

# Showing the pros and cons

**Sex industry:** In an effort to change people's perceptions of the 'world's oldest profession', the first sex worker film festival is to be screened in London **BY ANDREW WILLIAMS**

**W**e're doing this to break down stereotypes about the sex industry,' says academic, lecturer and one of the organisers of the Sex Worker Film Festival, Heidi Hoefinger (pictured). 'We're using the arts to show sex workers are just like everyone else and deserve rights and respect for the choices they make.'

Features include *Hands Off*, a documentary about Hackney Council's attempts to ban lap dancing clubs, and another called *69 Things I Love About Sex Work*. What's on the list? 'Sex worker activism, hanging out with other sex workers and helping people,' says Hoefinger. 'The film-maker sees herself as a healer in some way. Often people find it very difficult to believe people like doing sex work.'

'Sex worker' is the festival's preferred term. 'Sex worker is more empowering and highlights it's a labour issue,' says Hoefinger. 'It's about work and is a valid labour option.'

The organisers are campaigning for a complete decriminalisation of prostitution and are eager to change people's perceptions of the sex industry. They're quick to make a distinction between those who choose to do sex work and those who are forced into it.

'Trafficking should be illegal and sex work shouldn't,' states Hoefinger. 'Sex workers are victimised as drug addicts or low class – but all types of women, men and transgendered people engage in all types of sex work.'

Nick Mai, an academic in migration studies at London Metropolitan University, made the documentary *Normal*, about four people from Eastern Europe who work in the sex industry. One story is of a woman forced into prostitution by a trafficker who told her she was coming to London to work in a beauty parlour. She was rescued after a police raid, took a low-paid job and subsequently went back to prostitution, this time working for herself, voluntarily.

'The majority of migrants working in the sex industry choose to do so,' says Mai. 'It's not as if they're choosing between being a top manager in the City or working in the sex industry. But rather than working in a food packing factory for £20 for 12 hours of work, maybe working in the sex industry could pay them £300 a day. Which means a woman can feed her kids better.'

'Why do people consider the sex industry such an extraordinary choice given all the compromises we all make every day to earn a living?'

Hoefinger dismisses people's preconceptions about prostitution being synonymous with violence, murder, trafficking and drug addiction as products of media sensationalism. 'They sell stories,' she says. 'It's less interesting to cover sex workers working towards decriminalisation.'

However, it wasn't media sensationalism that killed Susan Rushworth, Shelley Armitage and Suzanne Blamires in 2010 – it was maniac Stephen Griffiths, the crossbow cannibal. The women worked as prostitutes in Bradford and many others who still do fit the image of drug users selling sex to support their addiction.

Max McLean, a retired detective chief superintendent for West Yorkshire CID, said earlier this year: 'Our foolish laws mean while prostitution is not illegal, working in a brothel is. This gives the clear message to those who work in prostitution – you're on your own.'

Hoefinger, who wants the festival to normalise the public's view of sex work, is critical of some feminist groups who want further legislation against it. 'Rather than say "abolish the industry", which would just make it more dangerous, feminists should respect people's choices to do it,' she says.

This seems unlikely, as feminist groups such as Object campaigned for an element of the Policing and Crime Act 2009 to make it illegal to buy sex from someone forced into prostitution.

It was a step towards a wider campaign which would make it illegal to buy sex from prostitutes at all. At the time, Object said: 'Recognising prostitution as "just a job" ignores the violence, poverty and marginalisation which drives women into prostitution and means an end to services to support women out of prostitution – why would you need exit strategies for a "normal job"?''

However, Hoefinger says 'normal' is how many people working in the industry see it. 'Rather than glamorous or horrific, it can be quite mundane. It's just daily exchanges between people. It's not all that bad and not all that amazing.'

Discover for yourself how mundane it is. *The Sex Worker Film Festival is at the Rio Cinema in Dalston, east London, on Sunday.*

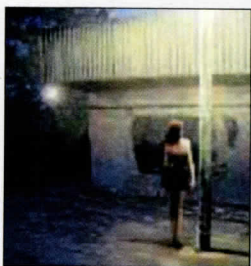


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## Case study

Amy, 25, has been working as an escort in London for the past ten months:

'I was unhappy doing my university course and decided getting myself into debt doing something I wasn't interested in was pointless. I was looking for other jobs on the internet when I saw an advert for escorts. It seemed fun and interesting and would give me enough money to do other things. I started working for an agency but most are glorified brothels or run by former sex workers and tend to take quite a high proportion of the fee they charge the client, so I left. Now I work for myself and get more



information about the clients that way. I'm perfectly comfortable telling a client I'm not going to do something. Any woman, whether they're being

paid for sex or not, should know if they say "no" men should respect that and if they don't it's rape and should be dealt with.

'I generally see one to four clients a week. Sometimes, when I'm working in another city, I'll see four a day. London's a very big city and there are more women working in the sex industry than ever, so going to another city gives you different opportunities. Most friends are supportive and they understand it's my choice. A couple don't think I should do it and are worried about my safety. If I wanted to stop, I would. I'll do it as long as it suits me and until I decide I want to do something else with my life.'