

“I feel safe when I’m working with her”

**Sex workers’ experiences of
management and other third parties.**



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Sex workers’ experiences of management
and other third parties.**

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Consulting on legislation and casework

The English Collective of Prostitutes

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Executive summary

This report is based on the findings from a survey of 185 sex workers in all modes of full service sex work in England in 2019-2020. It asked about their experiences with criminalised third parties such as colleagues, managers, receptionists, security staff, drivers etcetera. The aim of the study was to map which third parties are present in sex work, and what workers' experiences are with those third parties.



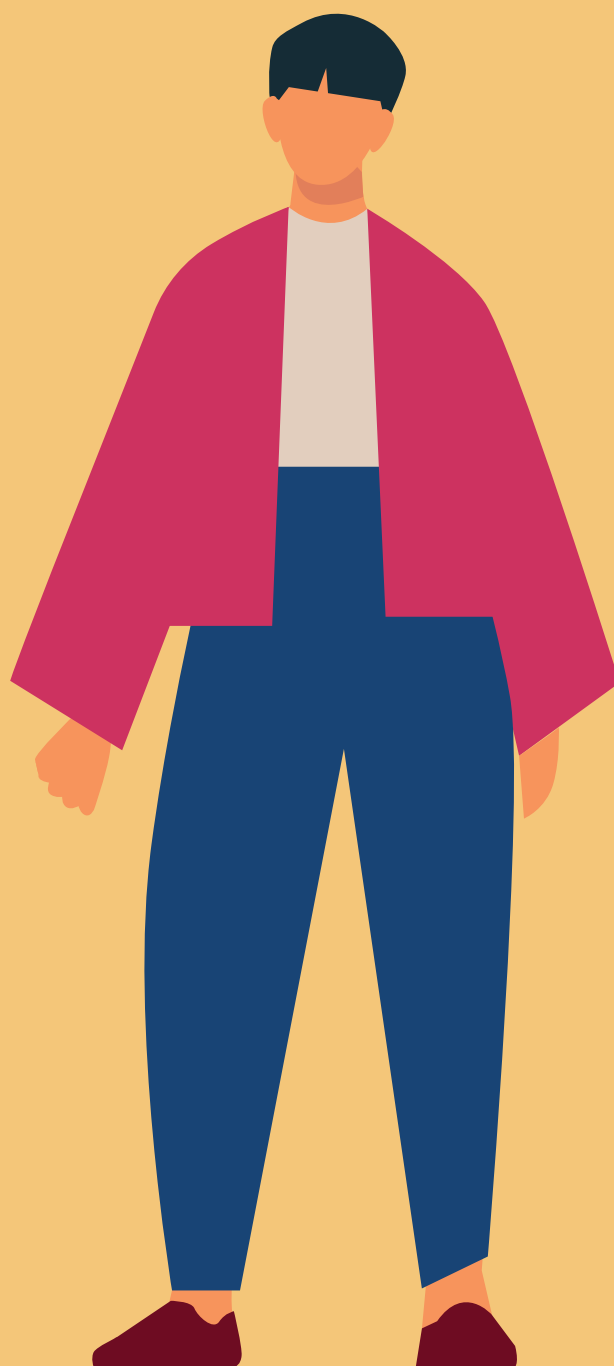
Key findings:

- Sex work is legal to do in England, but only in isolation. Management, co-working for safety, letting out premises, and providing many other non-managerial services to sex workers are criminalised.
- The most commonly encountered third parties as reported by participants are not managers. Instead, the most common third party are other sex workers themselves – mainly in the role of colleagues.
- Sex workers have a mix of experiences with third parties: positive, negative, and neutral. However, participants describe more positive experiences with non-managerial third parties (colleagues, receptionists, cleaners etc.), and more negative experiences with managers.
- Like in many other forms of informal work, third parties are often friends or partners.
- Sex workers very commonly leave unsatisfactory work situations and workplaces, either to work in a different workplace, or to work independently.
- Sex workers freely and commonly move from one mode of sex work to another, depending on their circumstances and needs. For instance, they move from agency work to independent work, or from work in premises to street-based work.
- Many sex workers are unclear on the legal status of third parties, and legislation criminalising third parties is interpreted and policed vastly different by different police forces.
- Many participants feel forced to choose between working alone and without support, or risking prosecution for themselves or any third parties they work with.
- The criminalisation of third parties and workplaces reduces sex workers' access to labour rights, to workplaces with good management practices, to cooperatives and worker-managed workplaces, and to the police and the justice system.
- Sex workers argue for legal change to the status of criminalised third parties in order to improve their working conditions and relationships with them.

Introduction and context

Full-service sex work is the one occupation in England that is completely legal only when the worker works alone. This is caused by the criminalisation of workplaces and third parties, which assumes that sex workers are in all cases controlled or coerced by third parties, and that third parties exert high levels of control over sex workers.

Although this criminalisation at first glance seems to be aimed at third parties who force or abuse those who do sex work, there is no distinction in UK law between coercion and non-coercive assistance by third parties in the sex industry (Hickle and Roe-Sepowitz, 2016; Home Affairs Committee, 2016). This means that third parties who are consented to, hired by sex workers, or are sex workers themselves are also criminalised. This can make it more difficult for sex workers to undertake their work safely, and prevents them from working together for safety (World Health Organization, 2012; Pitcher and Wijers, 2014; Pitcher, 2015; English Collective of Prostitutes, 2016).



Five main modes of full-service sex work:

1. Indoor premises
2. Independent indoor work
3. Street-based work
4. Clubs and parties
5. Agency work

Third parties usually provide skills or services that improve sex workers' ability to find or meet clients, keep them safe, or free up their time. To map the relationship between sex workers and third parties, 185 current (at the time of research: 2019-2020) full-service sex workers were surveyed on third parties in their current and past workplaces. These participants represent a range of experiences in different modes of sex work, as well as diverse ages, genders, migration backgrounds and sexualities. Notably, 48% of participants stated they have a disability or chronic illness. Additionally, the legal status of third parties was explored in-depth in consultation with the English Collective of Prostitutes, who have decades of casework experience in the area of sex work.

**Sex workers****Clients**

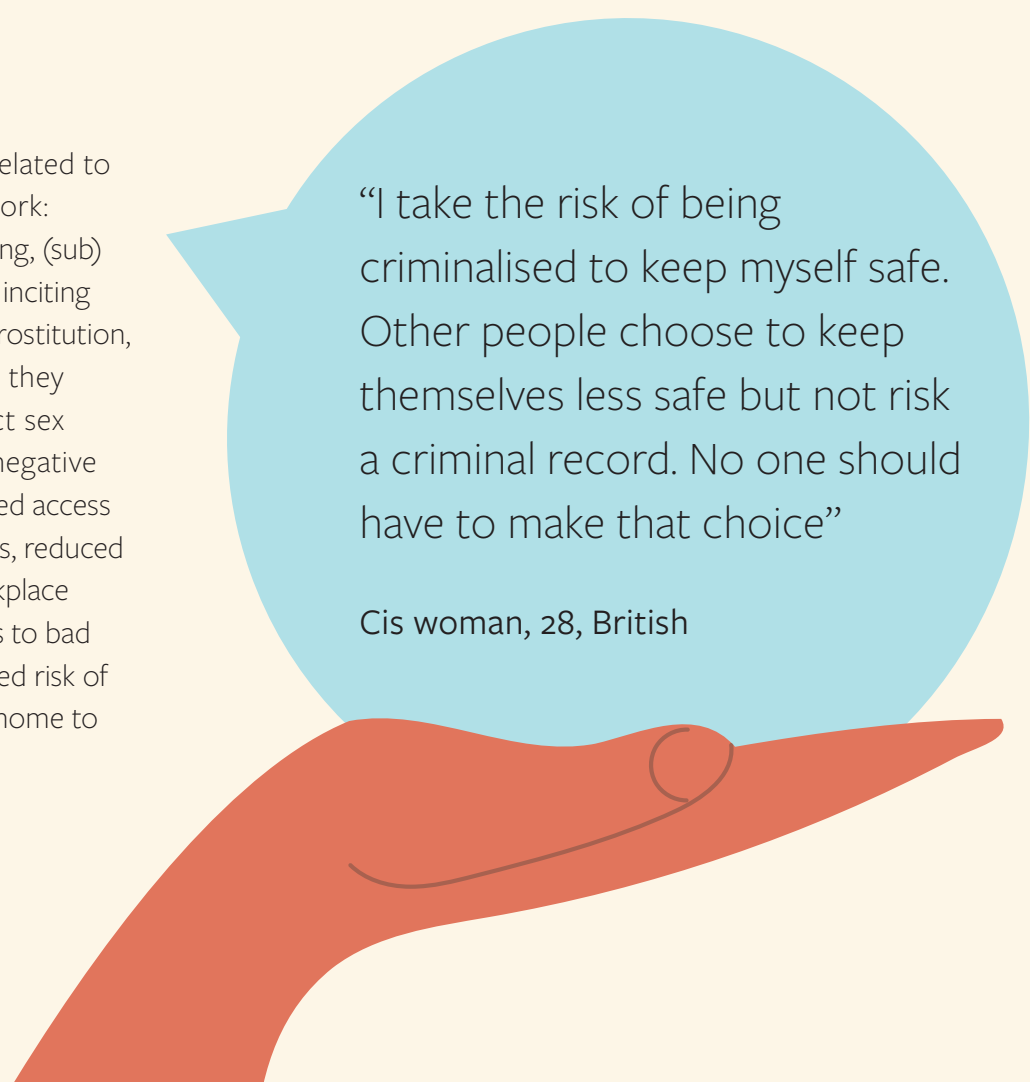
Third parties:
managers, colleagues,
maids, drivers,
cleaners, security staff,
landlords, personal
assistant, receptionists

How are third parties criminalised?

Legislation criminalising third parties has a broad scope, and covers managers, third parties without managerial power, and sex workers themselves. Third party legislation also criminalises nearly all workspaces. The likelihood of policing and prosecution for third party offences differs depending on location, context and local police forces. However, the fear of prosecution reduces sex workers' access to justice and labour right, increases stigma and isolation. This leads many workers to feel that they have to choose between breaking the law or working unsafely.

Legislation

There are five offences related to third party roles in sex work: (assisting in) brothel keeping, (sub) letting premises/brothels, inciting prostitution, controlling prostitution, and trafficking. Although they seemingly exist to protect sex workers, they also have negative effects on workers: reduced access to justice and labour rights, reduced safety at work, fewer workplace options, fewer alternatives to bad management, and increased risk of losing their workplace or home to police intervention.



"I take the risk of being criminalised to keep myself safe. Other people choose to keep themselves less safe but not risk a criminal record. No one should have to make that choice"

Cis woman, 28, British

Sexual Offences Act
1956 S33-35

**Managing a brothel (or assisting in
brothel management)**

- Brothel managers
- Brothel owners
- Receptionists
- Maids
- Security
- Colleagues and co-workers
- Cleaners

(Sub)letting premises used as a brothel

- Colleagues subletting a workspace
- Friends or others subletting a workspace
- Landlords

Sexual Offences Act
2003 S52 & S53

Inciting prostitution

- Brothel and agency managers
- Colleagues helping or advising new workers

Controlling prostitution

- Brothel and agency managers
- Receptionists
- Maids
- Security staff
- Personal assistants
- Safety buddies
- Duo partners
- Potentially: any other third party

Modern Slavery Act
2015 S2

Trafficking

- Drivers
- Any other party if transport takes place

Sexual Offences Act 1956, sections 33-35

The Sexual Offences Act 1956 criminalises third parties in relation to brothel management and the letting out of a venue to be used as a brothel. Managing a brothel is defined expansively: it includes any form of influence over a space in which two or more people offer sexual services, and does not need to include control or compulsion. This means that a third party can be convicted of brothel keeping regardless of whether the work is voluntary or not, and regardless of the working conditions. Assisting in the management of a brothel is very broadly defined and has been used to prosecute receptionists, cleaners, security staff, and sex workers themselves.

Landlords who are unaware of a brothel on their property can be prosecuted under brothel keeping legislation. However, in the experience of the English Collective of Prostitutes, the police is more likely to inform the landlord of the sex work taking place and encourage the landlord to evict the sex working tenant or tenants.

Sexual Offences Act 2003, sections 52-53

The Sexual Offences Act 2003 criminalises anyone who causes or incites any other person to become a prostitute, or who controls any of the activities related to another person's prostitution. Although the wording of the law seems to imply some form of force or lack of consent, third parties can be convicted even if the worker involved has agreed to work together. Incitement covers third parties who force or coerce others to start sex work, but also does not require force or pressure: it can include suggesting, proposing, or encouraging

a person to start sex work, and this broad interpretation means workers and organisations are hesitant to offer advice to new sex workers.

Controlling a sex worker for gain may include management tasks such as control over the sex workers' prices, the place of work, or the number of clients. However, in the experience of the English Collective of Prostitutes, it also includes other types of third party support, such as organising a sex worker's diary, being in charge of travel arrangements, or booking in appointments.

Modern Slavery Act 2015, section 2

The Modern Slavery Act 2015 criminalises the arranging or facilitation of travel (within, through or outside the UK) of another person, in order for this other person to be exploited. Under trafficking legislation, consensual sex work can be classified as exploitation.

In the public imagination and in media, trafficking is usually seen as the moving of women across borders, either through force or deception, in order for them to do sex work they do not want to be doing. However, trafficking charges can be used for the prosecution of any person knowingly involved in the transport or travel of a sex worker, do not require force or coercion, and can include third parties who are requested by a sex worker to provide transport. This means that any person who knowingly provides transport for a sex worker could be convicted of trafficking. This travel or transport does not require the crossing of borders or even county lines, and a few miles of travel is sufficient.

Effects of criminalisation on sex workers


Third party legislation has the effect of criminalising workplaces, the managing of sex workers or premises, and the provision of services and transportation to sex workers. Additionally, sex workers – as workers, colleagues or house mates – can be criminalised for working together, sharing premises, providing help to each other and to third parties, and for arranging transport for each other. In all these cases, it is still a crime if the sex worker consented to or requested the third party activities. In fact, sex workers can be convicted of assisting in the management of a brothel in which they themselves work and are managed, meaning they are assisting in a crime they themselves are considered a victim of.

Participants describe several negative effects that third party criminalisation has on them. The fact that managing a brothel is a crime reduces or removes access to labour rights or

workplace regulations, and increases rather than decreases sex workers' risk of bad or dangerous management.

It also makes third parties who provide security less willing to provide these services. The English Collective of Prostitutes has seen a decrease in premises hiring security due to the policing of security staff. If third parties were no longer criminalised, abusive management and harmful workplace practices would still be illegal under workplace regulations and labour legislation, just like in other industries.

The fear of raids of premises pushes workers to lone working even if they would feel safer working with others.

A stylized illustration of a hand with orange skin, pointing its index finger towards a dark red speech bubble. The hand is positioned on the right side of the page, with the index finger pointing left towards the text inside the bubble.

“[third party criminalisation] emboldened the brothel owner to impose really unethical and unsafe work practices, as what she was doing was already illegal, so it really didn't matter to her”

Cis woman, 29, British

“

I do feel less safe from clients working on my own, particularly when I have had to manage difficult situations without support. It also means that I haven't been able to report incidents or follow up on incidents with the police. I have to accept I'll never receive justice.

Cis woman, 35, British

For those who work from home, especially if they share that home with other workers, fear being evicted by their landlord or being prosecuted for brothel keeping. Clients are aware of this and have used it to cross boundaries or assault workers.

“

The fact that it is criminalised definitely means that I would never report anything to the police, which gives clients an immense degree of power over me, and this is something all of my duo partners and workers I've shared places with have echoed.

Non-binary questioning, 22, EU migrant

Similarly, workers in premises feel unable to report crimes against them to the police, since they fear that any police involvement will lead to their workplace being shut down or they themselves being prosecuted:

“

Should I report anything my workplace will be shut down and myself and my 40+ colleagues (many of whom I consider friends) would suddenly be unemployed.

Cis woman, 24, British

One participant described a personal friendship that had moved from third party support into abusive management. Although she would like to be able to leave this relationship, criminalisation is making it harder for her to leave and access support, and she feels that criminalisation exacerbates her situation rather than supports her to leave:

“

While in theory [criminalisation] should deter manipulative or coercive individuals from controlling SWs and profiting from that (...) I am currently debating whether or not to approach police with my situation, as while I feel it has gotten out of hand I also do not wish to see him go to jail.


Cis woman, 35, British

Sex workers report that the criminalisation of workplaces and third parties leads to: reduced access to justice and labour rights, reduced safety at work, fewer workplace options, worse management practices, being forced to work in isolation, increased power of third parties over workers, and increased risk of losing their workplace or home to police intervention.



Mapping third parties / who are third parties?

The third parties most commonly encountered by sex workers in this research are not managers, but sex working colleagues. In addition to third parties employed in workplaces like premises, agencies and clubs, sex workers directly hire third parties to provide services for them. A large proportion of those taking on third party roles supporting sex workers are friends, family members and romantic partners of sex workers. Colleagues take on a range of roles for each other, including co-workers, co-entrepreneurs, security, client management, workplace sharing, and information and skill improvement.

A stylized illustration of a hand with dark brown skin and fingers, holding a green speech bubble. The hand is positioned at the top of the bubble, with the thumb and index finger visible. The speech bubble is a light green color with a darker green outline and a small tail pointing towards the top right. The background is a solid light orange color.

“I have a group of friends who all look out for each other, doing safety checks, touring together, and being supportive with chats (...) Friends who are other workers have passed on clients, shared tips, been safety buddies, helped with website, taken pictures”

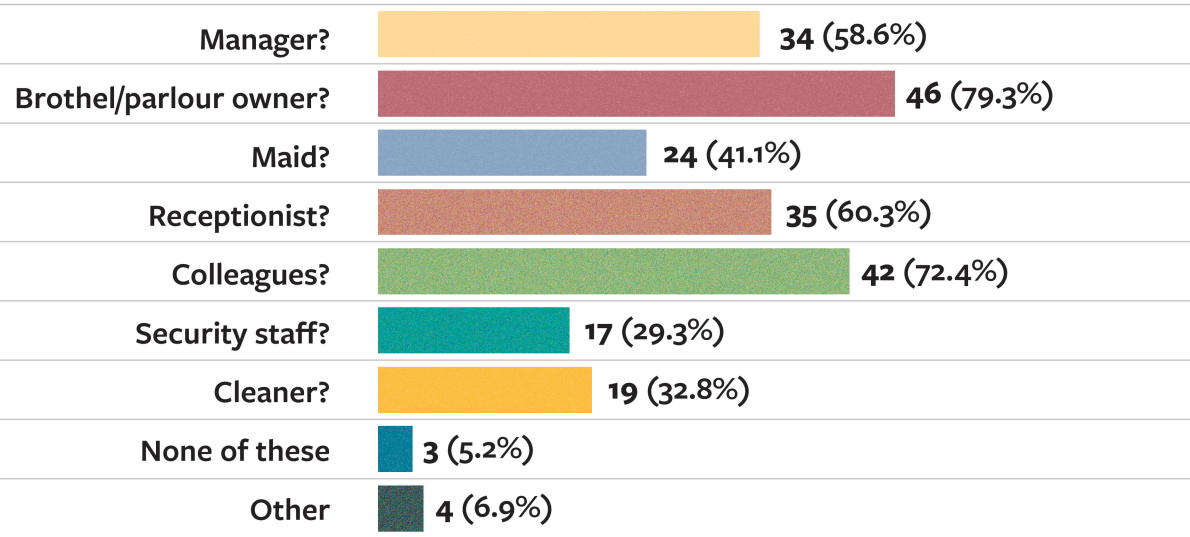
Cis woman, 42, British

Third parties in different modes of sex work

Participants with experience working in premises, such as parlours, saunas and brothels, make up 30.3% of all participants (56 individuals). They have encountered mainly premise owners, colleagues, managers and receptionists in those workplaces.

Figure one: Third parties in indoor premise work.

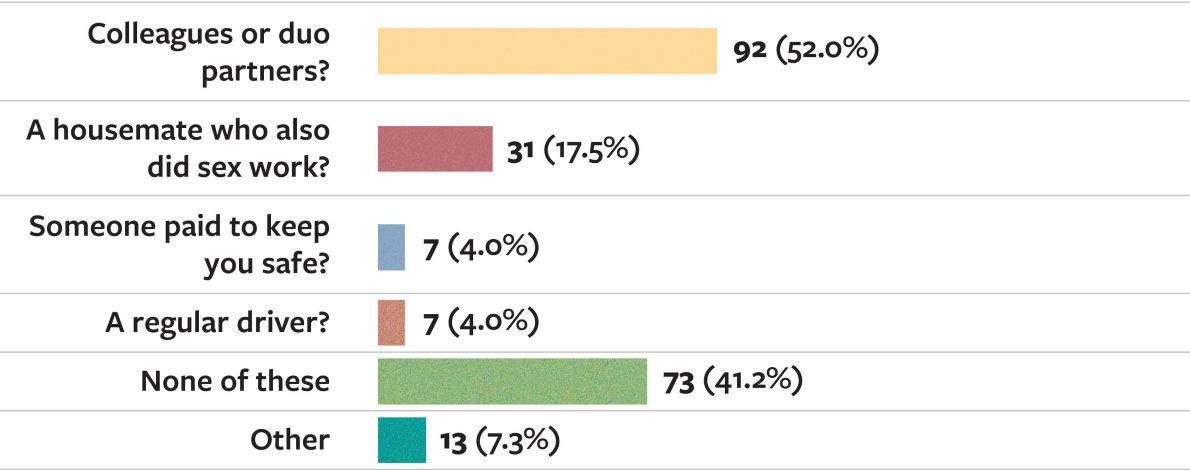
When you worked in a brothel or parlour, was there a:



Participants with experience of independent indoor sex work make up 95.7% of all participants (177 individuals). They have encountered mainly colleagues, hired third parties themselves ([see the next section](#)) or worked completely alone.

Figure two: Third parties in indoor independent work

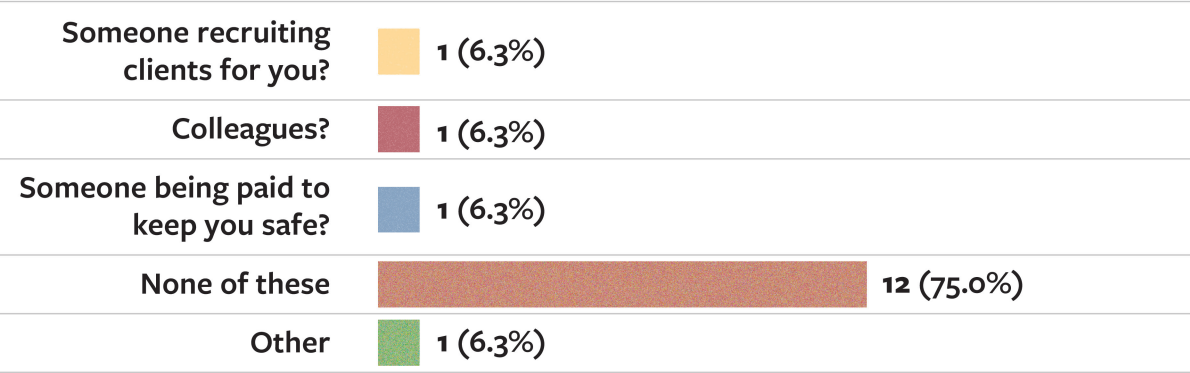
When you worked independently, did you have:



Participants with experience of street-based work make up 8.6% of all participants (16 individuals) mainly worked without any third parties. One person had another person recruiting clients for them, one person had colleagues in their street work, one person paid someone to keep them safe, and the person who selected ‘other’ had an unpaid friend keeping an eye on their safety.

Figure three: Third parties in street-based work

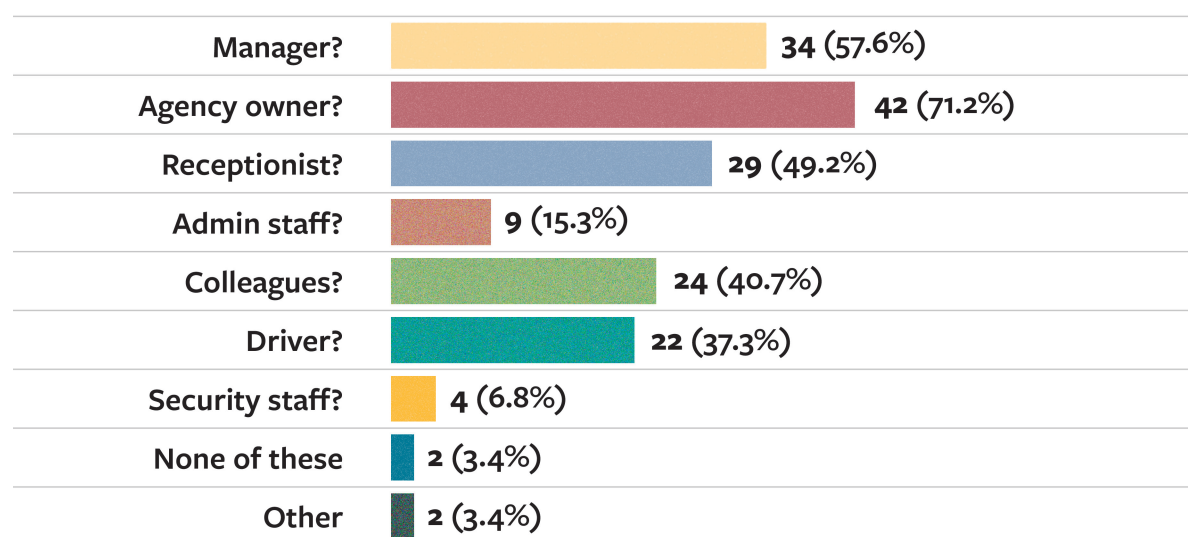
When you did street-based work, did you have:



Participants with experience working for escorting agencies make up 31.9% of all participants (59 individuals). They have encountered mainly agency owners, agency managers, receptionists, colleagues and drivers.

Figure four: Third parties in agency work

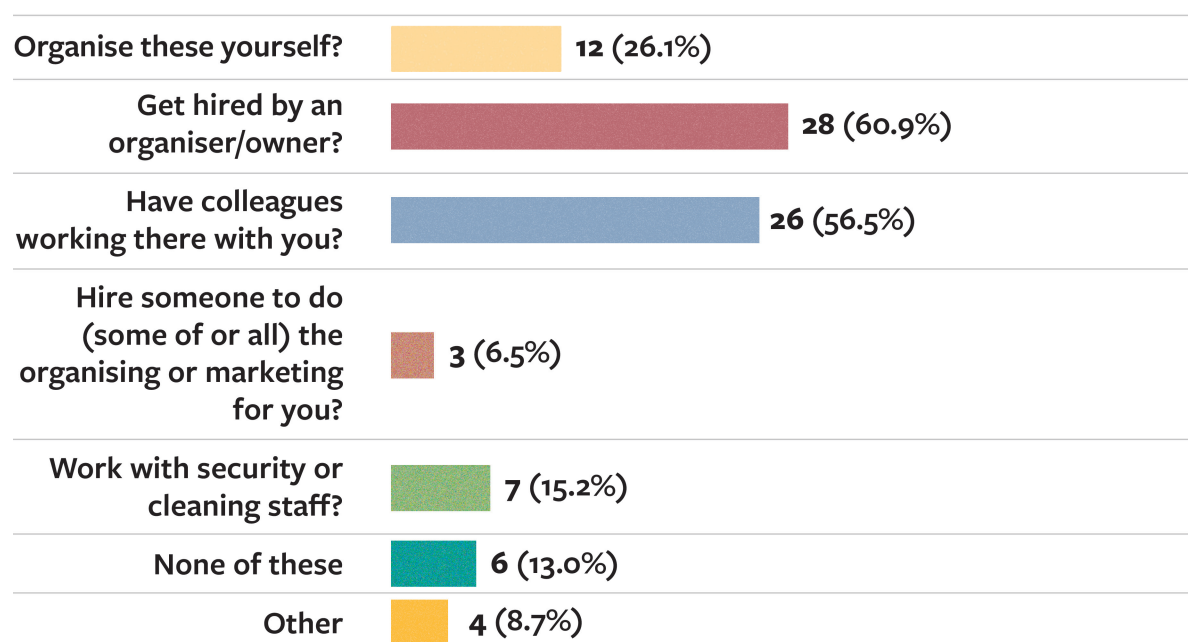
When you did street-based work, did you have:



Participants with experience working in sex clubs, at sex parties, or at sex-related events make up 24.9% of all participants (46 individuals). They have encountered mainly club owners, event organisers and colleagues. However, a sizable minority have organised events which they worked at themselves.

Figure five: Third parties at clubs/parties

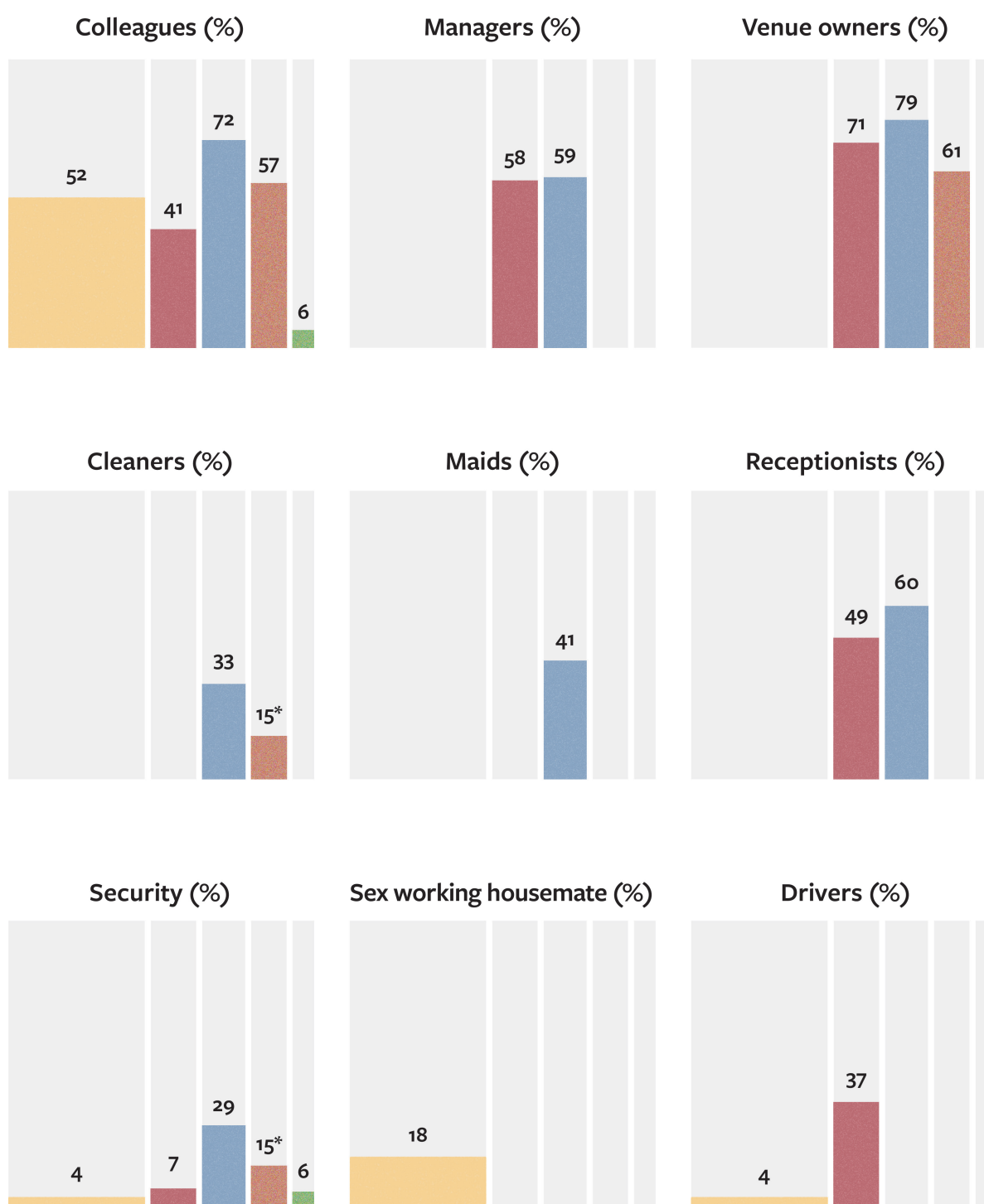
When you worked at sex parties/clubs or at kink parties/clubs, did you:



The data visualisation in Figure 9 (on the next page) is providing a simplified view of the data and shows in relative sizes which third parties are most commonly engaged by sex workers participating in this research.

Figure six: Which third parties do sex workers in the UK work with?*Worker location (number of respondents):*

- Independent indoor workers (177) ● Agency workers (59) ● Premise workers (56)
- Party/club workers (46) ● Street-based workers (16)



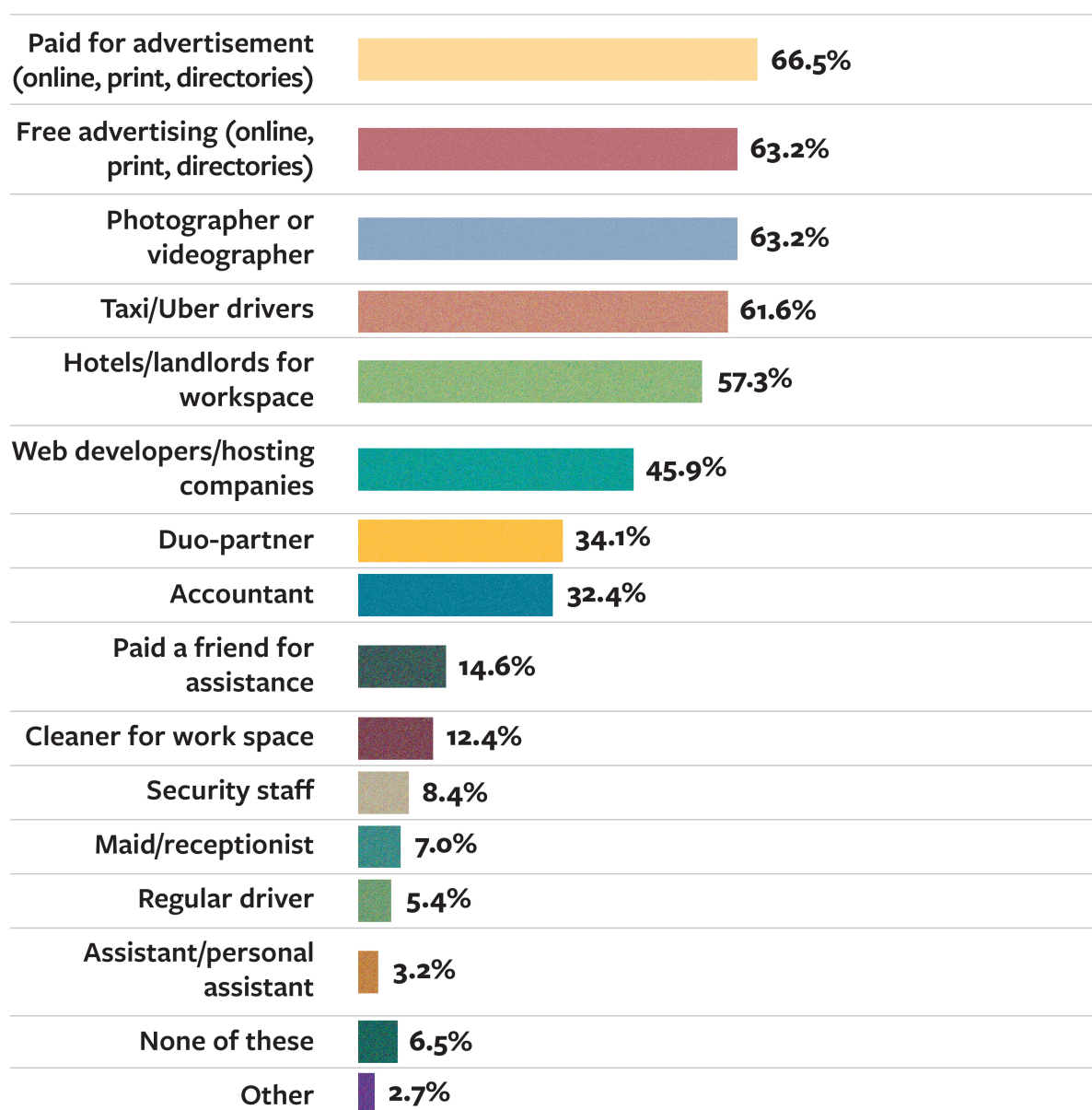
* Party/club workers combined survey results for 'Cleaners' and 'Security'

Sex workers hiring third parties

At the time of the survey, only 6.5% of respondents reported currently having a third party who is in a managerial role, although many participants have had managers in past workplaces. However, in addition to managers there is a wide variety of third parties who are hired by sex workers to provide services in relation to their work. This includes third parties who are less likely to be criminalised, such as advertisers, photographers, taxi drivers and hotels, but also third parties who are more likely to be criminalised, such as security staff, receptionists, regular drivers and personal assistants.

Figure seven: Other third parties

Have you ever hired/paid one of the following people in your sex work?



Respondents were especially positive about their interactions with their personal assistant or secretary:

“
My secretary affects my well-being extremely positively as they save me from a part of the job that is boring, repetitive but also essential to keep my business alive. I think most people would say the same of their personal assistant.
Questioning woman, 28, EU migrant

Participants stressed the importance of the administrative side of independent sex work and the fact that having assistance with these tasks allows them to focus on the parts of their work that help them make money.

The role of drivers and security staff largely overlap, with an emphasis on the security role of the driver for workers who do independent or agency outcalls. One agency worker explains how she herself employed a driver to provide security services, since the agency did not provide that service to workers:

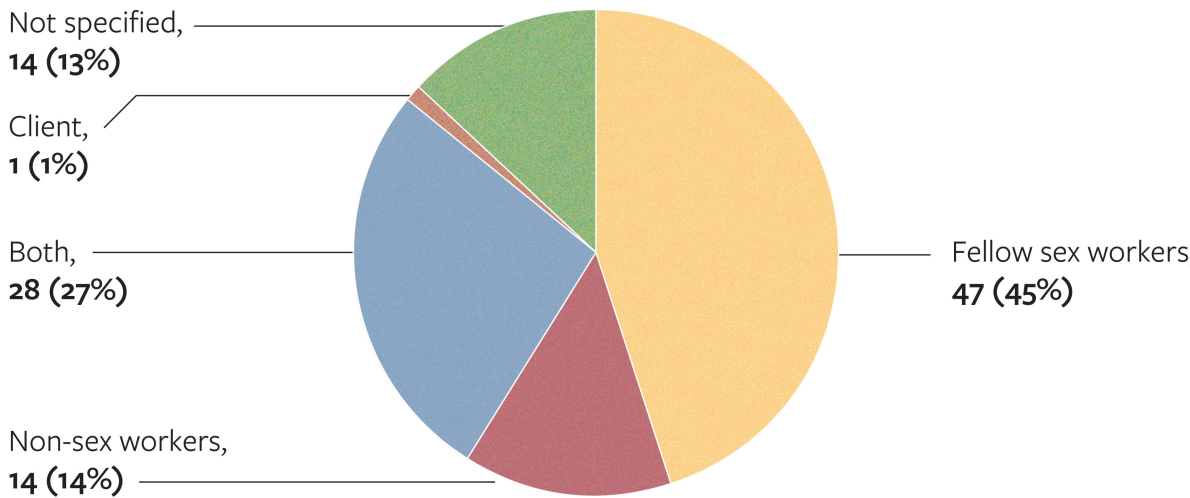
“
I had an arrangement where I got the money and took it out to the driver as a way of checking in to say I was OK. Then the driver would keep track of time and we had security system if I was late calling/getting out.
Cis woman, 51, British

Friends, family and partners as third parties

Out of 185 participants, 104 (56.8%) has had friends involved with or helping with their sex work, and 27 (14.6%) participants has paid a friend for help with work. In the majority of cases, these are either sex working friends, or a mix of sex worker and non-sex worker friends.

Figure eight: Friends or acquaintances who help with work

Identity of friends or acquaintances who have been involved with, or helped with, work:



The most common third party roles of friends of participants are security support, advice, taking work photos and administrative or marketing support.

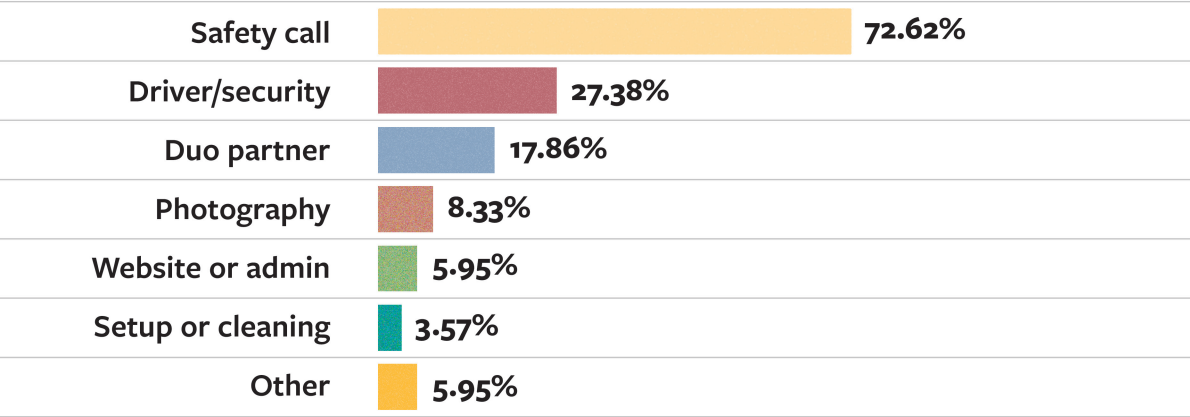
“
I have had friends and partners do photography and copy-editing work for me. My main [safety] buddy is my best friend. None are sex workers.
Cis woman, 26, EU migrant

The majority of this help from friends is unpaid, but 14.6% of participants has paid a friend for help or support. Non-sex working friends or partners are more likely to take on an in-person security role.

“
I have a friend who is my safety call if my husband is unavailable. Sometimes he will also help me clean my incall.
Cis woman, 27, British

Out of 185 participants, 45.4% of participants (84 persons) has had a partner take on a third party role to support their sex work. Those third party roles include being a safety call, being a duo partner, and driving or providing security services. Less often mentioned support includes photography, administrative help, and the set up or clean up of a workspace.

Figure nine: Types of support from partners
Types of support from/involvement of partners:



Sex workers regularly worry about how any contact with the police may affect third parties, including friends and partners:

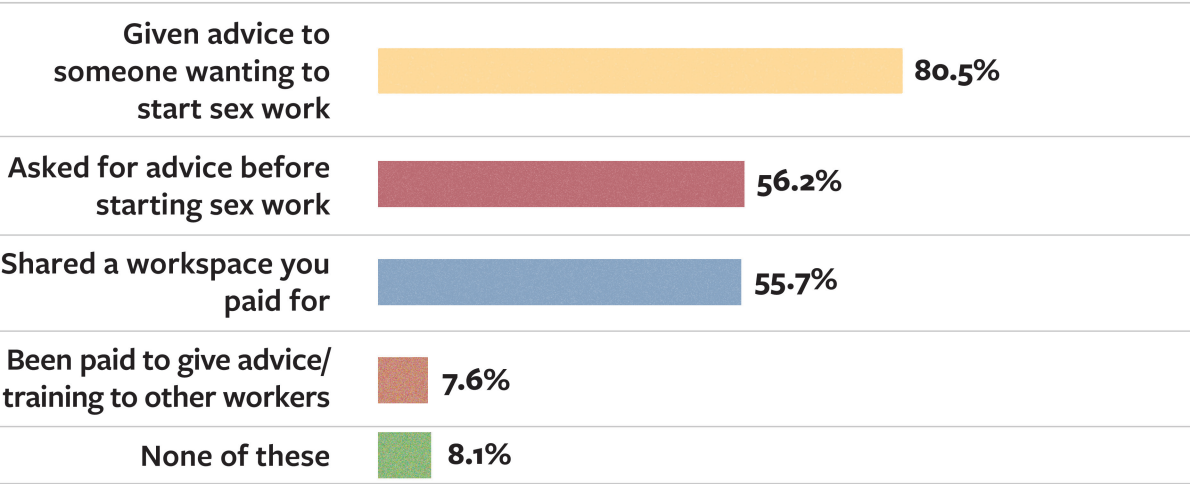
“
I would generally never talk to the police, but especially because their investigation into any crimes perpetrated against me may lead to my partner and I being persecuted or losing our home.
Cis woman, 26, British

Sex workers as third parties or colleagues

Due to inconsistent policing and the broad interpretation of third party legislation, there are several activities common to self-employment which could be seen as criminal third party behaviour when done by sex workers. This includes sharing workspace with other workers, giving advice to someone new to the field, and being paid for giving training or advice.

Figure ten: Sex workers in third party roles

Have you ever...?



The vast majority of sex workers in this research have taken on a third party role at least once in their career. Of those respondents who have both sex working and non-sex working friends involved with their work, many specified that the majority of the time, the friends helping them are fellow sex workers, and non-sex worker help is more incidental:



Yes, friends have helped by being a safety call and with advertising (web design, photography, wording on ads etc.). Most, but not all, were sex workers.

Trans woman, 30, EU migrant

Colleagues, either in managed workplaces or while working independently, take on a range of roles for each other, including: co-workers, co-entrepreneurs, security, workplace sharing, and information and skill improvement.



Colleagues, house mates and duo partners have been great, they make me feel safer when I work and it's always nice to have someone there who you feel shares your experience. I currently engage a lot with colleagues online, and it has been so important. I have been able to learn lots from more experienced colleagues and figure out my own working style and strategy. I've been able to improve my work a lot through these online spaces in particular.

Trans non-binary, 32, EU migrant

Sex workers are most likely to meet co-workers in managed premises, or as duo partners (fellow sex workers who work together sharing a session with a client). 34.1% participants (64 individuals) had worked with a colleague as a duo-partner. The support of a duo partner can make work easier even if the worker would rather not be doing sex work.

“

My colleague/duo partner is a saving grace! I don't want to be in this industry, but she makes it fun, we can laugh at distressing events, support each other. I am lucky to have her - my mental health would be severely worse without her.

Cis woman, 25, British

Additionally, many independent workers stated that having a duo partner around made their work more fun and “gives you someone to laugh with” (trans non-binary, 30, British). Many love co-working: “I would exclusively work duos if I could” (cis woman, 39, British), but some dislike the competition that can come with co-working: “I made some good friendships but it's very easy for things to become competitive & other girls to become jealous & bitchy” (cis woman, 23, British).

Sex worker colleagues regularly act as co-entrepreneurs for each other. Independent sex workers are responsible for a range of business tasks, including marketing, answering client queries, booking appointments and seeing clients. Sharing business tips and doing these tasks with colleagues can be beneficial and motivating:

“

We helped each other get bookings and did some of them together. Work was more fun and profitable. Especially the more labour intensive and tedious parts of the job like answering emails and messages felt easier”

Cis woman, 35, EU migrant

Colleagues often take on security roles for each other, either in person (at work or in a different part of the premise), at a distance (safety calls), or by warning each other about dangerous clients.

“

My friends often acted as buddies for me and I for them. This was life saving. One of my friends was attacked and it was only because of our security system that we found her promptly.

Cis woman, 51, British

Client management within bookings is also an important security role colleagues take on. One participant was able to prevent a dangerous situation in a club from escalating due to the help of his colleague:

“

My colleague and I were assaulted whilst working in a sex club. We stuck up for each other and prevented it going further.

Cis man, 34, British

Although sharing a workplace with other sex workers is criminalised under brothel keeping legislation, many sex workers prefer to share a workspace for safety, company and for financial reasons. Often this is through sharing a home in which multiple house mates work, or through letting out a workplace to other workers.

“

At one point I rented an incall room from another sex worker and having her upstairs was lovely – I really liked having coffee and chats with her between bookings. It felt homely and nothing like sitting in a hotel room on my own all day.

Cis woman, 31, British

Colleagues also provide important information and an opportunity to learn from each other and improve skills. Sex workers state that colleagues helped them learn about safety procedures, support organisations, sexual health services, and the wider sex worker community. Colleagues also warn each other about dangerous clients in their area. Some colleague networks are more formal and focused on activism, but those activist networks still are also a space for mutual practical support and help:

“

Through sex worker activism, I have made many friends who are sex workers – they have helped me access resources in terms of sexual health clinics, advice on agencies, safety tips and organisations.

Cis woman, 34, British

Learning from colleagues is especially important for successful start in sex work:

“

When I first started, having a duo partner allowed me to get more work, to get some initial reviews and gave me some tips on safer working.

Cis woman, 26, EU migrant

Why work with or without third parties?

Behind the criminalisation of third parties is the assumption that all third parties have negative effects on sex workers or are controlling or abusive. However, sex workers participating in this research have a mix of positive, negative and neutral experiences with third parties. They choose to work with managers and non-managerial third parties because they offer safe workplaces and services that make their work easier, and to reduce isolation. Others choose to work alone so they can keep their full income and so they do not break the law, but this does make their work more isolating and unsafe.

“I wouldn’t be doing it without her. Having someone to tell all my stories to and who relates to me has been amazing. There’s no way I could be in this line of work and have to keep everything secret. It would be so lonely”

Cis woman, 20, British

Experiences of working with a manager

Managers – third parties who have some control over workers’ pay, time or work and who directly profit off sex workers’ labour – are most commonly present in premises, at agencies, and in clubs. The main reasons participants work with a manager is because they offer services that increase income and reduce additional labour for sex workers. Most managers are paid by taking a cut of the worker’s earnings (often a percentage of their income).

“
My manager makes me feel angry and like I’m being taken advantage of, but at the same time working there has made me feel far safer than working alone.
Trans non-binary, 20, British

Participants say that good agency or premise managers offer a safe workplace and do the marketing, client communication, screening, and administration for them, so they can focus on seeing clients. Additionally, they

want trust between worker and manager, and no pressure to work too much or to see all clients. Bad experiences with managers relate to lack of safety, high fees/cuts, bad behaviour from managers, and a lack of access to labour rights. Additionally, a small number of participants has experienced a partner or close friend taking on a managerial role in an abusive or controlling way.

“
When I was working in the brothel, (...) 70 pounds was taken out for the maid then the rest was split 50/50 with the manager. Even though my manager was alright, I don’t agree with 50/50 split, the sex worker should get the majority.
Cis woman, 28, British

“
I’ve always felt listened to and supported by the agency staff. I am able to set and uphold boundaries, work as much or as little as I want, take time off. I’ve never felt coerced or encouraged to do anything.
Cis woman, 34, British

Advantages and disadvantages of working with a manager

Advantages	Disadvantages
Provides a workplace	Unreasonable fees/cut
Does the marketing	Pressure to work or see bad clients
Does the administration	Bad screening and safety procedures
Does client recruitment	“Fines” for lateness or breaking rules
Does the client communication	Strict rules
Safety procedures and screening	Mistrust from managers
Reasonable cut for services provided	Preventing colleagues from organising
Trust between worker and manager	Abusive behaviour: verbal abuse, insults, body shaming, threats of firing
No pressure to work or see too many clients	No labour rights: lacking breaks, Racism, transphobia and xenophobia.

Experiences of working with a non-managerial third party

Non-managerial third parties include colleagues, security staff, receptionists, maids, cleaners, drivers and others who provide a service to sex workers. They are either hired by the manager or owner of a brothel, agency or club, or they are hired directly by sex workers themselves. The main reasons for working with third parties are because they make workers feel safe, because they offer useful services and because they offer companionship at work. They are seen as useful when they provide services that help sex workers focus their energy on clients themselves, or if they simply mean sex workers do not have to do the repetitive labour of cleaning or staying on top of online marketing. Participants feel especially positive about working with colleagues, and with third parties they hire themselves.

Generally, sex worker participants are much more positive about non-managerial third parties than they are about managers. Negative experiences with wider work relations

focus on the cases in which they make workers feel unsafe, in which they (try to) exert control and pressure over a worker and take on a more managerial role, and cases where wider work relations are explicitly hired to act on behalf of management when managers are not present.

“
The receptionist was really helpful because she dealt with the clients really well and gave a no nonsense vibe which discouraged them from acting up or thinking it would be okay to be aggressive, it kind of set the tone for expected behaviour.
Non-binary questioning, 31, non-EU migrant

“
The maids allowed us to just focus on the work in the room because they dealt with the admin, washing etc. They also provided emotional support and improved moral when you were having an off-day or it was quiet. I miss working with a maid, as now I work independently on my own.
Cis woman, 35, British

Engaging non-managerial third parties (wider work relations)

Advantages	Disadvantages
Safety / not being at work alone	Insufficient screening
Offer useful services: workspace, admin, client communication, marketing, security, cleaning	Ineffective security
Good client screening	Siding with clients in conflicts
Trust between worker and third party	Pressure to work
Dealing with bad clients	Enforcing rules from management
Understanding sex work / non-judgemental	Not getting along with third parties/colleagues
Reliable in safety procedures	
Provide companionship and reduce isolation	
No pressure to work or see all clients	

“

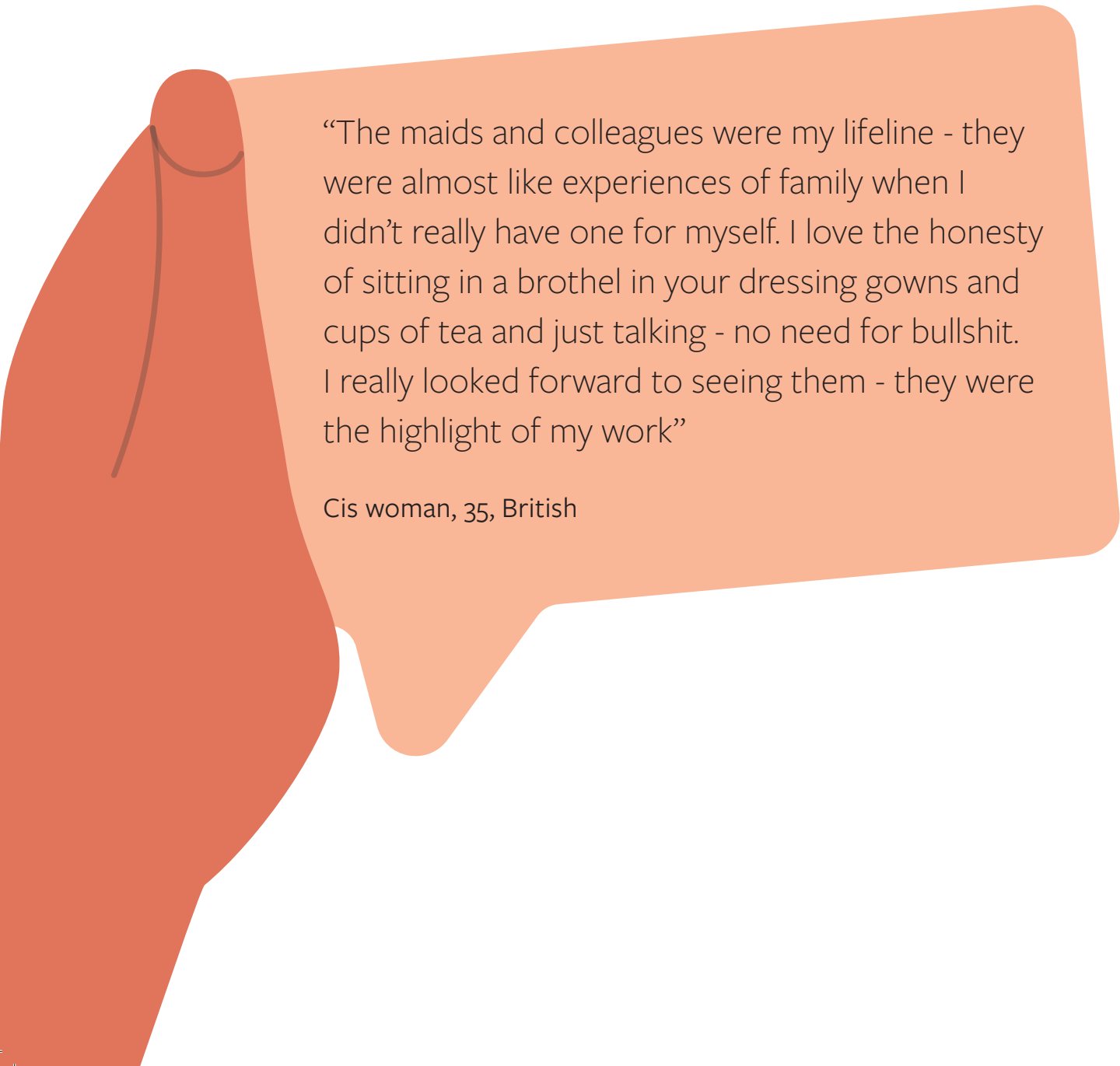
It was a relationship between boss and worker, even with the receptionist. So I was always wary, they were normal bosses, trying to get me to work more at their convenience, but generally fair about their cut.

Cis woman, 51, British

“

The maids were mostly easy going and kind, but a few tended to encourage gossip or ill manners amongst colleagues. I often heard anti-Eastern European xenophobia from them.

Cis woman, 35, British



“The maids and colleagues were my lifeline - they were almost like experiences of family when I didn't really have one for myself. I love the honesty of sitting in a brothel in your dressing gowns and cups of tea and just talking - no need for bullshit. I really looked forward to seeing them - they were the highlight of my work”

Cis woman, 35, British

Experiences of working without third parties

Since the law criminalises nearly all workplaces, the only way to work legally is without colleagues or any other third parties. This is generally only possible as an independent indoor or street-based worker, since in other modes of sex work managers, colleagues or other third parties come with the workplace. Most participants feel less safe working completely alone, and many express that they feel forced to choose between working alone and feeling unsafe, or working with third parties and breaking the law. However, participants also discuss positive reasons for independent work, such as increased income and more control over their work and hours.

“

Best time ever to not have to answer to anybody! Lots of additional work because I am the only one doing all the admin now, but it’s better than agencies. I could never see a guy now unless I talk to him first.

Cis woman, 39, EU migrant

“

[I] only had myself to look out for me. It was terrifying and I was often sick with fear.

Cis woman, 51, British

“

I prefer to work alone (...) but there are drawbacks (...) mostly safety issues but it can be a bit lonely also.

Cis woman, 35, British

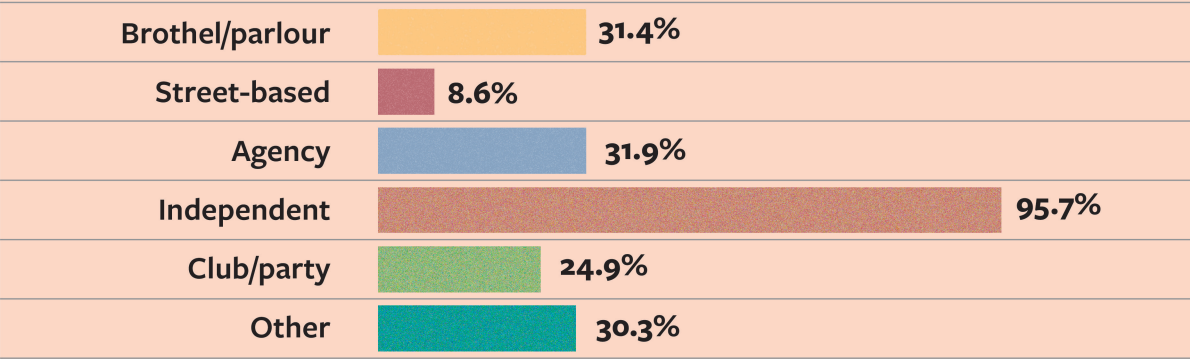
Solo working / not engaging third parties at all

Advantages	Disadvantages
Not criminalised	Fear for safety
Being able to keep full income	More isolation and loneliness
Screening is up to own standards	More time spent on non-work tasks
Get to choose safety protocols	Worse mental health
Complete control over work and hours	
No interpersonal conflicts	
Independence	

Why change workplaces or third parties?

The majority of sex workers in this research has worked in two or more modes of full-service sex work, which means that sex workers are able to – and commonly do – leave unsatisfactory work situations and workplaces. Participants are more likely to discuss past work environments in negative terms, and more likely to discuss current work environments in positive terms, showing that the ability to move to other workplaces has a positive effect on sex workers. This ability to change workplaces is increased by knowledge of the sector and access to community resources and information, and is constrained by bad and abusive management, the criminalisation of workplaces and co-working, isolation, and stigma towards sex work within society.

Figure eleven: In which environments have you done sex work?



Reasons to change workplaces

Sex workers move from one mode of sex work to another in response to unsatisfactory work circumstances, because of individual preferences or temporary needs, or as a consequence of increased knowledge of and access to other modes of sex work due to work experience. Sex workers regularly mention leaving a workplace because the hours, earnings, rules, behaviour of third parties, or safety measures were not up to their standards.

“

[T]he owner wanted to accuse me of wrongdoing in the end just to not pay me. Thing that I easily proved myself innocent for and so I got the money. But that event was one of the major ones that pushed me to become an independent.

Cis woman, 39, EU migrant

Since what makes a good work environment is personal, there is no single direction that leads to better experiences. For that reason, two people can move in opposite directions and both experience an improvement in their work experience:

“

Working with other sex workers was comforting to me, previously I was an escort which was very lonely. I felt like I had a community there.

Cis woman, 35, British

And:

“

It's always healthier to work alone.

Cis woman, 32, British

While there is no clear single direction that labour mobility takes, since preferences for one mode of work over another are highly personal, the low number of participants who have a current managers makes clear that in broad strokes workers are more likely to move from managed work to independent work. Participants describe a range of benefits to independent work, including financial considerations, higher levels of control over their own labour and time, increased freedom to choose and reject clients, more independence and lack of managerial oversight, as well as the ability to avoid excessive risk-shifting or financial exploitations by third parties. These benefits are similar to the benefits of other forms of self-employment: high levels of control over working hours, client choice and rates.

“

Overall I would say it was good to have most of these [third parties] around, except the bosses but that's true of any boss really.

Non-binary questioning, 31, non-EU migrant

Barriers to changing workplaces and third parties

The criminalization of managed and shared workplaces leads to an artificial scarcity, which means that the ones that do exist often hold a monopoly position. This limits the ability of sex workers to change their workplace or the third parties with which they work. Additionally, there is very little information available about these criminalised workplaces and jobs.




If they were decriminalized, this would make it much more difficult for managers to take advantage of us and would take away the monopoly position they have now.

Cis woman, 27, EU migrant

Bad management practices are also barriers to workers changing workplaces. Sex workers describe that some managers keep workers apart to prevent workers from cooperating, organising or changing to a better workplace.

Some agency owners use methods such as monitoring workers through clients, demanding the worker doesn't work anywhere else, or sabotaging independent sex work avenues by creating fake bookings to fill workers' diaries. All these methods make it harder for workers to move to other workplaces, to be less reliant on the third party for income, or to be able to move into independent work.



“We were not allowed to exchange numbers with other workers/maids, and girls are separated on their day of work to keep them from organising”

Cis woman, 22, non-EU migrant

Several sex workers discuss how isolation makes their work harder and keeps them from accessing support and information which could enable them to work independently, help them move to other modes of sex work, or to other workplaces. This isolation is exacerbated by the criminalisation of workplaces and co-working, which mean that many sex workers never meet colleagues to share information with. Working together with colleagues is the only way for many participants to learn about opportunities for better work:

“

My duo partner, a friend outside of the industry, makes me feel safe. She has been in the industry longer than me, and has been so invaluable, teaching me the small things a new worker would only learn through bad mistakes. I feel safe when I'm working with her.

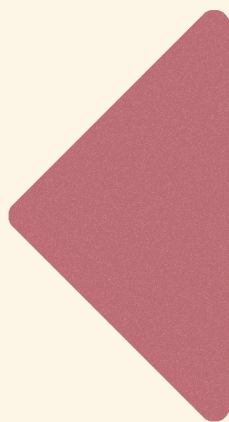
Cis woman, 25, British

Finally, sex work stigma increases sex worker isolation, reduces their access to information, and reduces opportunities to meet colleagues:

“

None of my friends and family knew. Having other SWs for support is very important for your well-being in this industry.

Cis woman, 34, British



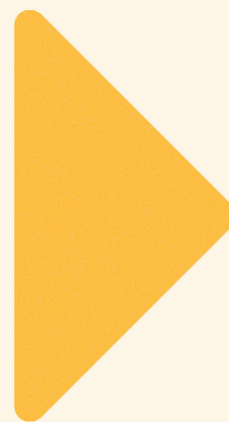
Factors preventing workers from changing workplaces

Criminalisation
Bad management
Isolation
Stigma



Factors enabling workers to change workplaces

Knowledge of sector
Access to information
Access to community and colleagues



What do sex workers want?

When asked what would make their relationships with third parties better or safer, 45% of participants answered that decriminalisation would have that effect, a further 33% says that changes to legalisation/regulation would have that effect, and a smaller group mentions wider social and political change that would improve their relationships with third parties.



Decriminalisation

Nearly half of the sex working participants argued for decriminalisation by specifically using that terminology. This is unsurprising, since sex workers and sex worker-led organisations worldwide have been campaigning for decriminalisation for decades. However, opinions on exactly who and what should be decriminalised differs, with some aiming for full decriminalisation and others focusing on the decriminalisation of co-working or certain third parties.

“

All aspects of sex work should be decriminalized.

Trans woman, 35, EU migrant

“

Decriminalisation of brothel keeping.

Cis woman, 21, British

“

Decriminalisation of working with others, that includes migrants, and for the police to actually follow the guidelines set by the NPCC.

Cis woman, 21, British

“

Full decriminalization of the entire sex industry, including managers, drivers, landlords and co-workers.

Cis woman, 24, British

“

Decriminalise them. Except for agencies/managers.

Cis woman, 35, British

“

Decrim (full).

Cis man, 34, British

Sex workers argue that decriminalisation will

reduce the imbalance in power between themselves and managers or other third parties, and would allow them to not need managers at all because they would have the alternative to work with colleagues.

“

Being able to co-work with other sex workers, without managers involved in any way, would make work a lot safer.

Cis woman, 39, British

Several participants state that decriminalisation would specifically improve their safety at work and would allow them to take safety measures as they see fit. Safety is described as a communal issue, which can only be ensured by the decriminalisation of mutual support between sex workers. Safety under decriminalisation also includes access to justice, and the ability to report bad or violent clients to the police.

“

Decriminalisation would mean that we were not worried about criminal repercussions of our safety measures.

Cis woman, 31, British

“

I would be much happier if colleagues and friends who help me with my work were not criminalised, and I would be and feel far more safe.

Non-binary questioning, 32, British

Finally, many participants discuss how decriminalisation, although in itself not enough to solve all problems in sex work, would open up space for sex workers to work on issues such as whorephobia, labour rights, societal stigma against sex workers, forced labour, support for sex workers, and the wider societal issues like poverty which cause people to start sex work in the first place.

Other legal change

A third of sex worker participants answered that a change in legislation would improve their relationship with third parties, but did not mention decriminalisation specifically. Some advocate for regulation or legalisation, some simply call for ‘better laws’ or in other terms state they want a change to the current legislation. The distinction between decriminalisation and legalisation is unclear to many non-lawyers, and it is not a stretch to assume that not all participants are clear on that distinction either. For that reason, it cannot be assumed that all 33% of participants in this category would support legalisation over other legislative interventions. Some of these responses call for decriminalisation in other terms and others advocate clearly for legalisation and regulation.

“

People offering a service that I want like a receptionist or agency owner or photographer should not be criminalised. Maybe a fit and proper person check should be made before they get a licence to offer these services.

Cis woman, 26, British

Sex workers co-working seems to be the third party activity all participants agree shouldn't be criminalised.

“

Allowing 2 people to share an incall apartment. My pal and I have been lucky so far, but if one of us did get raped/attacked at work, it would be a barrier to us seeking police involvement if we thought we might get penalised for sharing a flat for work.

Cis woman, 26, British

Other workers extend this to third parties providing security and transport services (“If we could work together from premises,

employ security and drivers like others. Not have to worry about getting advice on working/safety” (cis woman, 51, British)) and to brothel keeping: “If I could work legally with someone in a flat or have the option to work in a parlour without risk of raids I would be a lot safer” (cis woman, 23, British).

Several participants specify that only “non exploitative relationships such as drivers or someone you rent from” (cis woman, 41, British) should be decriminalised or legalised, and that “[i]f someone is exploiting a vulnerable woman and controlling who she sees and what she does that should be illegal” (cis woman, 41, British). One worker argues that abusive work relations are more common while third parties are criminalised, and that the ability to operate ‘above board’ will help with this:

“

Some common sense and up to date understanding of the industry when making the laws. Just help empower ourselves to operate independently, legally and safely. That means letting us be able to advertise, rent safe workspaces, pay taxes, hire booking/admin assistants, drivers & security all above board like any working professional. Keeping the industry in the dark and workers limited is what enables so much abuse to go on invisibly. Workers feel they have no rights, power or autonomy to work safely above board.

Cis woman, 26, British

Some participants who propose regulation are unsure if decriminalisation should extend to managers, or argue for the monitoring of third parties.

“

I'm not sure that I would fully decriminalise management activities, however I feel there should be strong leniency/observation - if there is no exploitation or violence and this can be proven, I think management could be a really positive thing for the SW community. I would love to see a positive, safe, supportive, empowering environment managing other SWs and ensuring their welfare was looked (...). Full decriminalisation of management activities would, however, leave SWs more vulnerable to exploitation, but having a legal middle ground which allowed monitoring of potentially exploitative activities might work well.

Cis woman, 26, British

Social change

In addition to decriminalisation or other legal change, sex workers express a large range of changes that would make their relationships with third parties better or safer. These include labour rights, the ability to be a legal employer, fiscal integration into society, reduction of stigma, more resources and support for sex workers, as well as an overhaul of social support and migration regulation so fewer people are pushed into sex work.

Many participants express they want workplace rights and protections:

“

Being given normal labour rights, like any other job so that I can fight my corner when I'm mistreated.

Trans non-binary, 24, British

Additionally, workers also want the ability to legally hire third parties and pay them for services. Some participants also want improved fiscal integration within society.

“

For private landlords I rent a workspace from by the day, it would be good for my accounts if I could get receipts from them for my tax return but they're unwilling to give them because of the nature of the industry and because they don't want to declare the cash I give them.

Cis woman, 28, British

Several workers mention the importance of the reduction of sex work stigma and whorephobia for their relationships with third parties. For many workers, legitimisation and reducing stigma are connected, just like workers' rights and reducing whorephobia in wider society go hand in hand.

Participants suggest a range of changes to sex worker support and wider society that can improve their relationships with third parties, such as better support services for sex workers, access to legal advice, less financial discrimination, access to banking and insurance. However, many sex workers argue that a significant wider changes in society are needed, and that decriminalisation is only part of this:

“

Knowing that [third parties] were legal, and that neither me nor them could get in trouble with the law in any way would provide so much more lee-way for negotiating things, it would make things more equal. However, the provision of better social care, more money into mental health care, more financial support for disabled people, more resources into domestic abuse support and more education on gender, i.e. a better and more equal welfare system, would be needed on top of decriminalisation of sex work, for those relations to improve. However, decriminalisation would be an excellent start.

Cis woman, 35,

British policy implications

Third parties in sex work are neither universally good, nor universally bad. However, the interventions that decrease the power of harmful third parties over sex workers, simultaneously increase sex workers' power over their working lives and their access to third parties who positively affect them.

The decriminalisation of third parties would give sex workers more agency to choose how, where, and with whom to work. Of course, abusive management and harmful workplace practices would still be illegal if third parties were decriminalised, just like they are in other industries.

“

If I had legal rights at work through decriminalisation, my manager would have less power over me.

Trans non-binary, 20, British

Focussing on the lived experience and knowledge of sex workers reveals the wide variety in experiences sex workers have with third parties. Current criminalisation of third parties does not prevent abusive management from taking place. It limits workers' access to alternative workplaces and to labour protections, while taking away the option of co-working for safety. There is an urgent need to focus on interventions and legislation that increase the agency of sex workers in their relationships with third parties. The decriminalisation of third parties and workplaces would be a crucial step towards this.

“

My duo partner, a friend outside of the industry, makes me feel safe. She has been in the industry longer than me, and has been so invaluable, teaching me the small things a new worker would only learn through bad mistakes. I feel safe when I'm working with her.

Cis woman, 25, British

How would decriminalisation of third parties benefit sex workers?





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