POLICY BRIEF

AUGUST 2024

HIGHER EDUCATION AND RACIALISED SEX WORKERS IN THE UK

Higher Education 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

Research by Swansea University's Student Sex Work Project indicates that approximately 5% of students had worked in sex industries, and that over 20% had considered doing so[2]. However, student sex workers tend to be a significantly under-researched and under-served population.

One academic described universities responding to research *"by saying none of their students would be sex workers so I was wasting my time and should try a post-92 university"*[3], while in 2021 the (then) Minister of State for Higher and Further Education Michelle Donelan condemned Durham University Student Union's safety training for student sex workers as *"legitimising a dangerous industry"* and *"badly failing in their duty to protect"*[4]. Despite an evident squeamishness around sex work at universities, student sex workers are a significant population that is unlikely to get smaller through criminalisation or invisibilisation.

Meanwhile, issues around student welfare and support in higher education have gained prominence in recent years - particularly against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic[5], an increasingly acute mental health crisis among students[67], and the long hours more than half of students report having to work in response to the cost of living crisis[8].

Despite increasing interest in student wellbeing, and the work of organisations like Support for Student Sex Workers (SFSSW) in providing vital support and resources, we believe there's been insufficient research into the lives and needs of student sex workers[9]. While some universities and student unions are making significant progress in this area[101112], longstanding tropes around sex work mean research or advocacy efforts are often thwarted on grounds of morality or sensitivity (Grove, 2021).

Racialised sex workers sit at the intersection of multiple inequalities within higher education, with existing issues around general student wellbeing and the specific needs of sex worker students compounded by structural racism within university settings.

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[2] Student Sex Workers: Reducing Stigma and Improving Well-being | Swansea University
[3] Grove, J. (2021) "'Whorephobia' blocking research into student sex work' | Times Higher Education, 2021
[4] 'Durham University Offers Safety Training for Student Sex Workers' | The Times, November 2021
[5]Batchelor-Hunt, N. (2020) 'Covid-19: Student Welfare Should Be A Priority – Not An Afterthought', *EachOther*, 2 October.
[6]Morris, S. (2022) *'Exeter University failed to make student who died feel wanted, says mother'*, *The Guardian*, 6 October).
[7] Student mental health problems almost tripled in recent years - study | UK News, 2023
[8]Adams, R. (2024) *'More than half of UK students working long hours in paid jobs'*, *The Guardian*, 13 June.
[9] 'Toolkit for Student Sex Workers' | Basis Yorkshire, 2021
[10] 'Student Sex Workers' | Students' Union UCL
[11] ' St Andrews Students' Association Student Sex Worker Support' - University of St Andrew's Students' Union | Your Union
[12] Scotland Student Sex Work Resources | SRUCSA

Research by the EHRC identified as a widespread issue in British universities, with 1 in 20 students and 3 in 20 staff reporting that they left their studies or jobs due to racial harassment[13], and white students are disproportionately likely to leave university with a first- or upper-second-class degree[14]. The 25% increase in Black university professors in the 22-23 academic year was encouraging, but this surge represents the hiring of just 40 people - Black professors still represent just 1% of professorial staff[1516]. Of 23,000 UK professors, only 66 are Black women[17].

The severe under-representation of racialised people in academia not only limits diversity in perspectives and leadership but also exacerbates the challenges faced by racialised sex workers, who (given the compounding impacts of structural racism and victimisation of sex workers)[18] find themselves even more isolated and vulnerable within these institutions.

This research project, involving 38 racialised sex workers sharing their experiences, highlighted key intersections between racism, anti-sex worker discrimination, and higher education. Key themes that emerged in our research interviews included a lack of support in university settings, a sense of hyper-visibility and hostility towards student sex workers, and the importance of clear and responsive accountability processes within universities.

Lack of General and Individualised Support

Participants in this project described the impact of a lack of support from universities across a range of issues, particularly finances and mental health, with one telling us that in *"general support for people was very lacking in university. For all sorts of things, mental health as well…they just leave you, they just leave you in so many ways".*

[13] 'Tackling racial harassment: Universities challenged' | Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2019
[14] 'Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Student Attainment at UK Universities: #ClosingtheGap' | Universities UK, May 2019
[15] Gibney, E. (2024) *'Number of Black UK professors rises by 25% in one year'* , Nature [Preprint]
[16] Parr, C. (2024) *'Number of Black professors up but diversity progress "too slow"'*, Research Professional News, 16 January.
[17] '100 Black Women Professors NOW' | When Equality, 2021
[18] 'Sex Work & Racism: The Impact of Structural Racism on Racialised Sex Workers in Europe and Central Asia' | ESWA, 2022

Universities are clearly struggling to properly support their students in general, with Student Loans Company data suggesting a 28% rise in dropout rates between 2019 and 2023[19], driven primarily by mental health issues[20]. Furthermore, Russell Group projections show that students in England will be almost £2,000 worse off in the 2024-25 academic year than if maintenance loans had ket up with inflation since 2020-21[21].

These are wider, structural issues within higher education - however, they create an acute issue for racialised sex workers within universities, who are more likely to need complex and individualised help from a system struggling to provide even basic support to its students.

One participant, Penelope, described initially engaging in sex work after a period of significant trauma during their studies meant they had to quit their job and were unable to make ends meet. Rather than acting as any sense of support or stability, their university was largely absent: *"Support? There is literally nothing. There is not even anything if you have just got depression, let alone if you are a sex worker with BPD".* When Penelope was finally able to access student wellbeing support, she found *"services that were not up to cope with the complexities of what I was dealing with…there was literally no one to turn to at all".*

Hostility and Surveillance

> It is a fucking surveillance mechanism, it's not actually a mechanism to help people. At the front of it, it's "yeah we will help you with your mental health, we will help you with your health and stuff or any problems you have" but actually they are just watching you, surveilling you and they will use it to kick you out really, they will use it against you. I don't think it's a very safe mechanism at all.
>
> **Project Participant**

[19]Bryson, J. (2023) *'University dropout rates reach new high, figures suggest'*, *BBC News*, 28 September.

[20] 'Student mental health problems have almost tripled, study finds' | Kings College London, 2023

[21] 'Universities spending tens of millions to financially support students, as maintenance loans fail to keep up with inflation' | Russell Group, 2024

Participants described a higher education environment where official support is often inaccessible or unhelpful to racialised sex workers, and where creating your own informal support networks is also difficult. The environment described is *"so hostile…and like, other students [are] so hostile".* Given the disproportionate risks of harm faced by sex workers, a support network is often vital to someone's safety and wellbeing. However, negative attitudes and policies within higher education mean that universities are often a driver of anxiety and isolation rather than a source of support.

> I heard them saying things that you kind of get as a sex worker, [like] you're wayward, you're off the rails, you don't have control of your life, you're a mess, you're a failure, you're not capable, that's why you do this work. So I definitely internalised a lot of that and kind of believed that – and it's still quite difficult to let go of, that like sex work, I'm doing it because I'm a failure, I dropped out of school, yeah I feel like a really cliched, like a really cliched stripper sometimes who is like I'm here because I failed my Degree
>
> **Melissa (participant)**

One participant shared that they had been sexually assaulted by a university lecturer, but felt like experiences of harm like that weren't something she *"could safely discuss in school at the time, [or] felt empowered to discuss or embody".*

Many participants discussed the lack of acknowledgement from many universities that students might engage in sex work, particularly survival sex work, as a perpetuator of the taboos sex workers have to navigate. One expressed frustration over their university's lack of recognition of student sex workers, which does nothing to actually *"prevent people going into sex work"* while contributing to an environment where student sex workers feel unable to access support or report harms.

> I don't think it was a coincidence that I didn't hear anything from, like, the University in terms of supporting students who do sex work… I think they choose to, kind of, like, just ignore it and pretend that it doesn't happen. I think for me it's because my University's outward messaging, to a certain extent, was so much about promoting themselves so that people would [want] to be there

Project Participant

> I see the kind of University management and leadership, I guess, as being completely focused on just making that money, and then that's to the detriment of people doing the work, because they are not being explicit about any support that they might be able to provide, or they are not providing it . . . acknowledge that [student sex work] happens and that, like, you know, this is what we can do to support it

Project Participant

Participants also discussed the formal victimisation of sex workers within their universities, with one telling us about fears they'd be expelled for doing something that *"brings the university into disrepute"* if they sought support related to their experiences. Another had witnessed an incident where a student sex worker at their university was *"kicked out under morality"* after one of her clients, a tutor at the same university, outed her.

Instead of getting any kind of help from their universities, student sex workers can run the risk of expulsion, or eviction from their accommodation under *"morality clauses"*[22]. How can universities expect to fulfil any duty of care for students who do sex work when these students can reasonably expect to be expelled and made homeless if they approach them for support?

[22] 'The Mirror: Desperate students sell sex to pay fees as lockdown kills off jobs in pubs and shops' | English Collective of Prostitutes, 2021

Positive Attitudes and Experiences

Participants highlight the importance of positive messaging and a clear stance towards sex work from universities, which many had identified at other universities but not at their own. One participant told us that on their University's website *"on the Welfare Advisor's page, there is a little umbrella and it says that we support student sex workers"*, which aids in creating a supportive and affirming environment for student sex workers. In addition to this, the participant mentioned Support for Student Sex Workers, a service which they were referred to by their Welfare Advisor at University. Having a designated and adequately trained professional on campus to talk to about concerns, seek assistance, and assess situations for safety contributes to a supportive atmosphere and is something they describe as *"invaluable help"*.

The positive impact that the role of University Welfare Advisors can have on student sex workers is illustrated by multiple participant accounts, with advisors filling a vital role as proactive sources and signposters of support. Furthermore, one participant described how Support for Student Sex Workers *"helped me with sexual health [stuff]. She has helped me with the sexual assault as well, she signposted me to a local domestic abuse charity. [She] gave me the contact details for somebody at the local sexual health clinic and it is a private number for sex workers to use to get as in immediately for an appointment".*

Another participant shared how support from their university's counselling services enabled them to go from missing lectures, being *"late to all of them…showing up high"*, to arriving early to classes and counselling sessions. Experiences of counselling provision, additional support following disclosure of sex worker status, and guidance in engaging with health or academic services, were all described as significantly positive interventions that made a fundamental difference in the wellbeing of student sex workers.

Experiences Reporting Harm

> I remember, when I arrived I was like almost on a little cloud and very much like idealising this University and stuff. I feel like if [I had experienced harm] at the beginning, I would probably have been like, yeah, the Uni is going to do something about it, like, change is coming. I'm going to report it, we are going to do this and that, you know, like super motivated. If that had happened after a semester, I would have been like, nah. Yeah, there's no point. Yeah.
>
> **Project Participant**

Participants described a lack of *"faith in, kind of, telling my university about any of my experiences or, kind of like, holding anyone to account".* In an environment that feels so hostile to racialised sex workers, there's an anticipation of *"getting knocked back"* on any attempts to report harm. There was a sense that universities are sources of discrimination and *"that's [just] the way it is",* or "*there's no point"* in complaints processes.

One participant brought up the 2018 Bracton Law Society Scandal[23], where a student society at the University of Exeter were investigated following allegations of racism, sexism and homophobia. Revealed Whatsapp messages like *"bomb the mosques"* and *"we need a race war"*[24] were unsurprising to the participant, who said *"basically everyone knew the group chat was racist for months…but they didn't do anything about it",* and that there was no response to student complaints from Exeter until *"someone leaked the group chat to the Daily Mail".* They also discussed having a lecturer *"use the N-word in a lecture and then say it was for, like, shock value",* and not feeling like their university had the capacity to handle such issues.

Reflecting on an instance where she was sexually assaulted and touched inappropriately by a dance teacher, one participant talks about the lack of support that she received as her attendance suffered: *"I was, like, going up to teachers and adults and being like, listen, some shit's going down, I'm not sure*

[23] "Racist' law society disbanded by University of Exeter' | BBC NEWS, 2018
[24] 'University of Exeter investigates claims of racist WhatsApp group' | The Guardian, 2018

how I can keep showing up but I really want to. I don't want to fail my degree…I was looking for people to call me in…but there was none of that". Unfortunately, despite actively seeking support and expressing the desire to continue their studies, the participant had to leave their course following the incident.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The experiences shared by participants reveal a troubling pattern of silence, neglect, and unchecked harm within higher education settings, with universities acting as harmful and punitive influences rather than sources of support. A lack of compassion and accountability, limited reporting mechanisms, and an unwillingness to discuss sex work or racism at university marginalises racialised sex workers and perpetuates a cycle of isolation and inequality.

Participants noted the positive role played by university welfare advisors or counsellors in providing vital support or signposting for racialised sex workers, but also expressed concerns that a welfare system struggling to support students in general will rarely be equipped to support students with unique and complex needs.

Some of the solutions discussed were:

- Efforts to destigmatise sex worker status and improve on-campus support options, including the engagement of support organisations like Support for Student Sex Workers or National Ugly Mugs, or allowing students to create and maintain peer safety and support networks without fear of university retribution.
- Ending punitive and moralising policies, such as expulsion and eviction from student housing, in recognition that they're more likely to alienate and harm vulnerable students than to dissuade anyone from engaging in sex work.
- Investing in trainings or resources around sex work foruniversity staff, particularly student support and wellbeing staff, giving them confidence to discuss the support needs of student sex workers in a productive way and signpost to appropriate services.
- Enhanced mental health support, and the creation of safer spaces for student sex workers to discuss their issues and seek support.
- Enhanced financial support in recognition of cost of living and university costs., reducing the risks of survival sex work among university students.

National Ugly Mugs

Ending Violence Against Sex Workers

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