

A photograph of two men standing with their backs to the camera, facing a plain, light-colored wall. The man on the left is wearing a dark, pinstriped suit. The man on the right is wearing a dark jacket, dark pants, and a dark beanie. The ground is covered in light-colored gravel. The text "WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT WHEN WE TALK OF THE SEX INDUSTRY?" is overlaid in red, stylized capital letters in the center of the image.

WHAT ARE
WE TALKING
ABOUT
WHEN
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OF THE
SEX
INDUSTRY?

IMAGE: LENKE SZILÁGYI

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Introduction

The media relentlessly sanitises the sex industry, with photos of legs in stockings in dimly-lit rooms and quotes from celebrities about how much money they are making on OnlyFans, while failing to mention the contribution their pre-existing status makes, or the level of outgoings required to maintain that status. They are at the top of a pyramid scheme in which lesser mortals will make less than the minimum wage.

It's perhaps not surprising therefore that most discussions about the sex industry on social media lack any real explanation about what it really is and how it works. Those who argue for full decriminalisation of the industry often claim that they only mean sex between consenting adults – implying that both parties are equally able to say no to specific practices and to withdraw from the arrangement at will. But that's not how the industry works in practice.

This booklet aims to rectify these misconceptions and to provide a realistic understanding 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.¹ 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.

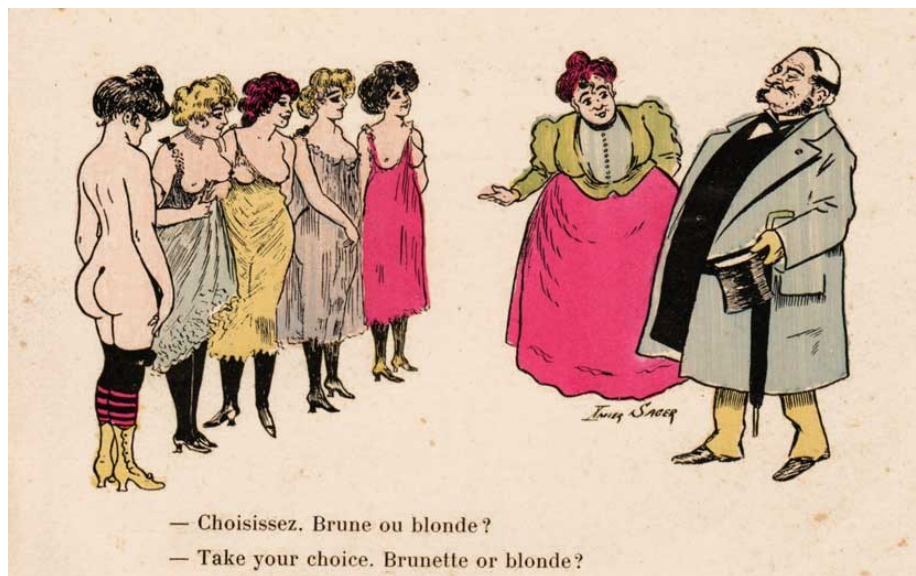
We can roughly group the various practices into three categories:

- **Prostitution.** This 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.
- **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.

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.



*Victorian postcard of women lined up in a Parisian brothel for a punter.
Notice he's fully clad and is sizing them up as if they're merchandise.
Compare the women's facial expressions with the punter's.*

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%.² Male consumers often pressurise performers to do ever more explicit, dangerous, and even lethal practices.³ This means that it can be hard to make much money unless you ditch your initial boundaries about what you are prepared to do. Furthermore, some male consumers attempt to meet women in private for sex, for sums that many women are unlikely to feel able to refuse.

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. The odds of these outcomes increase, the greater the number of consumers watching – which can exceed tens of thousands.

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.⁴

Job specification: Webcamming

General tasks	Perform live acts to anonymised, potentially global male audiences in front of a camera while remaining fully visible and identifiable yourself.
Responsibilities	Conform to pornified image of sex. Simulate pleasure, frequently performing acts you do not enjoy and which may disgust you. Abandon personal and health and safety boundaries under pressure to remain competitive.
Career development pathway	Potential future involvement in pornography and prostitution to provide additional income. A lifetime of intimate partners asking why, if you performed an act you appeared to enjoy for financial reward, you will not do it 'for love'.
Immediate boss	Every man who communicates with you through the website.
Desirable qualifications	Use of the 'freeze' and 'fawn' stress responses. History of prior abuse, exploitation or self-harm. Dissociation.
Remuneration	Subject to fluctuation due to deliberate recruitment of oversupply of labour and resulting pressure to respond to increasingly extreme porn-related demand.
Deductions	Large percentage of takings payable to websites whose owners carry no risk of harassment, 'revenge porn', stalking, blackmail, physical and mental harm, or issues with alcohol or substance use themselves.

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.⁵

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.”⁶

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.”*⁷

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.⁸

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.”*⁹

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

OnlyFans creators can earn a percentage of the earnings of new creators they introduce (‘refer’) to the site – meaning that OnlyFans is a pyramid scheme. It not only lowers the bar to entry into the sex industry, but also to pimping.¹⁰

Currently these ‘referral’ earnings are capped at 5% of the referred creator’s earnings for the first 12 months up to the first \$1 million earned by the referred creator.¹¹

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.¹²



Artwork by a young woman who documented her life in prostitution at brothelgirl.tumblr.com

‘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.

‘Sugar dating’ websites are often vague about the real nature of the arrangements they facilitate, making extensive use of euphemism and coded language. To many young people, they can appear to be ordinary dating sites.

For example, the sign-up form on Seeking (formerly Seeking Arrangement), one of the biggest ‘sugar dating’ sites, asks you to choose whether you are looking for someone who is “successful” or “attractive”. The definition of “successful” uses the phrase, “individual seeking to enhance another lifestyle”, to indicate that payment or other material benefits might be involved. However, many young people might quite reasonably not understand this, and even if they do, they might not realise that the payment is predicated on providing sexual access.

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.¹³

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.¹⁴

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.”¹⁵

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.¹⁶

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. Women 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.¹⁷

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.¹⁸

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 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, lap dancing and stripping revolve 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.¹⁹

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.

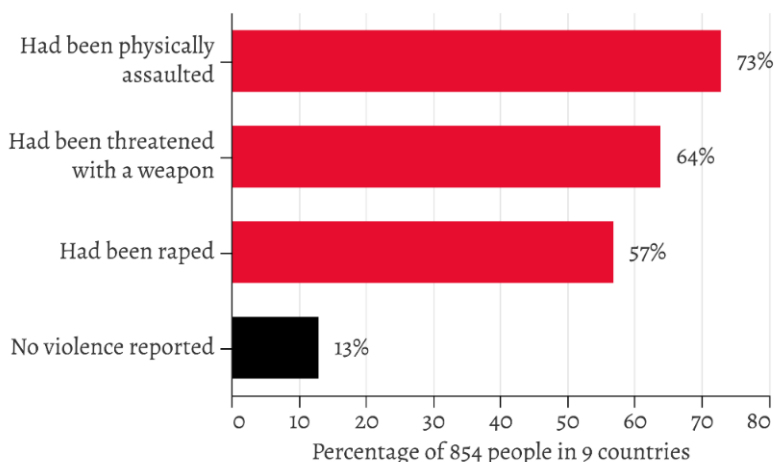
The ineffectiveness of the screening mechanisms was demonstrated recently when Mark Brown was convicted of the murders of two women he met through Adultwork, where he was a registered user.²⁰

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 log in 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.²¹

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



*Violence experienced by 854 people in prostitution in 9 countries.*²²

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.²³

They suffer a staggering amount of violence.²⁴ A meta-study found that violence is a prominent feature of prostitution regardless of the setting, social exclusion is the leading cause of entry, and prostitution usually deepens a woman's social exclusion.²⁵

Many women find the reality so unbearable that they turn to drink or drugs – which can add to their problems and make getting out even harder. It is also likely to adversely affect other areas of their life, including their studies if a student.

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.²⁶

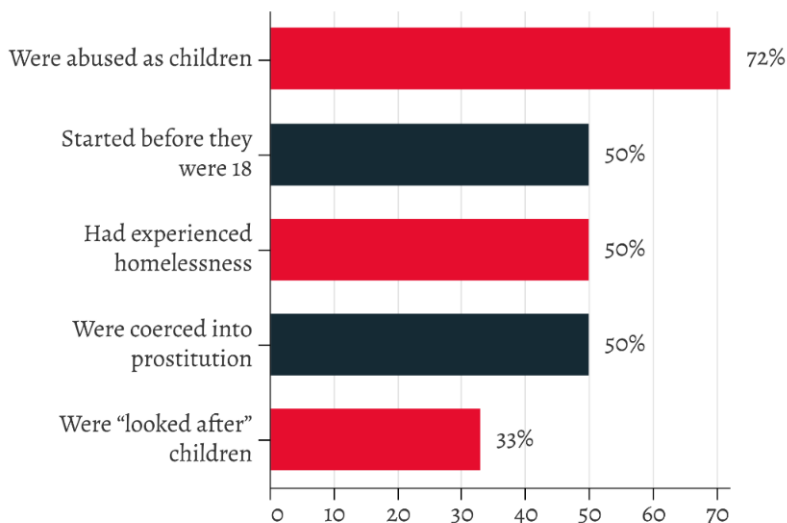


Chart showing data from studies of prostituted women and girls in the UK.²⁷

Job specification: ‘Full service’ prostitution

General tasks	Sexual activity with multiple male clients without complaint, regardless of their age, appearance, attitude, health, or hygiene standards. Every orifice must be available. Act degrading scenes from porn.
Responsibilities	Never complain. Simulate pleasure. Be convincing. Be fuckable. Do whatever the client wants even if it hurts or disgusts you. The client is always right. Conform to unrealistic standards, even when you’re pregnant or crying. Abandon personal and health and safety boundaries under pressure to remain competitive.
Career development pathway	The typical trajectory is downwards as you get older, less desirable, and less able to tolerate the abuse. Potential negative impact on future career and even ability to work. Physical, emotional and spiritual damage. Social isolation. Substance abuse.
Immediate boss	Brothel owners, punters, pimps, human traffickers.
Desirable qualifications	As young as possible. A fuckable body. Vulnerable. Ability to dissociate from yourself. Lack of social support. A history of prior abuse, exploitation, self-harm, or homelessness. Poor.
Remuneration	Subject to fluctuation due to deliberate recruitment of oversupply of labour and resulting pressure to respond to increasingly extreme porn-related demands. No pension, sick, or holiday pay.
Deductions	Large percentage of pay goes to pimp, brothel owner, drivers, and others offering ‘protection’ whilst being the greatest source of danger or actively facilitating it.
Occupational hazards	Being urinated and defecated on, being strangled, raped, and tortured. Ultimately death and murder.

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 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.



Artwork by a young woman who documented her life in prostitution at brothelgirl.tumblr.com

“The popularisation of the term ‘sex work’ helps to mask the class relations at work in prostitution. It fails to take into account the social context in which prostitution develops and particularly ignores the dynamics of race, class and sex dominance which exist between sex buyers and prostituted women.”

– Last Girl First! Prostitution at the intersection of sex, race & class-based oppressions

Sex for rent

Landlords offering rooms in exchange for sexual activity – or demanding sex from women (and to a lesser extent, men) who are struggling to pay their rent – has become increasingly common in the UK, particularly in university cities and towns.²⁸

Results from a 2018 YouGov poll for housing charity, Shelter, suggested that 250,000 women had been asked for sexual ‘favours’ by their landlords in exchange for free or discounted accommodation at some point between 2013 and 2018.²⁹ More recent research by Shelter suggested that 30,000 women in the UK were propositioned with such arrangements between the start of the COVID lockdowns in March 2020 and January 2021.³⁰

Just as with ‘sugar dating’ websites, adverts for these arrangements sometimes use euphemism and coded language, meaning that the actual reality might not always be obvious. For example, rooms might be offered for free in return for “benefits” or keeping the landlord “company” – although some adverts are more explicit.

These arrangements might appear attractive to those who are struggling financially. But they come at a high cost. Journalists at both the Daily Mail and the Mirror went undercover to investigate typical adverts and quickly found numerous sleazy and unpleasant men attempting to lure vulnerable young women into their net.³¹

Typically, there is greater public outrage about these arrangements than about other forms of prostitution. Perhaps this is because it is easier to imagine yourself in this situation and to recognise that while the initial decision to take up the offer might have been some kind of a choice, that wouldn’t alter the fact that having to have sex on a regular basis with someone you don’t fancy in order to keep a roof over your head would be an intolerable burden.³²

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.³³ 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 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.”³⁴



*Hong Kong brothel
advert that categorises
the women by ethnicity*

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.³⁵ 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

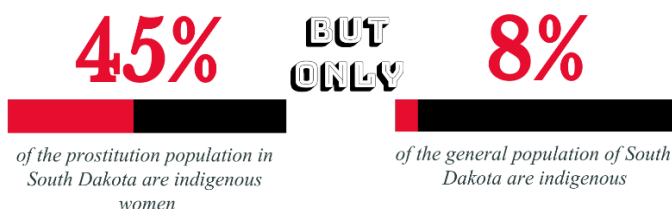
visible for all to see on punter forums.³⁶

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.³⁷ 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.³⁸

The links with domination and colonialist history are still visible. For example, indigenous women remain hugely overrepresented in the sex industry in Canada and the US. 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.³⁹



In the United States, women of colour are also greatly overrepresented in the sex industry. In many 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.⁴⁰

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.⁴¹ 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.

Survivor voices: Esther

With prostitution, the supply of women needs to exceed the demand by a significant margin because otherwise the punter will not have a choice.

He is the one with the power to choose, to make decisions based on racist and sexist stereotypes and class hierarchies which are not tolerated in any other context and would indeed be denounced as hate speech or “acts of violence” if they consisted of words alone. For punters and pimps, prostituted women are merely a collection of anatomical objects.

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 cancer⁴²), syphilis, hepatitis, HIV, and cystitis. Anal sex and coprophilia (aka scatophilia/scat) bring risks of infection with additional infectious diseases, including giardia, shigella, and hepatitis A and E.⁴³ Some of the microbes causing these infectious diseases are already resistant to antibiotics.

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, fissures and fistulas 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.⁴⁴

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.

61%

The percentage of women with lived experience of prostitution who were found by a 2018 study to have sustained head injuries.

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.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶

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 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 had lived experience of prostitution have traumatic brain damage at levels comparable to victims of torture.⁴⁷ A 2018 study found that 61% had sustained head injuries in prostitution.⁴⁸ This is similar to or higher than the rate found in boxers.⁴⁹

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: 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.

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: 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.”⁵⁰

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 groundbreaking 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%.⁵¹ 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.⁵²

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.⁵³

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.

Not surprisingly given this reality, there is evidence that many students 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: 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.

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 couldn’t 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 didn’t have the funding or the facilities to do anything more than listen to me cry down the phone.

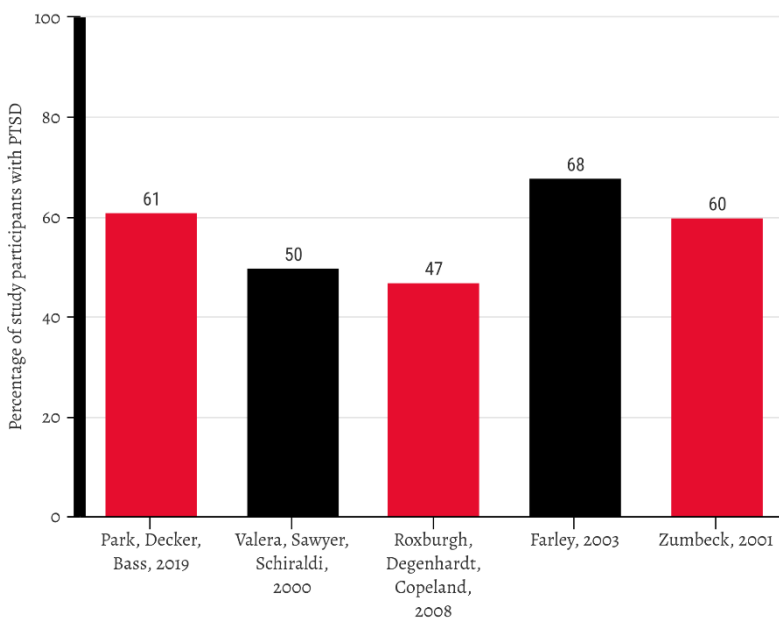


Chart showing PTSD levels in women involved in prostitution from 5 different peer-reviewed studies. (See endnote 51)

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.

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.⁵⁴

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.⁵⁵

Further advice about general digital safety is available online – we particularly recommend ‘A DIY Guide to Feminist Cybersecurity’ at hackblossom.org.⁵⁶

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.⁵⁷ 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 young people getting drawn into the sex industry in the first place.

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.⁵⁸ 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.

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.⁵⁹

Is it 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 support yourself.

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. In time, 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."*⁶⁰

The longer you stay in the sex industry, the greater these effects are likely to be. A woman, let's call her 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.

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

Provided you steer clear of pimping or 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’.

Young people 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.

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.”⁶¹

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.”⁶²

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.”⁶³

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 men's use of it.

“A majority of the women (61%) who used drugs or alcohol described the need to chemically dissociate or numb themselves from the physical and emotional pain during prostitution.”

– Garden of Truth: The Prostitution and Trafficking of Native Women in Minnesota, 2011

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 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.⁶⁴ And we are witnessing an epidemic of male violence against women and girls, including in schools and 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.⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶ Engaging in the sex industry as a consumer or sex buyer is anathema to developing warm and empathetic human relationships.

Educational establishments 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: 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.

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.



Artwork by a young woman who documented her life in prostitution at brothelgirl.tumblr.com.

The Nordic Model

The Nordic Model is the only approach to prostitution law and policy that recognises the prostitution system as part of the structural oppression of women and other marginalised groups, and as both a cause and a consequence of the persistent inequality between the sexes.

The Nordic Model aims to reduce the size of the industry and the numbers of people drawn into it, to provide those caught up in it with genuine routes out and viable alternatives, and to change social norms. 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 Parliament⁶⁷ and the Council of Europe⁶⁸ recommend a Nordic Model approach rather than full decriminalisation as the best way of addressing prostitution.

About Nordic Model Now!

Nordic Model Now! is a secular feminist grassroots group campaigning for the abolition of prostitution and related practices, and for the Nordic Model approach to prostitution. NMN is run entirely by unpaid volunteers and receives no institutional or public funding and relies entirely on donations from supporters.

Find us on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, & YouTube: [@nordicmodelnow](#)

**NORDIC
MODEL NOW!**

CAMPAIGNING FOR A BETTER
FUTURE FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS



<https://nordicmodelnow.org>

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