

Written evidence submitted by National Ugly Mugs (CVG0014)

Summary of Key Points

- While National Ugly Mugs (NUM) supports sex workers of all genders, we recognise the heavily-gendered nature of sex work, and present this evidence with this in mind.
- [NUM has been at the forefront of the Covid-19 response for sex workers](#), and has seen first-hand the economic and health damages which have occurred as the result of the pandemic.
- Sex workers have faced unequal access to government and other official support schemes for a variety of reasons, with many unable to access support at all. As a result, they have had to make risky decisions to balance their safety, financial security and wellbeing. In some cases, government support has been actively diverted to groups working against the wishes of sex workers, denying them the support they need.
- The stigma surrounding sex work has exacerbated these difficulties, with workers facing additional barriers to accessing grants and Universal Credit
- Workers who have been eligible for the SEISS grant or been successful in applying for Universal Credit have still faced extended wait times for payments to be received, and therefore many have still needed to obtain income during this time
- The economic impact of Covid-19 has had a significant negative impact on the health and wellbeing of sex workers, with greater levels of loneliness, stress, anxiety and depression reported to NUM during the lockdown period
- The government must ensure that future economic protections are extended to the most marginalised and vulnerable people to prevent future harms, and work to ensure that sex workers can be included as part of the broader labour market, thereby gaining the ability to access workers' rights and support

National Ugly Mugs (NUM)

Our Mission: Ending violence against sex workers

National Ugly Mugs (NUM) was founded in 2012 after 10 years of advocacy to the Home Office for a national reporting and alerting service where sex workers¹, front-line services and police forces could document harms experienced by sex workers. Since then, NUM has become the largest sex worker support organisation in the country, providing UK-wide victim support and crime prevention resources for people of all genders who work in sex industries. Our mandate is simply to 'end violence against sex workers'.

¹ We define sex work as the exchange of sexual services for money or resources. This definition, and this submission, incorporates a range of different modes of sex work, including, but not limited to; street sex work, brothel work, escorting, adult film, stripping, professional BDSM services, phone sex and camming.

We value and proudly centralise the experiences of sex workers. Our Research and Development (R&D) Team of 'experts by experience' contribute to operations and strategic leadership, as well as service development and delivery. As of December 2019, we have over 7500 members, with over 6100 of these identifying as sex workers, and the others comprising practitioners, frontline support services and other venues.

NUM:

- Takes reports of harms committed against sex workers - 80/100 per month;
- Produces warnings which are sent directly to the sex working community and support services throughout the UK alerting them to dangerous situations to prevent violent attacks - 1.17 million warnings since 2012;
- Provides practical and emotional support to sex workers through the NUM casework team, supporting people to cope and recover both within and outside of the criminal justice system;
- Shares intelligence with police in ways defined by the victim and supports sex workers in making full reports to police should they choose to do this;
- Assists in the identification, arrest and conviction of dangerous individuals operating in communities;
- Ensures sex workers have information and access to professional services when they have been a victim of crime;
- Provides education to police and practitioners to improve service delivery and victim responses;
- Uses data from our services for systemic advocacy to change law and policy to improve conditions that end all forms of violence against sex workers.

NUM's reach includes diverse on and off street sex industry workers. To read more about our work, please [click here](#) for our 2019/20 impact report.

NUM is an independent charity and has relationships with the National Police Chiefs Council, the Home Office, the National Crime Agency and is represented on the National Sex Working and Prostitution Working Group. NUM has relationships with many sex worker-led groups, including: ECP, Umbrella Lane, Scot-PEP, ICRSE, SWARM and SWARM North, UKAP and USW. These relationships are enhanced through the Research and Development (R&D) team of sex industry experts.

We are submitting to this inquiry due to the gendered nature of sex work. While we acknowledge that sex workers of all genders operate within the UK and face many of the same barriers, as of the end of 2019, 74% of our members identified as female.² NUM has been at the forefront of

² Female refers to self-identification provided upon applying for NUM membership, and includes both cis and trans

Covid-19 responses to sex workers during the pandemic. Sex workers comprise several marginalised populations; however there is an overrepresentation of women in sex work and responses to the pandemic must mitigate the disproportionate burden that women in poverty carry in our society.

How has the economic impact of Coronavirus affected men and women differently?

“Reduced business due to social distancing order. Massive impact on physical and mental health. Lack of food resulting in poor sleep and feeling run down. Struggling to see a positive. Anxiety at putting self at risk by having to take bookings and the poss of contracting virus but can't turn down the opportunity of money. Catch 22 situation.”

- NUM Member

The impact of Covid-19 on sex workers has been severe. Many of those who rely on in-person services to earn money have been placed in a difficult situation where they have had to decide whether to comply with lockdown restrictions and face financial hardship or continue to see clients and risk their lives and possibly face fines and other sanctions. At the beginning of the lockdown period, NUM conducted a needs assessment survey with our members and found that 60% were struggling to obtain basic necessities such as food and accommodation. This number rose steadily as lockdown continued. Our case work team were fielding calls daily from sex workers in need of food and money for bills and utilities.

While there has been a surge people beginning online sex work and other non-contact sex industry work, or migrating to it, doing so is not always practical as it is dependent on living situations and facilities, their ability to invest in the technologies to work online, as well as having the social capital to do so successfully. Women tend to have more family obligations and may hesitate to create an online presence due to fears of being outed. Furthermore, success in online sex work often requires sustained network-building, and thus workers making the transition now for safety reasons due to Covid-19 may not be able to adequately replace their income using this method.

Many sex workers have been excluded from government support schemes for various reasons. Those who are eligible for SEISS for example, have had to wait almost three months before receiving any income support. This has left them with a significant amount of time without funds:

“I've struggled the last couple of years and went through my savings. I've been working basically just to pay the bills and now I have no money to cover any of them.”

women. NUM as an organisation supports sex workers of all genders - male, female and non-binary, both cis- and transgender.

- NUM Member

“We would require more from the government... in particular, they could make a move processing the self-employed grant now rather than in June, as they currently envision”

- NUM Member

For those without adequate savings, they face the same dilemma as those with no access to public funds before any payment is made; whether to continue working or struggle to obtain the basic necessities that they need to survive.

Some women have attempted to close this gap by accessing Universal Credit, but this has also brought about a number of difficulties. Reports of waiting times to access Universal Credit suggest exceptional delays. Furthermore, the five-week waiting period following an accepted application creates additional pressure for sex workers to make ends meet during this time. Outside of the Covid-19 pandemic, [evidence has recently been delivered to the Department of Work and Pensions regarding survival sex work and Universal Credit](#), demonstrating that this is not an isolated issue. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated this. Even for sex workers who are eligible, the length of time without income is still substantial enough that they may need to find alternative sources of income during the waiting period rather than face long-term penalisation in their Universal Credit payments. With hungry kids to feed, they must work in order to survive the waiting period.

Alongside this, women have previously reported experiencing hostility and confusion when applying for Universal Credit and disclosing their sex work experience.

“When I tried to tell the advisor that I was a sex worker, he just laughed at me. I pulled up my statement of earnings online and showed them to him, and he just didn’t get it. I was trying to be honest and disclose all of my earnings from all my jobs and I felt ridiculed. It took a lot for me to tell him in the first place.”

- NUM Member

The exceptional stigma that sex workers, particularly women, deal with creates an additional barrier to accessing support, which must be dealt with head-on to ensure that they get the support that they are entitled to. The poor treatment that sex workers experience is particularly abhorrent, considering that many are impoverished women who have ability issues, many from diverse ethnical and racial backgrounds. There are barriers in accessing government support for marginalised populations that have only been underlined during this pandemic. Longer term strategies are needed to end structural inequalities and to facilitate the economic inclusion and support of women in poverty.

To what extent do the different impacts on men and women reflect existing sex or gender-based inequalities?

The reasons why people engage in sex work reflect existing sex and gender-based inequalities. Those across gender identities experience poverty; however, sex industries are mainly comprised of women who are most able to make a living across the sector. Reasons for involvement in sex work and survival sex during and beyond the pandemic varies and includes:

- The need to supplement insufficient income from other jobs; particularly for those in precarious or underpaid positions;
- The need to supplement insufficient student loans or other benefits;
- The need to fit work around caring responsibilities such as childcare or caring for family members;
- Difficulties accessing work within the mainstream labour market, such as for those with disabilities;
- Low pay for women (particularly women of color) in mainstream work relative to some roles in sex industries;
- Difficulties accessing employment due to additional stigma they may face, particularly for trans people;
- Inability to access employment due to migration or asylum status.

A number of these difficulties are overwhelmingly faced by women. Caroline Nokes acknowledged in the introduction to this inquiry that: *“women are more likely to have primary responsibility for childcare. They are more likely to work in the service sector, and to be in insecure or zero hours work. And more likely to be more dependent on social security, and in insecure housing. They are over-represented in jobs which are not eligible for statutory sick pay.”* For these same reasons, women are more likely to use income from sex work to support themselves and their dependents, thereby increasing their vulnerability during Covid-19. They are less likely to have access to savings to support themselves until an SEISS grant or Universal Credit payment comes in, and they may not have access to bank accounts or any financial instruments at all.

Furthermore, there has been no direct support to sex workers from government, which is reflective of the stigma that these workers currently face as they are invisibilised in the work force. Not only have sex workers had to risk their own health to survive, but they have also faced media ridicule and punitive policing throughout the pandemic. NUM has been directly contacted by eight journalists during the pandemic seeking to produce sensationalised stories, while other media outlets have continued to publish damaging articles such as “Scots prostitutes risking lives by continuing to work during coronavirus lockdown” (6th April 2020, The Daily Record) and “Fury over prostitute travelling Yorkshire to offer sex in brothel on wheels during lockdown”

(12th April 2020, The Daily Star). At the same time, police forces across the UK have continued to raid and close down brothels, causing not only significant distress to workers but also removing their sources of financial support without an offer of alternatives. The fining of street-based sex workers has increased significantly, forcing them to work in less visible and thus less safe areas. They may see clients they would not normally see and provide services that they are not comfortable doing, all to pay off the government imposed fine. The choice between safety and survival is not one that any person should be forced to make.

How have Government measures affected economic inequalities for men and women?

To restate, the measures taken by the government have affected economic inequalities between men and women through the exacerbation of the divide between those involved in sex work, which has significant female overrepresentation. While some male sex workers have contacted NUM and received support, we have overwhelmingly received requests for help from female and non-binary workers. The economic and social pressures which drive people into sex work are often reflective of the gendered division of labour within society, thus these inequalities have been most keenly felt by female and non-binary people.

How effective has the Government's economic support package, in particular, been for particular groups of men and women?

Many sex workers have been excluded from the economic support packages provided by the government for a variety of reasons:

- They have not been registered as self-employed or not been for a long enough period of time to be eligible for any grants;
- They are migrant workers and thus have no recourse to public funds;
- They have uncertain or precarious status as workers;
- They have not earned enough to have completed tax returns in the previous two years;
- They are in a financially abusive relationship or experiencing domestic abuse and have no control over the funds going into their households;
- They do not have bank accounts in which to receive funds, as banks and other financial services (including payment methods such as PayPal) discriminate against sex workers. We have received complaints from sex workers during the pandemic who were denied bank accounts. This made it difficult for sex workers to receive pandemic hardship funds offered by the sex worker mutual aid that we were administering.

Workers who do not have bank accounts must operate with cash at a time where retailers, including public transit, preferred card payments. This leads to further economic exclusion of women in sex work.

Furthermore, the precarious social and economic position of sex work has meant that they have struggled to navigate a confusing and unclear system of support packages offered by the government. Among those surveyed as part of our Needs Assessment, one in four needed help accessing, understanding and applying to the state support that they are entitled to. This problem occurs because these support packages are not created with sex workers in mind.

The stigma of sex work has also been visible in additional grant applications. NUM has supported a worker who was denied funding by her local council to support her transition from in-person sex work to online sex work during the pandemic. She wanted to transition to online work as a safer mode with non-contact sex work options,, ensuring that she could still earn money despite the circumstances. Her application was rejected despite fulfilling all eligibility criteria due to a “reputational risk for the council which outweighed the economic benefits of supporting her application.” Sex work is not illegal and we must support those to reduce harm in ways that work for their circumstances while creating options and pathways for liveable wage employment for all.

Some of the most marginalised populations of women who access sex worker-led organisations are blocked from accessing tax-payer funded support in a pandemic, due to ideological differences. [In Scotland, the government pledged £61,000 to the Encompass Network](#), a network of agencies focused on encouraging people to exit sex work through trauma support and counselling, which uses a violence against women approach, contrasting with the experiences and perceptions of sex workers themselves. None of the nine services in the Encompass Network are sex-worker led, and organisations which have been directly supporting the requests and needs of sex workers during the pandemic, such as Umbrella Lane and SCOT-PEP, have received no official support at all. The exclusion of sex workers from government support has meant that many have had to rely on charitable donations and generosity for support. NUM has provided support to both the Sex Workers’ Advocacy and Resistance Movement (SWARM) and Umbrella Lane in obtaining corporate donations to provide hardship grants to workers with no other income. NUM has provided emergency vouchers for food and hygiene supplies for those unable to access other forms of support. As of 01/07/2020 , with the help of some progressive funders, we have provided 318 vouchers to workers across the UK (215 to organisations, 103 to individuals) in the soft launch phase of this pandemic response strategy. This ensured that sex workers could stave off hunger for at least a day or two while making decisions about sex working and waiting for other resources. We have secured state aid and plan to fully roll out our pandemic response strategy for UK sex workers in the coming weeks.

During the process of re-opening the country’s economy, sex workers have struggled to obtain information on when they could go back to work. There is little government guidance for sex workers about the implications of house or hotel visits and it is often unclear into which category

their work places fall. Several lap dancing clubs (Sexual Entertainment Venues, licensed under the Policing and Crime Act 2009), for example, prepared social distancing measures in order to re-open on the weekend of the 04 July, only to be put on the list of venues that had to remain closed last minute. For dancers, this means no possibility to plan their income sources in the near future.

What has the specific economic impact been on men and women with other protected characteristics or intersecting identities (for example, women or men with disabilities; women and men from BAME communities; pregnant women)

As well as sex and gender, other marginalised groups and intersecting identities are also disproportionately represented in sex work, and this has included groups who are more likely to face difficulties in obtaining economic support for the reasons listed above. Their belonging to other marginalised groups - including those with disabilities, people of colour, lgbq+ and trans people, single parents or carers - may be a driving force behind their involvement in sex work (see p. 3-4), and thus people belonging to those communities are likely to be hit even harder by the consequences of Covid-19. Sex workers experience racism and ableism just as others in our communities do.

In particular, the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated loneliness, stress, anxiety, depression and other mental health issues amongst sex workers. The precarity, uncertainty and lack of support, alongside continued visible stigmatisation, has led to negative health consequences

“[I need] mental support and hope”

- NUM Member

“I feel very alone because my only friends are at the parlour I work and I don’t have close family. It’s like my life has ended.”

- NUM Member

While prioritising economic need, this cannot be disentangled from individual and societal health and wellbeing. Economic protection and safety is vital to support physical and mental health, increase security and allow people to access the resources that they need without worry or fear.

What measures should the Government put in place to ensure gender equality in the longer-term economic recovery from Coronavirus, with specific reference to any upcoming financial announcements?

- First and foremost, the government must recognise sex workers as full participants in the labour market, thereby granting them the same rights to safety, justice and financial

security that all other workers are granted. This must begin with the full decriminalisation of consensual sex work, including the removal of penalties for soliciting and brothel-keeping. Providing sex workers with the same workplace rights and protections as all other workers will increase their access to support schemes throughout Covid-19 and for future economic and personal recovery.

- The government must recognise the difficulties and discrimination that sex workers may face in accessing financial support or services, and must take steps to prevent this. These may include provisions similar to those outlined in the Equality Act 2010 that make it illegal to discriminate against a person based on their current or former involvement in sex work, which would allow sex workers to access banking, payment methods and grants in the same way that others can.
- The government must listen to and understand the complex and diverse reasons why people engage in sex work and consider [reform or alternative measures to support people and avoid sex work being used as a survival mechanism](#). These may include ending the five-week waiting period for universal credit amongst other solutions [recommended by evidence as part of these inquiries](#).
- The Department of Work and Pensions, particularly those who are front-line workers (such as at Job Centre venues or the Universal Credit telephone line) must be educated on sex work issues to improve the ability and confidence of sex workers to access Universal Credit without fear, stigma or ridicule.

Ultimately, it is vital that the government recognise populations which are at increased risk of harm and vulnerability during the Covid-19 crisis and beyond and take steps to improve inclusion and support for those that need it the most. Many sex workers have felt forced to turn to charities or non-profit organisations to survive during this pandemic, or have had to make difficult choices regarding their health and that of their families in choosing between survival and safety. Insights and analyses from active sex workers and the organisations that they trust must contribute to formulating solutions to the systemic issues laid bare as a result of the pandemic. Women in sex work experience particular marginalisation and they need a pathway to policy-makers, to tell their own story and influence how this committee interprets the true impact of this pandemic on the lives of women, whether or not you agree with their declaration of sex work as work.

The women NUM serves are often silenced by other women with the power to block their input into policy-making. We thank you for the opportunity to share some commentary about gender and the pandemic and we look forward to a deeper dive into this issue with you.

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