POLICY BRIEF

AUGUST 2024

SUPPORT SERVICES AND RACIALISED SEX WORKERS IN THE UK

Support Services and Racialised Sex Workers in the UK

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank every sex worker who participated in this research for your contributions, wisdom and trust. We would also like to thank our staff, particularly those with lived experience, for their contribution and guidance, and the organisations and researchers whose work we've cited throughout this report.

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National Ugly Mugs:
Ending All Forms of Violence Against Sex Workers

National Ugly Mugs (NUM), formerly the UK Network of Sex Work Projects (UKNSWP), is a UK-wide charity working to end all forms of violence against sex workers and the conditions leading to survival sex work. We deliver pioneering digital safety tools and direct support programmes, as well as advocacy, community education and research projects on the conditions, trends and inequalities around sex work. We're pushing for systems change: an end to the disproportionate discrimination, violence and poverty currently facing sex workers.

Our work is guided by three core principles:

1. **Sex Workers First:** privileging lived experience in sex industries as a primary way of knowing and responding to sex workers' priorities around safety, health and rights.
2. **Quality Support:** working with sex workers to prevent violence, support survivors in seeking justice and recovery, and end the conditions driving survival sex work.
3. **Learning and Innovation:** committing to consistent improvement, learning and growing in our approach to what we do, why we do it, and how we do it.

NUM is the only UK-wide reporting and alerting mechanism for sex workers, and a world leader in digital tools and individualised support services that promote their safety and wellbeing. We work alongside other sex worker-led groups around the world, including reporting mechanisms such as *Ugly Mugs Ireland* and France's *Projet Jamine*, and advised on the development of *Ugly Mugs Netherlands*.

We curate the national database of harms against sex workers, developed over the past 12 years, and have 9,800 members at the time of writing. In 2023, we sent out 849,631 safety alerts (3.3 million since inception) and processed 578 reports of violence against sex workers, containing 812 accounts of harm. We provided direct victim support services to 1,027 sex workers, and welcomed a further 281 to our NUMbrella Lane drop-in service

Sex work research is complex. While female, street-based sex workers often feel over-studied, those of other genders and forms of work are typically under-researched. What almost all sex workers are, though, despite differing levels of academic interest, is under-served by actual policy developments and adequate service provision. As such, the participation of sex workers in studies like this is greatly valued. We hope that as a result of their contributions, and the trust they've placed in us through them, we can effect change that materially improves their health and wellbeing.

Racial Justice for Sex Workers: Introduction and Methodology

Rights, Recognition and Redress, or the Racial Justice for Sex Workers Project, is the beginning of NUM's work on reclaiming narratives around sex work and race through in-depth conversations, research and collaboration between racialised sex workers and anti-racist activists.

Supported by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, the first iteration of the project focused on the relationships between racialised sex workers and public services. This document is one of five policy briefs on the experiences of racialised sex workers in five key areas of public life: policing, healthcare, housing, further education, and support services. You can find the other briefs, as well as information on our ongoing anti-racism work within NUM, on our website.

Racial Justice for Sex Workers is based on a Participatory Action Research methodology[1], where researchers work in collaboration with participants to understand an issue and change it for the better. Rather than studying participants as unempowered subjects, this project adopted an approach that focused on the expertise of racialised sex workers through their lived experience, developing a group of collaborators whose contributions guided the research and service outputs of this project.

Through this process, NUM has developed this series of reports, a range of advocacy materials, and a Reporting Professionals Tool: a new digital platform that will allow sex workers to report harms (such as racial discrimination, refusal of service, or abuses of power) perpetrated by individuals in positions of public trust, like police officers or doctors. The Reporting Professionals Tool will sit within our victim support casework team, and allow NUM to better support sex workers navigating harm recovery and justice processes within professional settings.

The Policy Briefs are constructed from a series of interviews conducted with 38 racialised sex workers in the UK. Participants were provided with an honorarium as a thank you for their knowledge contribution and time, and were assured at the beginning of their interviews that all responses would be anonymised. We also conducted a documentary review of recent research projects at NUM (both published and unpublished), led by sex workers and sex work researchers, for inclusion.

More information on the Racial Justice for Sex Workers project can be found on our landing page.

[1]O'Neill, Maggie. 'Cultural Criminology and Sex Work: Resisting Regulation through Radical Democracy and Participatory Action Research (PAR)'. *Journal of Law and Society* 37, no. 1 (2010): 210–32.

Introduction

Racialised sex workers in the UK sit at the intersection of historic and compounding forms of inequality[2]. As explored by the other policy briefs in this project, racism and anti-sex worker discrimination mean racialised sex workers are left navigating hostile systems across housing, healthcare, education and policing - systems that facilitate both unique burdens on the population (such as disproportionately poor health outcomes[3] or a lack of safe housing[4]) and additional difficulties accessing mainstream support.

In this context, support services - particularly sex worker-led organisations, charity programmes, and informal community spaces - can be vital to the wellbeing of a population experiencing acute support needs as well as alienation from mainstream support systems.

In part, racialised sex workers are facing an acute version of a wider issue in the UK: after a decade and a half of austerity, and against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and Cost of Living Crisis, people in need of support are increasingly finding it through charitable services or informal networks rather than public services. The largest nationwide network of emergency food distribution is through the Trussell Trust[5], and in 2020/21 charities delivered £16.8bn of public services including homelessness support, domestic violence services, social and health care, education, youth services, and financial support[6]. 91% of charities say they're expected to fill gaps in public services[7], and are increasingly using unsustainable amounts of charitable funding to subsidise public sector contracts[8].

Furthermore, the intense pressure on local authority funding[9] has caused a shift of resources away from preventative services and towards crisis interventions, making it harder for people with multiple or complex needs to access help before they experience significant harm[10]. Underfunding across charitable services (local authority funding to charities alone is estimated to have fallen by £13 billion since 2010[11]) leaves voluntary services less able to step in when people are unable to access state

[2] 'Sex Work & Racism: The Impact of Structural Racism on Racialised Sex Workers in Europe and Central Asia' | ESWA
[3] 'Racism and discrimination are fundamental drivers of health disparities worldwide; | UCL News
[4] 'The fight for home is a fight against racism' | Shelter England
[5] Raj, K. (2019) 'Nothing Left in the Cupboards', *Human Rights Watch*
[6] 'The true cost of delivering public services' - Survey of UK Charities | NCVO
[7] 'Charities expected to fill gaps in public service, chief executives say' | Charities Aid Foundation
[8] Butler, P. (2023) *'English charities "near insolvency" after subsidising public sector contracts'*, *The Guardian,* 13 November.
[9] Butler, P. (2024) *'Nearly one in 10 English councils expect to go bust in next year, survey finds'*, The Guardian, 28 February.
[10] 'A Quiet Crisis in Local Government Spending' | Lloyds Bank Foundation
[11] Whitehead, H. (2024) *'£13bn reduction in council funds to charities since 2010, say researchers'*, Civil Society, 29 February.

support, with particularly acute consequences for specialist and organisations “by and for” minoritised communities[12].

It’s in this context - and with an understanding of the financial and logistical crises facing support organisations - that racialised sex workers shared experiences of a support services system that lacks accessibility, accountability, and responsiveness. Participants focused on a lack of intersectionality and capacity within sex worker support and peer services, as well as a lack of clarity and safety when accessing mainstream services.

Criminalisation and Invisibilisation: Accommodating for Racialised Sex Workers in Mainstream Services

Racialised sex workers experience structural discrimination across policing, health, housing, education, and many other areas of life, and as such are more likely than most to require support from charities or public services. However, the services available to them are often ill-equipped to understand and address their specific needs.

Participants characterised navigating the support available to them as a frustrating and inaccessible process, defined by poor signposting and anxieties over disclosing their sex worker status. Online safety resources like NUM and ClientEye were noted as particularly useful, but participants also described relying on informal networks for vital safety or wellbeing support: *“the random Facebook groups I’m in, stuff like that, have literally saved my life and…continue to over and over again”.*

While there will always be a role for informal community support in people’s wellbeing, that these networks are described as life-saving is likely a sign of racialised sex workers being seriously under-served and under-engaged by support services.

Communication and Confidentiality

Many participants discussed lacking an understanding of the support available to them beyond NUM and SWARM (the Sex Workers Advocacy and Resistance Movement), largely due to racialised sex workers being ‘invisibilised’ through criminalisation and discrimination.

[12] 'Domestic abuse services at risk from council financial crisis, warns Commissioner' | Family Law Week

As discussed in our policy report on policing and racialised sex workers, the legal landscape facing sex workers in the UK is complicated and inconsistent. While selling sex is legal across the UK[13], sex workers experience a systemic criminalisation that displaces them from public spaces and makes them vulnerable to isolation, police harassment and other harms. This can be a particularly acute experience for racialised sex workers, who have to navigate this marginalisation of sex workers alongside a justice system that facilitates disproportionate violence against people of colour[14].

Furthermore, previous NUM research has found that secondary and tertiary impacts of being known to the state - like eviction from supported accommodation or immigration issues - were key to a declining willingness among sex workers to access police support after suffering harm. This trend is clearly mirrored in support services: sex workers face significant financial and banking discrimination[15][16], discriminatory eviction in breach of international human rights law, and immigration-based targeting[17], so they're placing immense trust in the services they access not to harm or 'out' them.

> "It's so much harder to be honest about my experiences and get the **actual care I need**"
>
> **Project Participant**

In turn, support services should work to be visible, accessible, and explicit about the safety and confidentiality that their users can expect. Otherwise, services risk providing inadequate or incomplete support to - or completely failing to engage - service users that don't feel comfortable outing themselves as sex workers to an unfamiliar organisation.

Outside of a small number of specialist sex worker services with online or community presences, participants reflected that it's hard to know where they can turn for proper help. As one told us, *"trying to find the resources- like, I get overwhelmed…I cannot just Google this shit. It's like, where do I begin?"*

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[13] The exchange of sexual services for money is entirely legal in England, Scotland and Wales (Sex worker safety | Metropolitan Police); and while paying for sex is illegal in Northern Ireland it is not a crime to sell sexual services, or to loiter or solicit (Paying for sexual services | nidirect)

[14] 'BAME deaths in police custody' | Inquest

[15] Hurley, J. (2024) *'Denial of accounts to sex workers by banks raises safety concerns'*, Global Relay Intelligence & Practice.

[16] 'Payment Rejected: Financial discrimination against sex workers in the UK' | National Ugly Mugs

[17] 'Migrant Sex Workers Fight Police Illegality & Racism' | English Collective of Prostitutes

There was a sense that a silence surrounds sex work in support service delivery. As one participant says, *"I know that…you are not allowed to advertise and encourage people to get into this industry. But [we need] more open knowledge about services that can support people - 'here is what you do if you feel unsafe'".*

Support and Staff Training

When they could access support services, participants shared experiences of services focusing on 'saving' sex workers rather than supporting them with their health or wellbeing needs. There were frustrations that all sex workers are put *"in the saviour category…it just creates a stigma, all sex workers need to be saved…it's dehumanising".*

While many current sex workers do want to leave sex industries and we can develop supportive pathways for them to explore their options - such as NUM's Vocational Support Service - attempts to 'rescue' sex workers during unrelated service provision undermines the individuality required for successful support, and counterproductively risks alienating sex workers form accessing public services or charity programmes altogether.

This is reflective of an issue highlighted in previous NUM research[18]: a lack of training and clarity around supporting sex workers means individual staff are left navigating sensitive issues without guidance or preparation. The result is often inappropriate or intense questioning, incorrect advice or support, or total user disengagement from the service. As participants in that research project put it, accessing mainstream help as a sex worker means having to *"manage the other person's anxieties about sex work", "fight off accusations or assumptions",* and subject yourself to *"a lot of paranoia…when you're in the informal economy".*

[18] Fighting for Fair Treatment | National Ugly Mugs

Intersectionality and Accountability: Creating Safer Peer Spaces for Racialised Sex Workers

The alienation from support services discussed above, particularly peer services, is important because of the pivotal roles they can play in the lives of many racialised sex workers. Research participants shared positive experiences with services like 56 Dean Street in London[19], a clinic staffed with specialist nurses who have a nuanced understanding of sex work, and emphasised how important feeling understood and welcomed by health, housing, or other services can be to successfully engaging with them.

Participants also discussed the importance of peer spaces, and being able to share a space with people who *"just get it",* when navigating the challenges of being a racialised sex worker in the UK. Collectively, formal support services and more informal peer spaces were described as contributing to an essential support system, ensuring the safety and wellbeing of workers. This underscored the need for comprehensive, accessible services and support structures - and for support services to be adaptable and open to the changing needs of racialised sex workers.

Participants felt there was a lack of inclusive spaces for racialised sex workers to share their experiences and seek support - that there were challenges to approaching more mainstream services as a sex worker, but also that specialist sex worker services and peer projects tended to lack in intersectionality and accessibility.

As one racialised sex worker told us, *"a lot of the spaces I'm in with [sex] workers, a lot of them are actually white workers…they will not even think that not everyone is white. When we're trying to organise events or something, they will say stuff and…workers of colour will have to intervene and ask 'but can that apply to everyone?', and then they'll be like, 'oh yeah, you're right' - so I guess it's more like unconscious bias".*

There were concerns that a lack of understanding around racialised sex workers' specific needs leads to a failure to provide accessible and culturally-sensitive assistance, and contributes to racialised sex workers experiencing harm or feeling alienated by services that are meant to support them:

[19] 56 Dean Street

> Usually when I go to [redacted sex worker group] or some sort of event, there's always something that happens. Someone says something stupid for absolutely no reason, and the white people around - who are all these, like, activists and stuff - will not say a single thing.

> I've heard from a lot of different people - just, bad experiences [with a sex worker service], in regards to comments being made and people not being held accountable. . . it creates this hierarchy in the space of, like, you're not allowed to be there, or you are not safe to be in that space - that other people's discriminatory comments are being upheld and maintained.

Project Participants

Demonstrating a desire and ability to understand the needs of racialised sex workers and adapt to them can avoid this sense of marginalisation, and create an environment which actively safeguards the safety, dignity and agency of workers. Most organisations serving sex workers are underfunded or grassroots projects, but relatively low-resource activities - like creating a safer space policy, holding service user listening sessions, or having clear complaints and suggestion processes - can go a long way to providing vital support in a way that recognises the unique needs and challenges faced by all of a service's participants.

> I feel like they could be better, I feel they could be better. I feel like from what I heard from some of my black friends, they have experienced certain things that weren't particularly good but I also think that these people have good intentions and think they are willing to learn and grow, because I think sometimes it's quite hard to know the needs of somebody when you haven't experienced something yourself, you are completely unaware, you know what I mean?

Project Participant

Geographic Disparities

> In London. . . I was quite excited to meet other workers of colour, because **they just get it**, and I did - and it was really amazing, and I just felt so comfortable in the space and just relaxed, and was, like, laughing and vocal. It was great but contrasted with here - I've only been about three times, four times. . . to peer spaces in Scotland in the past and just felt really isolated

Project Participant

A recurring theme in these discussions was the notable disparities between peer spaces or support services in large cities, particularly London, with the rest of the country. As a previous NUM research participant put it, accessing services in the UK - particularly as a sex worker - is a *"postcode lottery".*

Peer support groups were noted as particularly important in the context of geographic disparity, with racialised sex workers outside of London at potentially greater risk of isolation and marginalisation from existing services. Participants consistently underscored the importance of community as a pillar of safety - given their reluctance to rely on law enforcement or the criminal justice system - and were clear that regional peer support groups and spaces should be at the forefront of service design and provision.

Recommendations

Our findings indicate that support services - both formal charity programmes and peer run projects - occupy a disproportionately significant space in the lives of many racialised sex workers while being insufficiently equipped to properly support them.

Accessing mainstream support is characterised by uncertainty and alienation, while peer-run projects risk alienating racialised sex workers without investment in creating intersectional, accountable spaces. However, there is the potential for significant improvement in how support services address racialised sex workers' needs and circumstances.

Recommendations from project participants included:

1. Involving racialised sex workers in decision-making processes, and supporting them to take on leadership roles within services;

2. Creating safer space policies that explicitly address harassment, power imbalances, and reporting mechanisms;

3. Developing clear and accessible processes for recognising and rectifying harm or discrimination within service provision;

4. Addressing geographic disparities in support through investment in mainstream service outreach or regional peer-led services;

5. Investing in tailored services for racialised sex workers, such as specialist clinics with experienced nurses, online testing services, or online support spaces led by sex workers themselves;

6. And providing staff and volunteer training around both sex work and structural racism.

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Ending Violence Against Sex Workers

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