to provide compulsory sexual consent education.**¹⁰⁹

Sexist and misogynistic attitudes are deeply ingrained in our society and in spite of evidence of the catastrophic consequences of this for women and girls, there is a lack of political will to address these attitudes with anything more than small ineffective gestures.¹¹⁰ Universities are perfectly placed to challenge and change these norms.

¹⁰⁸ https://cease.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/210607_CEASE_Expose_Big_Porn_Report.pdf

¹⁰⁹ <https://news.sky.com/story/most-students-want-compulsory-sexual-consent-test-before-starting-university-think-tank-finds-12289612>

¹¹⁰ <https://web.archive.org/web/20211002185751/https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/969545c4-22f0-11ec-a1fd-37d9030e4d65?shareToken=b3d045cbb268b3f9fe829b949a101950>

FEMINIST RESISTANCE TO THE SEX INDUSTRY

In the 1970s, the women's liberation movement in the UK and US began to develop a sophisticated critique of pornography as it became increasingly visible and mainstream. For example, in 1974 Robin Morgan famously said:

*"Pornography is the theory and rape is the practice."*¹¹¹

Susan Brownmiller developed this theme in her ground-breaking 1975 book on rape. For example, she said:

*"There can be no equality in porn, no female equivalent, no turning of the tables in the name of bawdy fun. Pornography, like rape, is a male invention, designed to dehumanize women... Pornography is the undiluted essence of anti-female propaganda."*¹¹²

Andrea Dworkin published her searing work, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, in 1981. In it she explained that pornography is not only propaganda: the violence and degradation is real – real for the women directly involved and real for the women it is subsequently acted out upon.

Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon developed an Anti-Pornography Civil Rights Ordinance that defined pornography as sex discrimination and allowed those harmed in and through it to sue for civil damages. It was passed by Minneapolis City Council in 1983 and several other municipalities, but higher courts overturned it as unconstitutional.¹¹³

Sadly, but perhaps predictably when you consider who stands to gain from a thriving porn industry and the subordination of women, it wasn't long before there was a bitter backlash. Some self-described feminists cooperated with the pornographers in organising a campaign to defeat the Ordinance and to mock and discredit the feminist critique on which it was based. This shattered the early feminist consensus on pornography and ultimately led to the pro-sex industry narratives that now dominate academia, liberal feminism, and popular culture; narratives that are epitomised by notions that "sex work is real work" and that porn and prostitution can be empowering for women.

¹¹¹ Robin Morgan, "Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape," in *The Word of a Woman: Feminist Dispatches 1968-1992*. W.W. Norton, 1992.

¹¹² Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*. Simon and Schuster, 1975

¹¹³ <http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/dworkin/other/ordinance/newday/TOC.htm>

Feminist scholar Rebecca Whisnant uses the philosophical idea of ‘adaptive preferences’ to explain how these narratives became accepted by so many women:

“The basic idea is simple: if I can’t have something (or think I can’t have it), then it behooves me not to want that thing. Conversely, if I’m going to get something whether I like it or not, then I’ll be happier if I can get myself to want it and like it. So people adapt their desires to fit their situations, rather than vice versa, thus minimizing the pain and cognitive dissonance of continuing to want something that they don’t think they can get: ‘if you can’t have what you want,’ as the saying goes, ‘then want what you have.’”¹¹⁴

Whisnant quotes a feminist blogger who calls this approach ‘fuck-me’ feminism and describes it as:

“a school of thought that suggests [women] are empowered by reclaiming and controlling our own sexual objectification, by reclaiming the power of pornography and the sex industry for ourselves, and by flaunting our desire and willingness to have sex. In other words, being a man’s sexual object can’t hurt me if I want to be objectified; pornography and the sex industry can’t degrade me if I enjoy it or if I profit from it; being used for sex can’t devalue me if I’m using him too; being regarded as nothing more than a pussy to fuck can’t dehumanize me if I want him to fuck my pussy.”¹¹⁵

While this is understandable, these narratives do not serve young people well.

There is now a significant body of peer-reviewed academic research that shows that Dworkin and the other feminists of the late 1970s were right: porn use is associated with sexual misconduct and violence. It is also detrimental to the consumer. The online porn industry uses algorithms to drive escalation to more violent material, causing high levels of sexual dysfunction and creating appetites for ever more extreme content, including child sexual abuse material.¹¹⁶

Universities have a responsibility to equip young people with the tools to critique and resist the pornographers and sex industry profiteers, to understand the myriad dangers of involvement in the sex industry, and to connect to more human values.

¹¹⁴ <https://www.feministes-radicales.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Rebecca-Whisnant-Contemporary-feminism-in-a-porn-culture.pdf>

¹¹⁵ <https://www.feministes-radicales.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Rebecca-Whisnant-Contemporary-feminism-in-a-porn-culture.pdf>

¹¹⁶ <https://link.springer.com/epdf/10.1007/s40429-021-00390-8>

WHAT EVERYONE NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT PORN

In December 2020, Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, Nicholas Kristof, wrote in the *New York Times*:

“[Pornhub] is infested with rape videos. It monetizes child rapes, revenge pornography, spy cam videos of women showering, racist and misogynist content, and footage of women being asphyxiated in plastic bags. A search for “girls under18” (no space) or “14yo” leads in each case to more than 100,000 videos. Most aren’t of children being assaulted, but too many are.”¹¹⁷

The article caused such a furore that within days Pornhub removed 10 million unverified videos. Not long after, Visa and Mastercard rethought their relationship with MindGeek, Pornhub’s parent company, and have stopped providing payment services to the site.¹¹⁸ A number of women and girls are now bringing lawsuits against the company for profiting from their rape and human trafficking.¹¹⁹

This tells us that Pornhub in particular, but most likely the other big porn companies too, don’t give a second thought to your wellbeing. If they’re happy to profit from rape and child abuse, they certainly aren’t going to spare a thought for your sex life and mental health other than how to squeeze the maximum profit from you, no matter the cost. And that is exactly what they do.

They deliberately use algorithms to manipulate you, to get you hooked, and to drive you to seek out ever more extreme forms of porn. You may have noticed this – that what satisfied you last month now leaves you cold. A recent study by Mary Sharpe and Darryl Mead describes how it works:

“AI algorithms can drive consumers in either of two directions. On the one hand, they teach viewers’ brains, unconsciously, to crave stronger, more violent imagery. On the other hand, they drive consumers towards a focus on sexual activities with younger people. Thus, we have escalation to violent behaviour and/or towards the consumption of child sexual abuse material. People with PPU [problematic pornography use] have developed brain changes that increase

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<https://web.archive.org/web/20210930214227/https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/04/opinion/sunday/pornhub-rape-trafficking.html>

¹¹⁸ <https://www.movieguide.org/news-articles/pornhub-removes-10-million-plus-videos-after-scathing-nyt-rebuke.html>

¹¹⁹ <https://www.businessinsider.com/pornhub-mindgeek-sued-by-34-women-alleged-trafficking-videos-2021-6>

cravings for more stimulating, perhaps high-risk material and a diminished capacity to inhibit their use of it.”¹²⁰

Over time, heavy porn use can affect the brain and impair decision-making abilities, reduce the ability to curb impulsive behaviour, and increase the likelihood of aggressive and violent behaviour. It can even lead towards actual criminal behaviour. This does not make you popular or make it easy to develop meaningful relationships. It can lead to isolation and even suicide. Heavy porn use can also cause physical health problems, such as erectile dysfunction, delayed ejaculation, and anorgasmia.

The good news is that Sharpe and Mead say that:

*“Male users report that when they quit pornography and their brains eventually resensitise or heal, their compassion for women returns. At the same time, many mental health issues like social anxiety and depression, and physical health problems such as sexual dysfunction, reduce or disappear.”*¹²¹

Don’t be afraid to seek out help to kick a porn habit. This is a problem affecting large numbers of people. Help is available.

Another thing to understand is that porn is not fantasy. As Andrea Dworkin explained, it is all too real for those involved in its making and it is all too real for those on whom it is acted out. Professionally made porn in particular uses many techniques, including camera angles and editing, to hide some of the unpleasant realities, such as friction burns, bruising, and other injuries. Similarly advance preparation is not shown, such as the fasting and enemas that might precede anal penetration and the use of oral anaesthetic sprays that might precede ‘deepthroat’ to inhibit the gag reflex, for example.

The unrestrained capitalist drive for ever more extreme, violent and misogynistic content has popularised many practices that are uncomfortable and even dangerous, particularly for women, not least because of their smaller average physical size and strength relative to men. For example, fisting, when practiced by a man on a woman, can result in serious injuries including a damaged or broken pelvis. Inserting sharp objects into the vagina or rectum is dangerous and can be fatal if a nearby artery is severed.

‘Deepthroat’, especially when performed on a woman whose head is hanging over the side of a bed (a position popularised by porn), can lead to spinal injuries or a broken neck.

¹²⁰ <https://link.springer.com/epdf/10.1007/s40429-021-00390-8>

¹²¹ <https://link.springer.com/epdf/10.1007/s40429-021-00390-8>

‘Breath play’ (restricting the oxygen reaching the brain) and choking (strangulation) are always extremely dangerous¹²² and yet it is almost de rigueur in porn. Even Cosmopolitan warns against it:

*“Breath play as you may have seen it done in movies or porn with choking is really not something to be taken casually. ‘Some kinksters (myself included) who enjoy light breath play will not consider stronger forms because of the very real dangers involved,’ Lords says. ‘I cannot stress enough how dangerous this form of play can be and should never be done lightly.’”*¹²³

Brain damage from reduced oxygen flow and build-up of carbon dioxide can occur rapidly. Using devices (such as masks, belts, or gags) increases the likelihood of injury and even death. This is of particular relevance to students, because brain injury before the brain is fully developed (at around age 25-30) can be more devastating than brain injuries later in life, because it interrupts the normal neurological development.¹²⁴

The risks of something going catastrophically wrong when engaging in such practices are further increased when some recreational drugs (including cocaine) are used – by anaesthetising you to the levels of harm being inflicted and/or by impeding men’s ejaculation and driving them to more extreme acts in an attempt to resolve this.

There have been many cases recently of women dying during sex that involved strangulation and other violent practices.¹²⁵ Men (it’s always been men) who are charged with murder in such circumstances often claim that it was ‘rough sex’ that went wrong or that she wanted it. Even though under English law, it is not possible to legally consent to being physically harmed, many men have got off lightly using this defence – which is an indication of the deep sexism in the legal system. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 (England and Wales) has now outlawed this defence. It remains to be seen how this will work out in practice.

Students must be encouraged to think through the issues around the more dangerous sexual practices that porn has popularised and to understand the risks and how to mitigate them. Just because someone consents to sex, does not mean that they consent to being choked or anally penetrated. Consent is only valid if it is informed and can be

¹²² <https://psyarxiv.com/c6zbv/>

¹²³ <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/a29074659/breath-play-bdsm/>

¹²⁴ <https://www.lawscot.org.uk/news-and-events/legal-news/brain-not-fully-developed-until-age-25-research-reveals/>

¹²⁵ <https://wecantconsenttothis.uk/>

withdrawn at any point – but how can you know that she wants to stop if she is gagged or bound?

You need to be closely attentive to your partner and to talk honestly. How sad it would be if you are both driven by the expectations that porn has given you when that's not what either of you actually want.

Survivor voices: Esther

As a prostitute and in the several years of involvement with BDSM that led up to my entry into the sex trade, I experienced almost every practice inflicted by the CIA at Guantanamo and elsewhere. Men paid me to be a crash test dummy so that they could claim superior knowledge of “modern sexual practices” when seeking to inflict similar punishment on their female partners.

TOWARDS A MORE HUMAN SEXUALITY

So how do we resist Big Porn culture? Are we suggesting a return to abstinence and no sex outside marriage? Definitely not.

We are suggesting that handing our sexuality, that most intimate and core part of our humanness, to the pimps and pornographers is no more the answer than handing our health over to the fast-food companies or the well-being of our planet over to the big mining and oil companies.

As Rebecca Whisnant says:

“[T]he cultural products of mega-corporations are much more like advertising than they are like art. When powerful and profit-hungry entities go hunting for market share at any cost, what those entities will produce and sell is whatever gets the most people in the gut the fastest and makes them want more of that now. This will never be equality. It will never be complexity. It will never be anything thoughtful or meaningful or reflective. Not ever.”¹²⁶

Robert Jensen draws comparisons between pornography and the wars waged by the United States. He draws attention to the fact that American servicemen watch porn (the normal ultra-violent porn that Pornhub and similar serve up to us all, including

¹²⁶ <https://www.feministes-radicales.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Rebecca-Whisnant-Contemporary-feminism-in-a-porn-culture.pdf>

schoolkids) to psych themselves up before attacks and bombing raids. Contemporary mass-marketed porn and modern warfare both require cruelty and contempt. Jensen refuses to accept that porn is about sexual freedom any more than that the US goes to war for freedom. He argues that porn eroticises domination and subordination and works to maintain the second-class social status of women and that America's wars are about maintaining and extending its dominance and relative affluence.¹²⁷

He calls for a more human sexuality and argues this would be in all our interests:

"The costs of pornography and the wars of empire are borne mainly by those in the subordinated position. But there is a cost to those of us in the dominant position, not on the same scale, but a cost all the same.

When men make the choice to acquire sexual pleasure through blow bangs, we forgo part of our humanity. When Americans make the choice to protect our affluence through cluster bombs, we forgo part of our humanity. [...]

I do believe that sexuality can be about more than pleasure. It can be about finding pleasure and intimacy through connection. I use the metaphor of heat and light. There is a cliché that when an argument is of little value, it produces more heat than light. One of the ways this culture talks about sex is in terms of heat: She's hot; he's hot; we had hot sex. Sex is bump and grind; heat makes the sex good.

But what if our embodied connections could be less about heat and more about light? What if instead of desperately seeking hot sex, we searched for a way to produce light when we touch? What if such touch were about finding a way to create light between people so that we could see ourselves and each other better? If the goal is knowing ourselves and each other like that, then what we need is not heat but light to illuminate the path. How do we touch and talk to each other to shine that light? [...]

*So here's my pitch to men: Even if we have no concern for anyone else, the short-term physical pleasure we gain through pornography is going to cost us something: we lose opportunities for something more. Heat is gained, but light is lost. "*¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Jensen, R 'Blow bangs and cluster bombs: The cruelty of men and Americans', in Stark, C and Whisnant, R (ed.) *Not For Sale – Feminists Resisting Prostitution and Pornography*. Spinifex, 2004.

¹²⁸ Jensen, R 'Blow bangs and cluster bombs: The cruelty of men and Americans', in Stark, C and Whisnant, R (ed.) *Not For Sale – Feminists Resisting Prostitution and Pornography*. Spinifex, 2004.

CONSENT EDUCATION

Much consent education – including for example, the NUS ‘I Heart Consent’ programme – is based on the legal definitions of consent, rape and sexual assault.¹²⁹ While this is a start, it does little to explore the deeper issues and challenge ingrained sexist attitudes and the porn-induced reality.

Some questions that might provoke discussion and deeper reflection:

- Why does society put such a high value on consent with regard to sex – compared to, say, sharing food?
- What does healthy consensual sex look like?
- The definition of consent in English law is: “a person consents if he agrees by choice, and has the freedom and capacity to make that choice.” What does freedom and capacity mean in this context? What does it look like?
- What might a lack of freedom and capacity look like in practice?
- Can freedom and capacity be present if one person is significantly older, more experienced, or powerful than the other? If not, why not?
- What if saying no is likely to have negative consequences? For example, suppose it’s late at night and she’s away from home and has no transport, or she’s alone with someone who scares her and is much larger and stronger than she is. Trying to escape is not a realistic option. She fears what he’ll do if she says no. Or maybe she’s so afraid, she freezes. Is there any real freedom to make a choice in such circumstances?
- A common trope in mainstream porn is a man pressuring a woman for sex. Initially she is reluctant but he persists and eventually she relents, and it ends with her appearing to enjoy it. This reinforces many rape myths and suggests that her ‘no’ does not really mean ‘no’. Does this undermine the meaning of consent? If so, how?
- Is pressuring someone relentlessly until they give in acceptable?
- What about when the parties have a different understanding of what the sex means? For example, if one understands it to be part of a committed relationship but the other just wants to clock up another conquest to impress their friends.

¹²⁹ <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/liberation/women-students/lad-culture/i-heart-consent>

- What if one party dishonestly claims to love the other because he thinks it will make her consent?
- What if a university lecturer or manager in a job (overtly or implicitly) offers a higher grade, a promotion, or some other benefit in return for sex?
- What if a man offers his spare room to a hard-up woman on the basis that she has sex with him at his request?
- Does the woman in such situations have freedom to turn down sex? What if she has no money and nowhere else to go?
- What if a man offers to pay a woman for sex?
- If she is dependent on that money for the basics, such as her rent and children's food and shoes, what does that mean for her freedom to make a choice?
- What if she uses the money to fund a drug habit? Does she really want the sex or is it just about her next fix?
- What impact might having sex under such circumstances have on your understanding of consent?
- Might it make you more likely to ignore the other person's signals and so make you less responsive to sexual partners' cues in the future? Does this matter? Why?
- What does this tell us about buying sexual services?
- If you are paying her so that you can penetrate her, are you really paying for a service? Would it not be more accurate to say that you are paying to use her?
- What about material on porn sites that involves children or adult women who are made to appear younger – by wearing school uniform etc. – or that involves pain, strangulation, and similar?
- Why does society outlaw sexual relationships with children?
- Does consent to sex imply you have consent to choke or throttle them?
- Does consent to kissing imply you have consent to choke or throttle them?
- Does consent to sex imply you have consent to slap them or pull their hair?
- Does consent to sex imply you have consent to insert objects into their vagina or anus?

- Does consent to a dildo imply consent for something large, sharp, or angular and not designed for that purpose?
- How should you respond if your partner asks you to strangle them (or insert sharp objects into her vagina) for erotic reasons? Do they understand the risks involved? Do you? Do you understand how women have been socialised and groomed to want to please? Might she perhaps be asking for this because she thinks you want it? How do you start a conversation about this?
- How would you respond if someone asked you to help them commit suicide? Given the risks of strangulation, how is asking to be choked (i.e. strangled) different?
- Under English law, it is not possible to legally consent to being physically harmed – even if you get sexual pleasure from that. Why do you think this is? What does this mean for BDSM activities?
- What does this mean if your partner asks you to do something dangerous?
- How can you ensure that both partners can withdraw consent at any moment when engaged in BDSM activities? Is a safe word sufficient if they are unable to speak due to a hood, gag, or similar? Is a safe gesture sufficient if they are bound?
- Is the whole concept of consent misleading in that it suggests that consent is given once at the start and everything after that is agreed?
- Does the concept of consent suggest that sex is something done by one person to another, rather than a mutual experience in which each person is attentive to the verbal and nonverbal signals of the other and responds to them?
- Could there be a better way of framing the conversation about ensuring your sexual partner is willing and you are both on the same page?

READING LIST

- *Pornland: How porn has hijacked our sexuality* by Gail Dines. Beacon Press, 2010.
- *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* by Andrea Dworkin. Putnam, 1981.
- *Your Brain on Porn: Internet Pornography and the Emerging Science of Addiction* by Gary Wilson. Commonwealth Publishing, 2014.
- *Not For Sale – Feminists Resisting Prostitution and Pornography* edited by Christine Stark and Rebecca Whisnant. Spinifex, 2004.
- *Getting off: pornography and the end of masculinity* by Robert Jensen. South End Press, 2007.
- *The Sex Economy* by Monica O'Connor. Agenda Publishing, 2019.

- *Pimp State: Sex, money and the future of equality* by Kat Banyard. Faber & Faber, 2016.
- *Paid for: My journey through prostitution* by Rachel Moran. Norton & Co, 2015.
- *Being and Being Bought* by Kajsa Ekis Ekman. Spinifex, 2013.
- *The Macho Paradox: Why some men hurt women and how all men can help* by Jackson Katz. Sourcebooks, 2019.
- *The Sexual Contract* by Carole Pateman. Polity Press, 1988.
- *Trauma and Recovery* by Judith Lewis Herman. Pandora, 1992.

WEBSITES

- Men at Work CIC – For men and boys and those who work with them: <https://menatworkcic.org>
- Reward Foundation: <https://rewardfoundation.org>
- Nordic Model Now! <https://nordicmodelnow.org>
- Culture Reframed: <https://www.culturereframed.org>
- Collective Shout: <https://www.collectiveshout.org>
- A Model for Scotland: <https://www.amodelforscotland.org>

8. LEGAL MATTERS

THE PUBLIC SECTOR EQUALITY DUTY (PSED)

Prior to the year 2000, equality legislation in the UK did not require public bodies to take a proactive approach to equality issues. The legislation only gave individual complainants the right to seek redress **after** receiving discriminatory treatment.

This changed after the public inquiry that followed the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993 found that “institutional racism” was a key factor in the failures of the police response to the murder. This public recognition of entrenched and invidious forms of discrimination galvanised popular support for proactive institutional change and led to the introduction of an equality duty to the Race Relations Act, and subsequently to the sex and disability discrimination acts.

The Equality Act 2010 rolled the discrimination legislation into one act and defined nine protected characteristics: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, and pregnancy and maternity. It also extended the new equality duties, now called the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED), to cover all nine protected characteristics and applied it to most public bodies, including further and higher education institutions.

Of particular relevance to the sex industry is the protected characteristic of sex – which protects against discrimination on the grounds of being female or male. However, some of the other protected characteristics are also relevant because young, disabled, and LGBT+ people, and people from minority ethnic groups are also disproportionately vulnerable to being drawn into the sex industry and harmed within it.

The Government Equalities Office (GEO) Quick Start Guide¹³⁰ summarises the key features of the PSED like this:

“The PSED requires public bodies to have due regard to the need to:

- *Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by the Act;*

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/85041/equality-duty.pdf

- *Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it; and*
- *Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it.*

Having due regard means consciously thinking about the three aims of the Equality Duty as part of the process of decision-making. This means that consideration of equality issues must influence the decisions reached by public bodies...

Later, the guide says:

“The weight given to the Equality Duty, compared to the other factors, will depend on how much that function affects discrimination, equality of opportunity and good relations and the extent of any disadvantage that needs to be addressed.”

This handbook provides extensive evidence that the sex industry is profoundly gendered and causes great harm to the individuals caught up in it (most of whom have the protected characteristics of being of the female sex, and/or young, disabled, LGBT+, or from minority ethnic groups) and that it has a corrosive impact on the general relationship between the sexes and on initiatives and work to improve it. There is no doubt therefore that significant weight must be given to the PSED when developing, reviewing, and assessing any policy relating to the sex industry.

It’s not enough to simply develop a policy about supporting students who are already involved in the sex industry without considering the impact on other students and the wider community as the University of Leicester did.¹³¹ To conform with the spirit and letter of the PSED, it’s necessary to consider unintended and inadvertent impacts to other protected groups within the university and the wider community and to ask the right questions.

When considering a policy relating to the sex industry, for example, you might want to ask:

- Does the policy provide a sanitised view of the sex industry without a realistic discussion of the harms, risks and dangers that it involves?

¹³¹ <https://nordicmodelnow.org/2021/06/23/does-the-leicester-student-sex-work-toolkit-comply-with-equality-legislation/>

- Could the policy be interpreted as the university sanctioning student involvement in the sex industry?
- If the answer to either of these questions is yes, could this lead to students who are not already involved in the sex industry considering becoming involved in it?
- If so, is that likely to lead to those students being harmed and disadvantaged in either the short or long term?
- Is it likely that those students would have protected characteristics that have suffered historical and material disadvantages that the university has a legal obligation to work to reduce?
- Is it possible that male staff and students in particular could interpret the policy as the university sanctioning buying sexual services and so lead to them starting or increasing their consumption of sexual services?
- If so, is this likely to increase or worsen ‘rape culture’ attitudes and confuse male staff and students’ understanding of consent?
- Is this likely to worsen the general relationship between the sexes, make sexual harassment and sexual misconduct more likely, and therefore increase sex discrimination?
- Might this put girls and young women (in particular) in the local community at greater risk of being harassed or worse – for example, when travelling on public transport or waiting for a bus at night?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, the policy would fail to meet the three key planks of the PSED and should be returned to the drawing board. Similar questions need to be asked at all stages of the life of the policy, including during any subsequent review and assessment.

Unfortunately, the only mechanism for enforcing the PSED is judicial review, which is expensive for individuals to bring and is not covered by legal aid. However, we hope that universities would want to comply not just with the letter of the PSED but with its spirit too and would see doing this as best practice and as a selling point to current and potential students, their parents and schools.

If the university were to be faced with a sex discrimination suit, being able to show that they have thoroughly fulfilled their obligations under the PSED when developing relevant policies, would help to show that they take discrimination seriously and are doing all they can to challenge rape culture and sex discrimination.

This is of particular relevance at this time when sexual harassment and sexual violence are at an all-time high on university campuses and there is considerable dissatisfaction with the way that many universities are dealing with this problem.¹³² A well-thought-through policy for supporting students who have been impacted by the sex industry would be a significant contribution to work to change sexist cultures on campus.

SEX INDUSTRY LEGISLATION IN THE UK

Prostitution is legal in England, Wales, and Scotland, although many of the activities surrounding it are criminal offences. Selling sexual services is legal in Northern Ireland, but buying them is an offence.

This section briefly summarises the key offences related to the sale and purchase of sexual services and other potential legal sanctions in England and Wales. The law in Scotland is similar but the legislation is separate and there are key differences.

THE LAW IN ENGLAND AND WALES

With the exception of rape (which can only be committed by a male), all laws that relate to sexual behaviour and the buying and selling of sexual services apply to everyone regardless of sex or gender. Most of the sex-industry-related offences that are covered by legislation in England and Wales relate to ‘full service’ or in-person prostitution. Most of the other activities – such as lap dancing, stripping, webcamming, and advertising online – are legal, although sexual entertainment venues are subject to local licensing regulations. There are laws against ‘extreme’ pornography, but they do not apply to webcamming and are not covered here.

Police enforcement varies widely from area to area. However, national guidelines suggest the police should focus on “organised crime” and those who “exploit or cause harm” to those involved.¹³³ The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) data shows very low levels of prosecutions for most prostitution-related crime, relative to the size of the industry in the UK.¹³⁴ However, shamefully, police are known to undertake brothel raids – sometimes under the guise of ‘welfare checks’ – and arrest women for immigration offences, which would not show up under the CPS prostitution data.

The offences can be roughly categorised as follows. In practice, maximum sentences are rarely handed down for a first offence.

¹³² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-57174251>

¹³³ <https://library.college.police.uk/docs/appref/Sex-Work-and-Prostitution-Guidance-Jan-2019.pdf>

¹³⁴ <https://www.cps.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/publications/cps-vawg-report-2019.pdf>

On street prostitution – It is an offence to persistently loiter or solicit in a public place for the purpose of selling sexual services. The penalty on conviction is a fine or an ‘engagement and support order’ that requires you to attend meetings with a support worker. Other offences, such as highway obstruction or disorderly behaviour, are sometimes used against women involved in street prostitution, along with a variety of orders for ‘anti-social behaviour’.

It is also an offence to solicit to buy sex in a public place – whether on foot or in a car – and there is no requirement for persistence to be shown. This is usually known as kerb crawling and the maximum sentence is a fine.

Brothel keeping – It is legal to sell sex or to work as a maid in a brothel, but it is an offence to keep, manage or act or assist in the management of a brothel. The maximum sentence is up to seven years in prison.

A property is considered a brothel under the law if it is used by more than one person for the purpose of selling sexual services, even if they never do so at the same time. This means that technically if two women who share a flat both sell sex at the flat, one or both of them could potentially be charged with a brothel keeping offence.

Maids can also be charged with assisting in the management of a brothel, particularly if they have any element of control, if they have authority to negotiate prices and ‘services’, for example, or if they perform tasks like taking money and recording it in a cash book or arranging advertising or recruitment. They could potentially also be charged under the Modern Slavery Act 2015 if any of the women involved in prostitution in the brothel are trafficked.

CPS guidelines recommend focusing on the prosecution of those who control others in prostitution and make a living from their prostitution rather than those who have minor involvement.¹³⁵

Pimping – Offences for pimping include causing or inciting prostitution for gain and controlling prostitution for gain. The maximum sentence is seven years in prison.

Buying sex – Generally, paying for sexual services is legal. However, it is an offence to pay or attempt to pay for sex with a person who has been subjected to force, coercion or deception – regardless of whether you are aware of this or not. The maximum sentence is a fine.

¹³⁵ <https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/prostitution-and-exploitation-prostitution>

Paying for sex with someone under the age of 18 is considered a very serious offence, and the maximum sentence is 14 years in prison.

For a more detailed overview of the legislation in England and Wales, see the ‘*Sex Workers and the Law Booklet*’ from Release.¹³⁶ This covers the offences in more detail, along with other offences that you might be caught under, and tips for dealing with the police, getting legal help, etc.

INTERNATIONAL OBLIGATIONS

International law recognises prostitution as violence against women and girls. The 1949 UN Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others states that prostitution is incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person and that it endangers the welfare of the individual, the family and the community.¹³⁷

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) implicitly recognises prostitution as a violation of human rights and explicitly prohibits third parties from exploiting (i.e. profiting from) another person’s prostitution.¹³⁸ As a result, the UK has a direct, binding obligation to oppose any trivialisation of prostitution and to work towards the elimination of its exploitation, including pimping, procuring, and brothel keeping.¹³⁹

Article 9 of the Palermo Trafficking Protocol places a binding obligation on ratifying states to take measures to “alleviate the factors that make persons, especially women and children, vulnerable to trafficking” and to “discourage the demand that fosters all forms of exploitation of persons, especially women and children, that leads to trafficking”.¹⁴⁰

This means that the UK also has an obligation under international human trafficking treaties to reduce both the poverty and inequality that make people, especially women and girls, vulnerable to being trafficked and the demand for prostitution that drives human trafficking. Reducing the demand is imperative because otherwise the number of women voluntarily getting into the sex trade is inevitably insufficient to meet the demand and human traffickers step in to fill the gap by coercing or taking advantage of vulnerable young people.

¹³⁶ <https://www.release.org.uk/publications/sex-workers-and-law-booklet>

¹³⁷ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/traffickingpersons.aspx>

¹³⁸ <https://nordicmodelnow.org/facts-about-prostitution/fact-cedaw-requires-countries-to-fight-pimping/>

¹³⁹ <http://www.cap-international.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/ProstitutionUnderIntlHumanRightsLawEN.pdf>

¹⁴⁰ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/protocoltraffickingpersons.aspx>

9. THE LAST WORD

Survivor voices: Andrea Heinz

Andrea Heinz had \$60,000 of debt at the age of 22. She says, “I was struggling really bad. I wanted to go to university and naively saw escorting and massage as a way to clear my debts and pay my tuition”. These are her reflections nearly a decade after exiting the commercial sex trade in Canada.

What was said to me:

“Sex work is work”

“It’s a job like any other”

What happened:

The first man I saw forced sex acts on me that I wasn’t comfortable with.

Most of the men were married with children and were two, if not three (or four) times my age.

Men were repulsively unhygienic – refusing to shower beforehand, wanting to finger me with long dirty nails, breathing rancid breath two inches from my face as the smell of their body odour filled the room.

Men would arrive with skin tags, warts, ringworm, oozing sores, and other unknown rashes or bumps. They’d try to conceal it with dim lighting or excuse it away as “irritation from shaving”.

Men would try to secretly remove condoms; they were always trying to remove condoms. There was also no shortage of men pressuring me for a blowjob without a condom. That happened near daily.

Men would film me and photograph me without my consent. They’d hide their cell phones on record, or come wearing hidden camera items such as watches, or eyeglasses.

Men would choke me regularly. A couple times I thought I was about to black out and lose consciousness.

Men would make sexual references to children, asking me how old I was when I lost my virginity, and if I bled or cried when it happened. “You’re a good girl” was said to me countless times, and a schoolgirl outfit with pigtails was always the top request.

Men would make sexual references to animals and request urine/faecal play.

The dehumanizing and demeaning remarks were so hard on my spirit. I had to learn to dissociate and mentally leave my body each time my clothes would come off. Many nights I would cry in my bed before falling asleep.

Men became obsessed with me and would call and text me incessantly. One man followed me home from the brothel, shouted my alias name in the middle of my street at 2 a.m. and left love notes in my mailbox.

I got banned from America for ten years and labelled a “prostitute” for travelling there with a man who booked me for a weekend. Nothing happened to him.

The women I sold sex alongside were not happy or “empowered”. They were like robots operating on autopilot. Few had good support from friends and family. Very few had stable partners. All of them were in debt, most had no viable skills or education; many had addictions and/or untreated mental health issues.

I sold sex alongside a trafficking victim and women who were controlled by pimps.

I (unknowingly) sold sex alongside a 16-year-old girl even though the brothel was licensed and regulated by my city for “harm reduction”.

A woman I sold sex alongside was strangled to death and dumped in a farmer’s field. She was a single mom to a seven-year-old boy.

I witnessed women break down crying saying that it felt like being molested, like being raped in exchange for a few hundred bucks.

Relationships with my friends and family became extremely strained.

I became suicidal in the moments I wasn’t emotionally numb. I came close to ending my life on more than one occasion.

I spent two years desperately trying to exit before I was finally able to at age 29.

I ended up diagnosed with “Unspecified Trauma and Stressor-Related Disorder” by a psychologist I now pay \$125 an hour to see regularly, nine years after exiting and still struggling to heal.

The money never made any of it worth it. All of the money I made is gone.

What was said to me:

“Sex work is work”

“It’s a job like any other”

Don’t fall for it like I did.

10. RESOURCES

Universities need to ensure that students have access to a full range of services and know how to access them. The overarching aim should be that no student has to resort to prostitution because of a lack of other options. It is not enough to set up bursaries and grants if vulnerable students don't know about them. Similarly, it's not enough to set up programmes for students involved in the sex industry or for those who want to kick a porn habit if no one knows about them.

There is not enough space in this handbook to provide a full list of relevant national, regional, and local services, so we provide a list of the kinds of services that students might need (followed by further detail of a few key national services). Universities should ensure that students have access to all these services should they need them and that they know how to find them, whether they are internal or external to the university. Universities should seek to develop relationships with relevant local services.

Universities should ensure that students have access to a full range of appropriate services, provisions and opportunities, including:

- Welfare services
- Debt, financial, and budgeting advice, including money-saving tips
- On-campus foodbank for collection/donation and redistribution of emergency food, toiletries, period products and other essentials
- Daily collection and redistribution of unsold same-day expiry food that would otherwise be discarded from campus catering venues, food outlets and shops
- Bursaries, grants, and hardship loans
- Employment advice, CV writing, and job application help
- Workplace/employability skills courses and on-campus work experience where possible
- Directory of sympathetic local employers and part-time / weekend / holiday work employers
- Specialist support services for those involved in the sex industry
- Specialist exit-focused services for those wanting to exit the industry

- Sexual health clinics, including free condoms
- Sex education, including sexual consent education
- Specialist support for people wanting to kick a porn or sex buying habit
- Counselling services*
- Mental health services
- Self-esteem building workshops
- Suicide prevention initiatives and emergency phone numbers
- Crisis phone numbers
- Alcohol and substance abuse services
- Rape crisis services
- Domestic abuse services
- Sexual violence and sexual harassment reporting support
- Housing advice
- Benefits advice
- Legal advice
- Specialist support for people of colour and minority ethnicities
- Disability support and advice
- LGBTQ+ support

* Waiting lists for university counselling services are often long, particularly at times of peak demand around enrolment in September/October and around exam and assessment time in April/May. It would therefore make sense to advise students to seek a GP referral to NHS therapy or IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapy) provision as an alternative or backup to university services where waiting times are dauntingly long.

SERVICES FOR THOSE INVOLVED IN PROSTITUTION THAT INCLUDE HELP TO EXIT

Beyond The Streets – A UK-wide call back service offering advice and general guidance to those who feel trapped in prostitution. <http://beyondthestreets.org.uk/i-want-support>

The Nelson Trust – Trauma-informed service providing holistic support for women and their families across Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, Somerset, Bristol and Wales, including support to exit prostitution. <https://nelsontrust.com/how-we-help/womens-community-services>

Kairos WWT – A Coventry-based service for women involved in sexual exploitation, including one-to-one, group, and criminal justice support. <https://kairoswwt.org.uk>

Nia – Works with women in prostitution in London, providing a non-judgemental service, advocacy and support in exiting. <http://niaendingviolence.org.uk/get-help/prostitution>

St Mungos – A London-based project offering emergency housing support to vulnerable and homeless women, including those trying to escape prostitution. <http://rebuildingshatteredlives.org/about-us>

Encompass – A network of agencies in Scotland that provide support and exiting services to those involved in prostitution. <http://www.encompassnetwork.info/who-we-are.html>

Routes Out – Part of Community Safety Glasgow, this provides support for those wanting to exit prostitution. <http://www.glasgow.gov.uk/article/23783/Routes-Out>

For a more complete list of UK services, see <https://www.sase.org.uk/services>.

For the London directory of modern slavery survivor support services, see <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599abfb4e6f2e19ff048494f/t/60dc7d9e1e22da2407d004b0/1625062815242/London+Services+Directory+Final+1.pdf>.

HELP FOR THOSE WHO WANT TO KICK A PORN HABIT

The Reward Foundation – Provides a comprehensive list of resources for people seeking to kick a porn habit. <https://rewardfoundation.org/quitting-porn/help-with-porn-addiction>

THE NORDIC MODEL

The Nordic Model is an approach to prostitution policy and legislation that aims to reduce the size of the sex industry and the numbers of people being drawn into it, and to provide those caught up in it with genuine routes out and viable alternatives. It has several elements:

- It repeals laws that criminalise the selling of sex.
- It provides support, exit services and alternatives to those caught up in the sex industry.
- It makes buying sex a criminal offence, with the key aim of changing attitudes and behaviour.

Along with all this, there need to be: strong laws against pimping, brothel keeping and human trafficking; a public information campaign; education in schools and colleges; training for the police, CPS, judiciary and other frontline staff; investment in real and viable alternatives; and measures to address the poverty and inequality that leave so many with no alternative but involvement in the sex industry.

Both the EU Parliament¹⁴¹ and the Council of Europe¹⁴² recommend a Nordic Model approach rather than full decriminalisation as the best way of addressing prostitution.

¹⁴¹ http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-7-2014-0071_EN.html

¹⁴² <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=20716>

“This is, unfortunately, a very timely, necessary and probably life-saving handbook. For any student thinking of getting involved in the so-called sex industry, read this handbook first. For any university staff thinking of encouraging their students to get involved in this form of coercive exploitation, read it twice.”

Peter Jenkins has been a student counsellor in Further and Higher Education for the past 40 years, and has written in detail about the university's legal duty of care towards students and staff in D. Mair (Ed) 'Short-term counselling in Higher Education' (Routledge, 2016).

“As a prostitution survivor, I am deeply concerned about the promotion of ‘Pretty Woman’ notions that obscure the violence and abuse inherent in the sex trade. This, along with pornography, is driving the hyper-sexualisation and objectification of girls and young women in the wider culture and creating a perfect hunting ground for young men to treat girls and young women as prey. The results are there for all to see in the soaring numbers of rapes, sexual assaults, and strangulations. This handbook provides universities with a much-needed vision for how to tackle this terrifying new reality.”

Fiona Broadfoot, founder of Build A Girl UK, sex trade survivor, and women's rights activist.

“I would like to promote this handbook to universities as a means of preventing more students and young people from going down the route of participating in the sex industry. My clinical work in our GP outreach service (where we care for traumatised individuals often selling sex in order to obtain drugs) and the Zone's Icebreak service (where I see a group earlier on the trajectory, including students) have convinced me of the harm, often through re-traumatisation or bodily violence, that can result.”

Richard Byng has worked as a GP for 25 years and has particular experience of working with people with complex needs. He is also Professor in Primary Care Research at the University of Plymouth where he specialises in developing and evaluating interventions for complex clinical problems.

“It is very important that universities support the physical and psychological welfare of all students, and not promote policies which can leave them vulnerable and at risk. In particular, universities with nursing schools must, as NMC approved institutions, ensure that the ‘learning culture prioritises the safety of ...students’, that they are ‘provided with information and support... which encourages them to take responsibility for their own mental and physical health and well-being’. As such, I wholly support this handbook.”

Dr Sinead Helyar, BSc. PG (Acc.) Dip. MSc. PhD. RN.

