

Classroom safety for student sex workers: a case study at the University of Greenwich

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Abstract

Student sex workers face compounded stigma that can challenge their ability to participate fully in academic environments (Simpson and Smith, 2021). This case study explores classroom safety for student sex workers at the University of Greenwich, focusing on seminars that address sex work-related topics. Using participant observation and role-play activities, the study examines how power dynamics, stigma and inclusivity emerge in four seminars. The findings highlight the persistence of institutional biases and societal prejudices despite efforts to foster supportive spaces within higher education learning environments. Recommendations include educator training, curriculum design informed by intersectionality and institutional collaborations with sex worker-led organisations to address these systemic issues.

Keywords: classroom safety, student sex workers, stigma, power dynamics, intersectionality

Introduction

Sex work has historically been a contentious and stigmatised subject, especially within academic institutions. As Mac and Smith (2020) state, "Sex workers are everywhere", but the recognition of their presence within universities has been limited (Simpson, 2022). Recent research at the University of Greenwich (Bruno *et al.*, 2023) highlights a deficiency in guaranteeing classroom safety of student sex workers, raising questions about their visibility, participation and the stigma they encounter.

Lecturers attempt to create safe spaces within classrooms for intellectual engagement and exploration; however, for student sex workers, these efforts may inadvertently perpetuate exclusion and invisibility, replicating societal stigmas and systemic inequities (Booth, 2023). While the University of Greenwich has integrated sex work-related topics into the curriculum as part of its research-informed teaching approach, in keeping with its broader teaching policy, to have done so raises critical questions about how lecturers can foster a safer and more inclusive classroom environment for sex workers. Building on research into classroom dynamics, stigma and intersectionality, this case study critically evaluates four seminars to explore two central questions: how do classroom dynamics affect the participation and safety of student sex workers and how can lecturers create safer classrooms that are inclusive for this marginalised group?

Defining student sex work

Sex work is broadly defined as the transaction of sexual services, performances or goods for material compensation (Weitzer, 2010), encompassing a range of activities with varying levels of intimacy and organisational roles. Such examples as direct sex work, erotic dancing and

online forms of sex work (e.g., webcamming) highlight its diversity in terms of behaviour, structure and financial reliance (Harcourt and Donovan, 2005). Research estimates that over five per cent of United Kingdom (UK) university students, equating to approximately 133,000 individuals, engage in some form of sex work during their studies (Betzer *et al.*, 2015; Sagar *et al.*, 2016), often navigating sex work alongside their studies as a means of addressing financial pressures.

In the UK, sex work is legal, but associated activities such as brothel-keeping and soliciting are criminalised, reflecting societal attitudes (Sexual Offences Act, 2003). These laws create unsafe environments for sex workers, exacerbating their vulnerability through security initiatives – like closed circuit television – which aim to enhance community safety but often harm sex workers instead (Gilling, 2001).

The student sex work pilot study at the University of Greenwich (Bruno *et al.*, 2023) revealed how the legal framework around sex work affects classroom interactions and perceptions of sex work. Universities have a critical role in fostering safer spaces for student sex workers; they have the potential to offer security and protection against societal stigmas and the harms that sex workers face, both of these exacerbated by legislation and public perceptions. This research examines how these factors influence classroom discussions about sex work.

In this case study, I draw on intersectionality to understand possible marginalisation of sex workers in learning environments. Intersectionality, introduced by Crenshaw (1989), examines how overlapping identities, such as race, gender, class and occupation, create unique forms of oppression and privilege. Originally focused on the marginalisation of Black women, the framework of intersectionality has expanded to highlight how interconnected systems of power shape experiences across various social contexts. For student sex workers, intersectionality reveals how stigma around sex work interacts with economic, racial and gender-based inequalities. Crenshaw (1991) emphasises that intersectionality is not merely additive; rather, it is fundamental to understanding how systemic barriers affect individuals with multiple marginalised identities. In educational spaces, the absence of an intersectional approach risks perpetuating inequities, leaving marginalised students feeling invisible. By applying Crenshaw's (1989) framework, this study explores how classrooms can become more inclusive by addressing the complex dynamics of identity and power, particularly for student sex workers.

Pilot study

A pilot study conducted at the University of Greenwich used a quantitative approach to investigate how student sex work is perceived and addressed within academic settings, focusing on interactions between staff and students. The study aimed to explore the dynamics of disclosure and the institutional response to students involved in sex work, particularly in learning and support contexts (Bruno *et al.*, 2023). Data for the study were collected from two separate surveys, one designed for staff and the other for students. The staff survey received eighty-five responses, and the student survey gathered seventy-four. While the relatively small sample size limits the generalisability of the findings, it provides a valuable snapshot of experiences and attitudes within the institution, particularly regarding confidentiality and disclosure.

The findings indicated that both staff and students tended to express an acceptance of sex work and sex workers, consistent with broader national data about student sex work trends (Sagar *et al.*, 2016). However, the study uncovered troubling practices related to disclosure.

That some staff members admitted to assuming a student's involvement in 'prostitution', on the basis of second-hand information from colleagues or placement providers, points to significant breaches of confidentiality and a failure to uphold students' boundaries. Additionally, twelve staff members reported instances where students had openly disclosed their involvement in sex work, underscoring the presence of a student sex worker population at the university.

Interestingly, the study found that student sex workers often preferred to disclose their occupation in classroom discussions rather than private settings; they saw the classroom as a space to disclose their sex-work status, despite the challenges posed by stigma and societal attitudes. These findings directly informed the subsequent qualitative research and prompted an investigation into how the topic of sex work is taught and whether classrooms can serve as safer spaces for student sex workers to engage critically and comfortably with the topic.

Safe spaces for student sex workers

The concept of 'safe spaces' in classrooms has increasingly come under critical scrutiny, especially within sociological and activist circles, for its presumption of complete safety – a notion often unattainable in practice. Instead, the idea of 'safer' spaces shifts the focus to a continuing, collective process of addressing structural inequities and fostering inclusivity. In the context of student sex workers, this reframing is particularly relevant. Just as Ohito and Brown (2021) argue that the impossibility of absolute safe spaces in predominantly white institutions requires intentional engagement with Black affective networks as sites of temporary reprieve from systemic violence, similar cooperative dynamics can be envisioned for classrooms addressing sex work. Boostrom (1998) contends that the notion of a completely safe classroom may be unattainable, as efforts to create such spaces can suppress critical dialogue and reinforce existing hierarchism. Here, continuous efforts to engage with and dismantle stigmatising discourses are necessary, emphasising action over static ideals (Ohito and Brown, 2021).

Parallel findings in inclusive pedagogical practices strongly suggest that instructors who engage in immediate and supportive behaviours are most likely to foster environments that are perceived as inclusive by students from marginalised communities (Faulkner *et al.*, 2021). This underlines the importance of co-creating classroom norms that acknowledge and actively counteract exclusionary practices. For student sex workers, this means not just discussing sex work academically, but also embedding frameworks that respect their lived experiences, challenging dominant narratives and actively inviting their participation in shaping discourse. A 'safer' classroom, then, becomes a dynamic space where inclusion is a shared, iterative responsibility rather than a static promise (Faulkner *et al.*, 2021).

Methodological approach

This study employed classroom participant observation and a role play activity to stimulate discussions among students. Participant observation, a well-established qualitative research approach, involves the researcher's directly engagement with the setting under study, observing behaviours, interactions and dynamics while maintaining a critical, reflective stance (Seim, 2024; Zieman, 2012). This method is particularly suited to exploring classroom dynamics and the nuanced experiences of students in educational environments because it allows observations of interactions and power dynamics within classroom settings. Observations were conducted over multiple sessions in both Criminology and Sociology, with

detailed field notes documenting verbal and non-verbal communication, participation patterns and the use of educational materials.

Role-playing activity

The role-playing activity (figure 1) was designed to explore: 1) disparities in participation; 2) the interplay of power between students, lecturers and myself as the researcher; 3) the behaviours that emerged when students were granted temporary authority as 'lecturers'.

Students were divided into four groups, each tasked with evaluating a staff response to a hypothetical disclosure of sex work by a student. I adopted the role of the student sex worker, while the groups assumed the roles of lecturers responsible for analysing and responding to the staff comments. Each group was assigned a distinct response, coded as A, B, C, or D, and asked to deliberate on its implications for student autonomy, wellbeing and agency. After a brief discussion within their groups, a spokesperson presented their collective findings to the entire seminar.

The activity offered students the opportunity to assess institutional practices critically, with a focus on themes such as consent, the appropriateness of wellbeing referrals and the involvement of sex worker-led organisations.

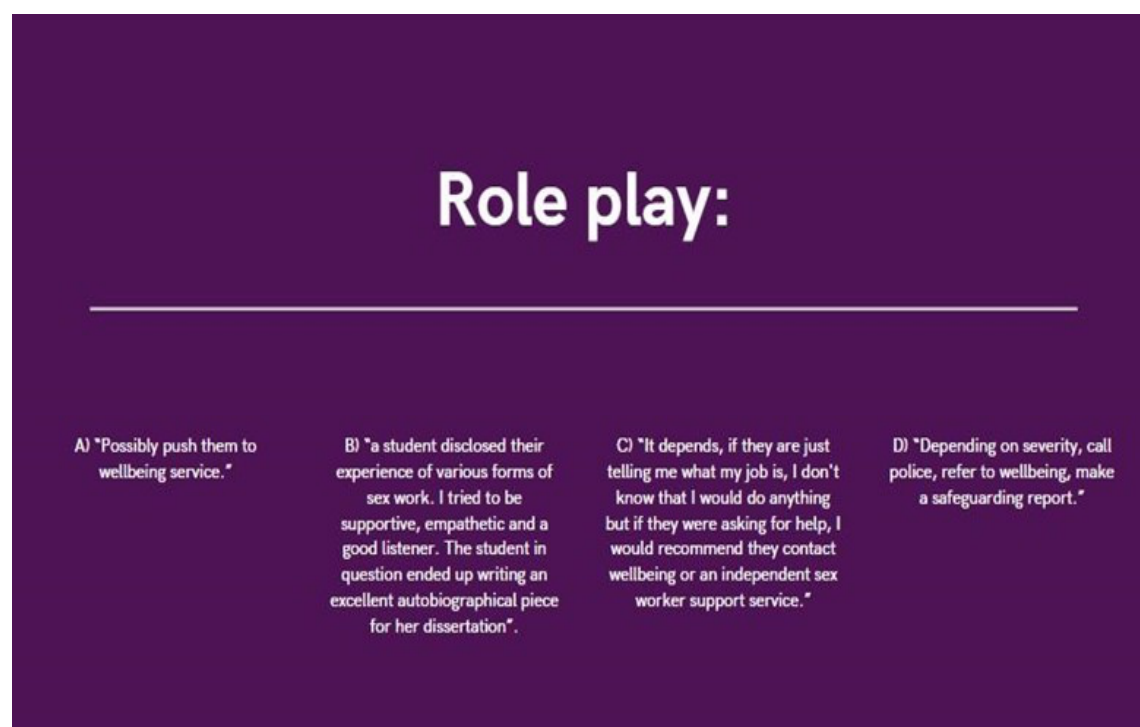


Figure 1.

Ethics

This study received ethical approval from the University of Greenwich Ethics Board. All students and lecturers involved were fully informed about the research aims, methods and confidentiality measures through detailed information sheets. Informed consent was obtained from every participant prior to any observation or activity, ensuring voluntary participation.

Analysis

The field notes from the classroom observations were analysed using a thematic approach, inspired by Braun and Clarke (2013). This involved repeatedly reading and re-reading the notes to identify patterns and micro-code the data, allowing distinct themes to emerge, based on similarities and differences within the observations. The analysis was underpinned by a constructionist perspective, which views social phenomena, including classroom dynamics, as socially constructed and discursively produced (Crotty, 2009). By this means, classroom interactions were understood not as isolated events but as reflective of broader societal norms, power structures and stigmas, particularly as they relate to the experiences of student sex workers. To ensure the reliability of the analysis, data were reviewed in detail and emerging themes were carefully discussed to reach consensus on their relevance and significance. This iterative process allowed for the identification of key conclusions, such as how classroom dynamics influence the participation and safety of student sex workers, while also acknowledging the limitations of the study, particularly regarding its scale and scope.

Findings

The observations revealed intricate classroom dynamics that affect discussions about sex work, emphasising how power, stigma, and inclusion intersect within academic settings. These dynamics shaped the engagement of students and illuminated the challenges faced by student sex workers.

In the first seminar, *“The Global Sex Industry: Perspectives, Experiences, and Responses”*, discussions centred on transnational perspectives of sex work and sex tourism. The lecturer used clear and accessible slides to present historical contexts, definitions and case studies, fostering critical engagement with sensitive topics such as fetishisation, racialisation and the portrayal of older women sex workers. However, the role-playing activity revealed contrasting attitudes among students. Groups 1.A and 1.B criticised a staff response that described actions as *“push”* towards seeking university wellbeing services, deeming it dismissive of autonomy and consent. One student noted, *“It appears that the staff member acted hastily, disregarding the student’s autonomy,”* while another expressed scepticism: *“Do wellbeing services even understand the specific challenges sex workers face?”*

In contrast, Group 1.C found merit in responses that acknowledged the agency and subjectivity of student sex workers and praised the involvement of sex worker-led organisations. This group concluded that such collaboration could create a more inclusive institutional approach. Meanwhile, Group 1.D voiced strong concerns about responses relying on police intervention, with one student asking, *“But what required a safeguarding report? Is sex work a safeguarding issue?”* This group advocated staff training led by sex workers to address systemic barriers and promote a deeper understanding of marginalisation.

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The second and third observations, conducted in the seminar *“Women, Power, Crime and Justice,”* addressed themes such as trafficking legislation, systemic stigma and the interplay of class, race and gender in the sex industry. The lectures included Menti.com questionnaires, group exercises and critical discussions about assigned readings. Across both seminars, similar expressions of disapproval emerged during the role-playing activity. Groups 2.A and 3.A criticised responses for infantilising students: *“Staff often treat us as if we’re children, even though we’re adults capable of making our own decisions.”* Groups 2.B and 3.B highlighted the empowering potential of approaches that enabled student agency: *“Sharing our experiences shouldn’t feel risky; it should feel empowering.”* Groups 2.C and 3.C stressed the importance of involving sex worker-led groups, viewing them as essential in fostering institutional support. Groups 2.D and 3.D again raised concerns about police involvement, challenging the assumption that sex work equates to safeguarding issues.

The fourth observation expanded on these themes, focusing on the conflation of trafficking and sex work, consent complexities and state violence. The seminar included a TEDx talk by Juno Mac, sparking critical engagement from some students but resistance from others. One group expressed overt moral disapproval: *“No, in my opinion, it is incorrect! I don’t want them as my friends!”* This sentiment demonstrates how stigma persists even in spaces designed for open dialogue. In contrast, another group took issue with the talk’s assertion, *“We can’t make policies from moral feelings,”* using this to argue for decriminalisation in New Zealand.

Across the observations, student quotes and discussions revealed the tension between fostering inclusive dialogue and addressing deeply ingrained biases. The findings highlight the importance of creating ‘safer’ spaces – dynamic environments where collaboration with marginalised groups, including sex workers, informs inclusive policies and practices. The critical engagement seen in these seminars serves to demonstrate that classrooms may succeed in challenging stigma, though it must be acknowledged that institutional silence and systemic barriers often militate against this.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the research was conducted in only four seminars within a single university, limiting the generalisability of the findings to broader educational contexts. The small sample size and focus on a specific academic setting may not fully capture the diverse experiences of student sex workers across different institutions. Additionally, the study relied on participant observation, which, while valuable for capturing nuanced dynamics, is inherently subjective and influenced by the researcher’s positionality. As a trans non-binary individual with personal connections to sex work activism, my interpretations may have been shaped by my lived experiences, despite efforts to engage in reflexivity throughout the research process. Furthermore, role-playing activities, while effective in fostering critical engagement, may not reflect the complexities of real-life situations faced by student sex workers, as they are bound by the constraints of classroom dynamics. Finally, the study’s reliance on observational data rather than direct interviews with student sex workers limits the depth of insight into their personal perspectives and lived experiences. These limitations suggest that further research is needed, with larger and more diverse samples, to build on the findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the intersection of sex work and higher education.

Recommendations

This research highlights the critical need for targeted actions and future research to address the challenges faced by student sex workers in academic settings. The following recommendations offer practical steps to foster inclusivity, support and systemic change.

The first recommendation is to advocate the decriminalisation of sex work. Universities should align with campaigns like Decrim Now to support this change actively. Decriminalisation provides a legal framework that allows sex workers, including students, to access essential support and protection while earning the income they need to survive (Decrim Now, no date). By taking a public stance, universities can challenge the stigma surrounding sex work and demonstrate a commitment to the safety and dignity of their student communities.

Comprehensive staff training is the second priority. Universities should implement specialised training programmes for staff, including lecturers, wellbeing officers and mental health professionals, in order to improve their understanding of the unique challenges faced by student sex workers. These programmes should be co-designed with sex worker-led organisations to ensure that training is informed by lived experiences and addresses practical strategies for creating supportive environments.

A further recommendation is that universities engage with student sex workers to hear their voice: establishing focus groups with student sex workers may provide vital insights into their experiences, needs and concerns. These forums create opportunities for students to share their perspectives while guiding the development of policies and practices that prioritise their safety and inclusion.

Finally, it is recommended that universities shift to 'safer' classrooms: Rather than striving for the unattainable ideal of 'safe spaces', universities should adopt the 'safer spaces' concept, which emphasises continuing collective efforts to minimise harm and foster inclusivity. Drawing inspiration from trans-feminist practices, practical steps include incorporating consciousness-raising activities, 'calling in' approaches to address problematic behaviour, trigger warnings, safe words and clear boundaries. Acts of care, positive feedback, empathetic communication and group agreements can further enhance classroom dynamics. Embedding these principles into diversity and inclusion handbooks ensures a sustained institutional commitment to inclusivity (Michals, 2001; Brown, 2019; Antliff, 2012).

Conclusion

This research highlights how power dynamics influence classroom practices, particularly regarding the visibility and inclusion of student sex workers. While power can often reinforce marginalisation, it is not fixed and can be subverted through intentional strategies such as role-playing exercises, which reveal shifts in behaviour and attitudes. Observations demonstrated critical awareness among students when evaluating staff responses to the needs of student sex workers, emphasising the importance of respectful and cautious approaches. However, outside the role-play scenarios, the stigma of student sex workers persisted, reflecting broader societal disregard for their presence and needs.

The concept of the classroom as a safe space remains unfulfilled in practice, as systemic inequalities continue to undermine inclusivity. These perspectives suggest that addressing structural barriers within educational institutions is essential to fostering genuinely inclusive and equitable learning environments. Acknowledging the presence of student sex workers and

nurturing collaboration between educators and marginalised communities are crucial steps in creating truly supportive environments. Future strategies must adopt intersectional approaches to foster inclusivity, alleviate the burden on staff and promote respect for diverse student experiences.

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