

Briefing on sex workers

What is sex work?

The term 'sex worker' refers to those engaged in prostitution and is the preferred term used throughout the literature on the subject. The term has been adopted as it is free of complicated, derogatory and sexist connotations which are more commonly associated with the term 'prostitute'.

Sex work is a term used to describe a wide range of activities relating to the exchange of money (or its equivalent) for the provision of a sexual service. Sex work can be grouped into two categories. Direct sex work refers to services, such as indoor and outdoor prostitution as well as escort services. This type of sex work typically involves the exchange of sex for a fee in which genital contact is common. Indirect sex work refers to services, such as lap dancing, stripping and virtual sex services (over the internet or phone). Genital contact is less common in this type of sex work; however, a fee is still exchanged for the service. Individuals who had been involved in sugar relationships may not identify this as 'sex work', particularly where the exchange has been premised around companionship and intimacy.

Is sex work legal?

In the UK, the exchange of sexual services for money is legal, but a number of activities, including soliciting in a public place, kerb crawling, owning or managing a brothel, pimping and pandering, are considered to be [crimes](#), under the Sexual Offences Act 2003.

Brothels

Any premises, for example, private flats, may be classified as a brothel if they are used by more than one person for the purposes of sex work, whether on the same day or on different days.

So, if you share premises with someone else and work on alternate days or weeks, the premises will still count as a brothel even though there is never more than one person working at any one time.

Advertising

It is not illegal to advertise sexual services, except in the following circumstances:



- Advertising on the Internet. It is difficult to be prosecuted for advertising sexual services on the Internet. Under English law, the acts of soliciting or obscene publication could be said to have taken place.
- It is an offence, though rarely charged, to publish an obscene article. This offence applies to anything to be read or looked at and any sound or picture recording.

Equalities considerations

Sex workers are [more likely to be women](#) so anything to do with sex work will have a disproportionate impact on women. But there also isn't much research about male, gay/lesbian or migrant sex workers so there isn't much we know about how any policies around sex work would impact on these groups.

References:

1. *Sex workers and the law*; 2017; Release;
https://www.release.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf/publications/SEX_WORKERS_%26_THE_LAW_2017.pdf [accessed 09-09-21]
2. A review of the literature on sex workers and social exclusion; 2014; Balfour, R and Allen, J; UCL. [A review of the literature on sex workers and social exclusion \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#) [accessed 09-09-21]
3. The nature and prevalence of prostitution and sex work in England and Wales today; 2019; Hester, M et al; University of Bristol. [Prostitution and Sex Work Report.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#) [accessed 09-09-21]