31 January 2024

About National Ugly Mugs

National Ugly Mugs (NUM) is a UK-wide charity working to end all forms of violence against sex workers and the conditions leading to survival sex work. Through pioneering digital safety tools, direct support programmes, and research on the conditions, trends and inequalities around sex work, we aim to end the disproportionate violence and poverty currently facing sex workers.

We create and run safety tools for sex workers to screen dangerous individuals and warn other workers and frontline services; provide safety information; provide emergency resources to reduce survival sex work; support sex workers experiencing violence; and work with sex workers to understand and navigate barriers around housing, work, justice and other systems where they face discrimination. Our work is done by, with and for sex workers, who are centralised as experts, and who are present as equals within our staff team, board of trustees, and membership.

Language

From the outset of the request for input from the UN Special Rapporteur, the language used demonstrates a bias ideological positioning which is rejected by sex workers and sex worker-supportive organisations. “Prostitution” and related terms have a long, meaningful and complex history, often used by those in positions of power to deny sex workers agency or respect. NUM does not support the use of the terms “prostitution” or “prostituted women” unless these are how those who are involved in sex work have chosen to self-define.

We fundamentally disagree with the positioning of sex work as inherently violent. It is undeniable that sex work contains violence. It is also clear that the rates of violence faced by sex workers is at its greatest under regimes of criminalisation; however, to define all sex work as violence is to deny sex workers agency and autonomy in understanding their own experiences. Sex workers must have the ability to conceptualise their experience in their own terms, and to have these terms respected by those with the responsibility to serve and protect them.

The UN Special Rapporteur also questions the notion of consent within sex work. Once again, sex workers must be able to define consent for themselves. Defining all sex work as non-consensual ignores the way in which most sex workers make decisions about their working practices. While many sex workers make choices about their involvement in sex work under significant constraints, this does not negate their ability to make that choice. The way to reduce sex workers making these choices is to ensure that their material needs are met so that they do not need to do so in the first place.
Our Knowledge

NUM was the first national reporting and alerting mechanism for adults in the sex industries, and holds the national database of harms committed against sex workers in the UK - developed over the past 11 years. We have 9,500 members at the time of writing, 83% of whom are independent sex workers. In 2022 we processed 519 reports of harm against sex workers, consisting of 794 incidents of violence, and sent over 764,000 safety alerts.

However, this only accounts for a small fraction of the harms we see, and that sex workers experience, on a daily basis. As well as our reporting and alerting for incidents of interpersonal violence, we also encounter reports of violence committed by organisations, institutions and state actors. These reports include interpersonal harm from those who abuse their positions of public trust, including physical and sexual violence; blackmail and extortion; denial of vital services such as healthcare or housing; financial discrimination; social exclusion; loss of mainstream work or educational opportunities; child removal; and the harms caused directly and indirectly through the criminalisation of their survival strategies.

The vast majority of sex workers, including our members, are working due to financial need, disability and other factors. Sex workers are diverse - there is no single “profile” which connects them all. They include sex workers of all genders, races, ethnicities, dis/abilities, sexualities and migration statuses; some are parents; others are students. Many have mainstream jobs alongside sex work involvement, and their work in sex work is also diverse. Similarly, little connects those who purchase sex aside from having the financial means to do so. While the majority of people who purchase sex are men, it is incorrect to say that they are exclusively so.

State Violence

Sex workers are (re)defining violence as a dynamic, context-specific lived experience. Various marginalised and invisibilised populations within sex industries, such as workers of colour, disabled workers, migrants, trans people, men and others are speaking up about socio-structural and socio-legal policies and practice, and how these influence the design of sex industries, their decisions about participation, and the harms they experience as a result.

Violence does not just look like assault, sexual harms or death – it is also experienced as being turned away from the police station or hospital when you try to report it and get help. It is being left in poverty by state policies, evictions, poor healthcare, family exclusion, removals of children – and having little access to support.

Much of the violence sex workers experience in their lives is the result of actions taken by state actors. This is particularly the case when it comes to policing practices. While all sex workers can experience police violence, those who work in the most heavily-criminalised ways (on-street or in brothels) bear the brunt of this mistreatment. Sex workers in research from the East London Project reported being knocked unconscious by police during raids, being outed to their community and neighbours, having their money confiscated, racism, transphobia, and being forced to have sex with officers to avoid arrest.

Furthermore, in the same research, 31.2% of the participants had experienced police violence. This included:

- 7.0% experienced extortion
- 13.2% had property damaged
- 23.5% experienced verbal abuse
- 20.1% reported feeling scared
- 4.2% had been raped by police officers

Ethnically/racially minoritized participants were more likely to have experienced extortion and rape by police.

Increasing state power and criminalisation will not end violence against sex workers - it will increase it. *Sex workers are already hesitant to seek legal assistance following harm due to fears that they will experience stigma or be criminalised themselves in the process - or have been so already.* Violent perpetrators see sex workers as “easy targets” because they know that sex workers are less likely to report harms against them or receive a protective response.

The criminalisation of sex work (or elements within it) will not end, or even reduce, trafficking. For example, the FOSTA/SESTA ban on adult services websites in the US may have served to increase it, as sex workers are pushed further underground into more exploitative and vulnerable positions, greater poverty, greater risk, and poorer health.

It is vital that sex workers are granted equitable access to justice (in the ways that they define), without fear of stigma or other forms of harm as a result. *Sex workers can be vital allies in preventing or minimising the harms of trafficking,* but this can only be achieved by removing the barriers which prevent them from accessing justice themselves, and this can only be achieved by ending all forms of criminalisation.

**Leaving Sex Work**

Our *Changing The Game* research in 2022 looked at understanding the issues that sex workers encounter when looking to leave sex industries or reduce their involvement in them.

The stigma experienced by sex workers acts as a significant barrier; both the stigma that they experience as sex workers, and the stigma they experience as a result of other marginalised identities they align with. This was particularly the case for migrant sex workers. The criminalisation of sex work and sex working practices also acted as a barrier, with some sex workers in possession of criminal records being unable to find suitable work as a result of these. If the end goal is for sex workers to leave sex work, all criminal records in relation to sex work must be expunged.

> “I got arrested over and again and couldn’t go on. I was facing prison for breaching an ASBO thing. It didn’t help my life though to leave prostitution. It just meant that I had to shoplift.”

Many sex workers report poor conditions in mainstream employment. A lack of autonomy, workers’ rights, disability accommodations and exploitative work practices all contributed to sex workers’ alienation from mainstream employment. This is alongside poor rates of pay. Some participants reported leaving sex work, only to return to it at a later date due to the Covid-19 pandemic, cost-of-living crisis and increase in poverty and austerity. Workers’ rights must be strengthened throughout our societies, including for those who sex work, and all workers must be granted a wage which allows them to meet their resource needs.

**Our Recommendations**

Violence against sex workers is not inevitable. It is not an occupational hazard. Violence against sex workers exists because of power, stigma, discrimination and exclusion. It exists because sex workers are
routinely denied control over their lives and working practices. It exists because safety is criminalised. It exists because sex worker voices are ignored, dismissed and ridiculed. It exists because so many sex workers experience marginalisation in other ways outside of their sex working identity, whether this is due to their race, gender, sexuality, migration status, class, health status or trans identity. Intersecting vulnerabilities compound violence, placing more and more people at risk, as people are treated as society's disposables.

With this in mind, we make the following recommendations:

- **The inclusion of sex workers in policy decisions regarding their lives and livelihoods.** Sex workers experience systemic exclusion throughout society, and in particular are denied access to positions of power where they are able to make material changes to their lives and working conditions. Sex workers must be at the centre of any innovations, services or policies designed to improve their lives, and listened to as valued experts.

- **A focus on implementing evidence-based harm reduction policies,** rather than those informed by myths and moralism. Once again, this must centre sex workers as experts.

- **The full decriminalisation of sex work.** This is a non-negotiable policy if we are to reduce and end violence against sex workers. Decriminalisation is the only policy which promotes safety for all sex workers, reduces the power of the state and other violent institutions over their lives, reduces stigma, reduces interpersonal violence, improves relationships with social institutions and grants sex workers rights as workers, as citizens and as members of our communities. This must also include the removal of all criminal records relating to sex work.

- **While it is vital to provide culturally-competent services to support sex workers who choose to leave sex work,** leaving sex work must never be a condition of providing support to those who are sex working. Leaving sex work is a complex process which is made exponentially more difficult under criminalisation regimes.

- **Continued efforts to end poverty and resource needs.** If we are to prevent people from entering sex work or from having their choices constrained within it through desperation, we must ensure that their material needs are met. This includes safe and stable housing for all; access to food and water; access to healthcare; and access to education, as well as the ability to access institutions on a fair and equitable basis.

We cannot eradicate violence against sex workers just by ending interpersonal violence. We must eliminate structural violence and transform our societies. The conditions which exclude sex workers - and other marginalised groups - from society, which prevent them from achieving justice, which keep their voices suppressed, have to end.

We urge you, as leaders and as people in positions of power, to use your power to improve the lives and conditions sex workers face, in the ways that they ask. Policies must focus on reducing poverty, austerity and hardship. Uplift and centre those whose voices are so often pushed to the side, reduce harm, promote their expertise, and send the message that sex workers are valuable members of our communities.