

Student sex work during a pandemic

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The problem

The topic of sex work (SW) often polarises people's views; the term itself is controversial, and there is a growing body of literature addressing these complex debates. SW is the selling of sexual services for money or 'goods' (such as drugs, material items or other services). Sexual services are sold directly and indirectly. Direct sexual services occur when there is physical contact between the sex worker and the client; this includes street-based sex work, brothel work and escort work. Indirect services occur when there is no physical contact and include lap-dancing, stripping and internet-based work. Individuals who sell services represent all demographic groups and all backgrounds: from single people with no family ties to people with childcare responsibilities; people who have no formal educational qualifications and those who have a high level of educational attainment; those who have no other paid work to individuals who sell sexual services to supplement other paid employment. There are potential social risks involved in selling sexual services; 'female, male and transgender sex workers face high levels of violence, stigma, discrimination and other human rights violations' (World Health Organisation, 2013:22).

What we know about student sex work and how we know it

There is a limited body of research on the subject and there are methodological difficulties in accurately assessing the number of students involved - individuals may not define themselves as sex workers, may participate on a transient basis or may not want to disclose for fear of being stigmatised - but best estimates from *The Student Sex Work Project* (Sagar et al, 2015) suggest that around 5% of the student population participate in SW, with an estimated 20% having considered it.

What we think might happen in the COVID-19 pandemic

- **Number of students participating in sex work** – There is anecdotal evidence (Robinson, 2020) that a growing number of students have been turning to SW since the start of the pandemic, many selling services indirectly on online platforms. The exact level of increase in student sex work (SSW) is unknown, but it is apparent that some students have started SW for the first time and others have returned to SW. As it will take some time for service and retail sectors to recover, where students are often employed, it is anticipated that there may be a further increase in SSW in the short-term. As countries emerge from the pandemic, it is likely that some students who have been involved in SW for the first time will stop and return to their previous work. Other students may stay in SW longer term, or may be involved on a transient basis. Overall, due to its financial benefits and flexibility, it is likely that there will be an overall increase in SSW post-pandemic.
- **Image-based sexual abuse*** – There are reports of images sold online by sex workers being used on pornography websites, without consent. Images may include faces and may be distributed globally. Inexperienced students are at particular risk of inadvertent identity disclosure.
- **Risks to personal safety** – There are particular risks involved in SW during the pandemic (The Guardian, 2021) and therefore there may be an increase in the number of students who experience verbal abuse, discrimination and sexual violence because of their involvement in this work.
- **Wellbeing** – Many students work alone and may be socially isolated. This, in addition to the risk of being 'outed' involuntarily, could adversely affect their wellbeing.
- **Under-reporting of victimisation** - It is difficult for students to report crimes because of the stigma surrounding SW. They are a hidden sub-group within a marginalised SW population.
- **Pressure to sell services at lower prices** – As there is evidence of an increase in online SW amongst the wider SW population during the pandemic (Shehadi and Partington, 2020), students

may feel pressure to: sell services for a lower fee; provide more for the fee paid; or move to direct SW, such as 'sugar daddy' experiences, which can be financially more lucrative.

- **Inadvertent law-breaking** – The laws relating to SW differ internationally and students may inadvertently break the law if they: sell online sex work in rented accommodation (tenancy contracts may have 'morality clauses' relating to this, Sex Work Research Hub, 2020); post explicit online adverts; sell services when children are present; work with another person for safety.
- **Drug use** – There may be an increase in the use of drugs such as crystal methamphetamine, a common 'chemsex' drug which some escort agencies provide to sex workers.

Some ideas in response

- **Numbers of students participating in sex work** – More research is necessary to provide accurate data on the number of students participating in SW. As some students may not self-identify as a sex worker, this is problematic as this will affect the accuracy of the data. Universities could consider increasing financial support, such as hardship grants, to reduce the numbers of vulnerable students.
- **Image-based sexual abuse*** – Publicity is needed to ensure students are aware that images sold on online platforms may be further distributed, without consent; including globally. SW support groups could have a dedicated website page on SSW with specific advice on identity protection.
- **Risks to personal safety** – Universities may wish to consider whether/how they might: include SSW within their existing frameworks, such as sexual violence zero tolerance or diversity/inclusion policies; encourage students involved in SW to report sexual violence; increase staff awareness about SSW (including legal issues) so they are equipped to respond to disclosures and signpost support services. The University of Leicester launched a SSW policy and open access toolkit in 2020 which universities may wish to refer to. SW support groups could consider how to communicate to students about safe client interaction, including consent processes. In online work, the IP address can be tracked to a postal address; students need to be aware of this.
- **Wellbeing** – Student wellbeing support groups inside and outside universities could prepare to deal with SSW wellbeing issues and consider how to publicise their support services.
- **Under-reporting of victimisation** – Students involved in SW need to know they can report incidents without fear of being stigmatised. University police liaison officers may be able to provide guidance and Students' Union representatives and students themselves could be involved.
- **Inadvertent law-breaking** – Organisations in contact with students involved in SW should encourage them to seek clarity on the legality of the services they are selling.
- **Drug use** – Drug support agencies may wish to highlight the risks attached to 'chemsex' drugs.

Relevant resources

- *McGlynn, C. and Rackley, E. (2017) 'Image-Based Sexual Abuse', *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*: 37(3): 534-561
- Robinson, A. (2020) 'Coronavirus: More Students Are Turning to Sex Work During the Covid-19 Pandemic': [Available here](#)
- Sagar, T., Jones, D., Symons, K. and Bowring, J. (2015) *The Student Sex Work Project*: [Available here](#)
- Shehadi, S. and Partington, M. (2020) 'Coronavirus: Offline Sex Workers Forced to Start Again Online': [Available here](#)
- The Guardian (2021) 'UK Sex Workers Face Rising Violence and Hardship During Pandemic': [Available here](#)
- University of Leicester (2020) *Student Sex Work Policy*: [Available here](#)
- World Health Organisation (2013) 'Addressing Violence Against Sex Workers': [Available here](#)

This is one of a series of short, speculative papers developed by the UCL Jill Dando Institute during the current pandemic. It is edited by Nick Tilley and Gloria Laycock and published by University College London. The raison d'être of the series is fully described at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/jill-dando-institute/research/covid-19-special-papers>