

Our politicians like to talk about prostitution; sex work, not so much.

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Prostitution and sex work

Debates about behaviour do not only turn on labels, but labels and descriptions can still be important. At present, those using the term 'sex worker' tend to be closer to the idea of decriminalisation, rather than abolition or a Nordic model outlawing buying of sex, if not selling. The latter groups do not equate prostitution with a form of work.

Parliament provides one arena for examining the choice of words, and where labels can assume a degree of importance. This may be clear from a 2018 debate in the House of Commons on Commercial Sexual Exploitation, where Victoria Atkins MP was 'corrected' in her use of the term 'sex worker' by Jess Phillips MP.

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| Victoria Atkins | We have provided more than £2 million to organisations supporting sex workers, including the £650,000 from the violence against women and girls service transformation fund that we have given to the police and crime commissioner of Merseyside to provide a victim-focused service for sex workers— |
| Jess Phillips | Prostitutes |
| Victoria Atkins | And prostitutes who are victims of, or at risk of, sexual or domestic violence, abuse, exploitation or human trafficking. I have used both words deliberately through my speech. |
| Sarah Champion | Only one is correct. |
| Victoria Atkins | Forgive me. In that case, may Hansard note that when I have said "sex workers", I was referring also to prostitutes, and vice versa? I do not want to fall over on the language, as other hon. Members have mentioned. |

Hansard: Commercial Sexual Exploitation. 04 July 2018¹.

If we search the entirety of Hansard for mentions of either 'prostitution' or 'sex work', it is of course not surprising that the former term dominates. In searches up to 11 July 2019 (starting back in 1800), there were 3,903 references to prostitution and 59 to sex work. The following two charts (Figure 1 and 2) show the spread over time in using these words.

¹ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2018-07-04/debates/50911795-3525-4F4A-B047-EF87047B5176/CommercialSexualExploitation>

Figure 1 Mentions of 'prostitution' in Hansard (highest bar is n=86 mentions).

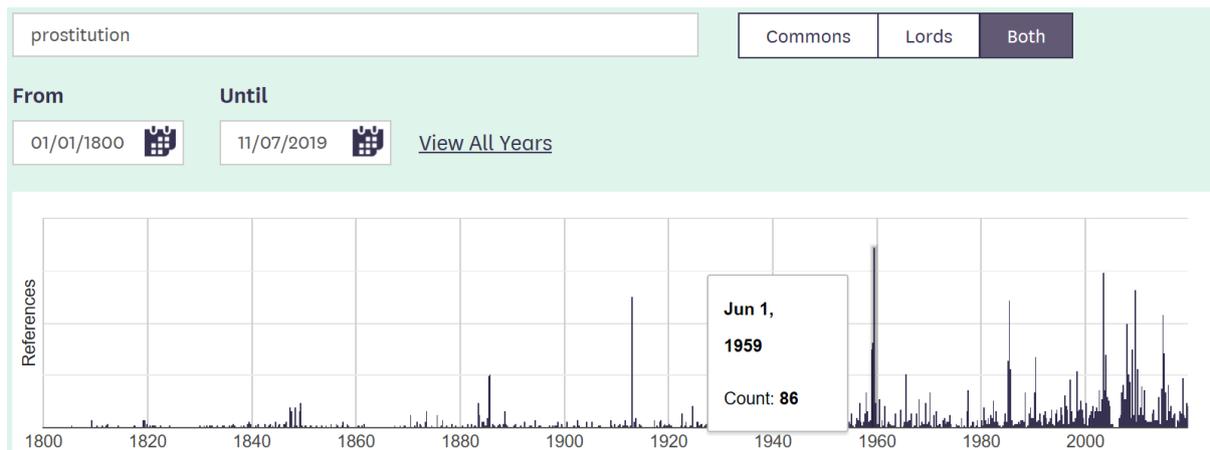
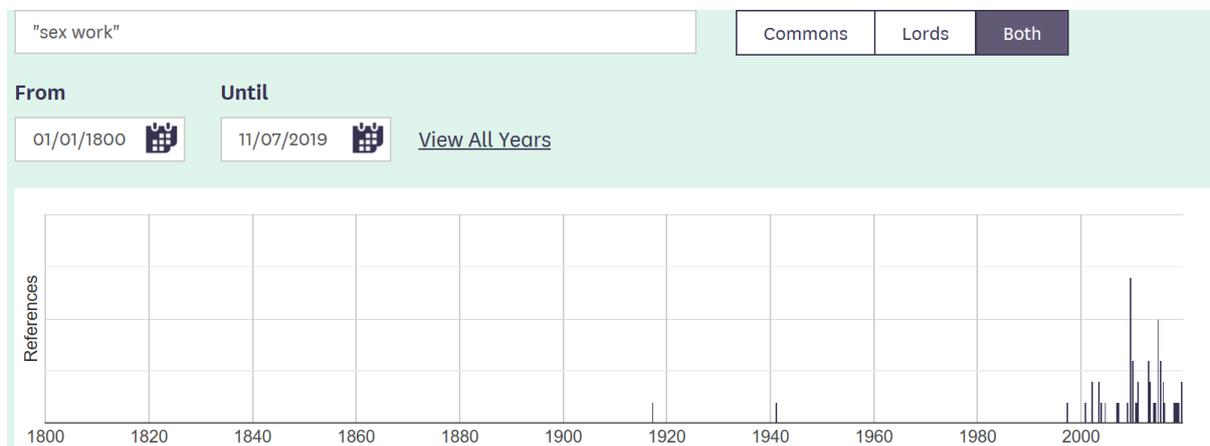


Figure 2 Mentions of 'sex work in Hansard (peaking at 7 instances).



There are large clusters of occasions when prostitution is discussed, often relating to the passage of particular pieces of legislation.

There are only 59 references to 'sex work', mostly from the year 2000 onwards. The apparent 1917 reference is Asquith: "... sex, work ..." and not relevant. The 1941 reference is a repeat of the 1917 quote.

The 1997 reference concerns "Income from child sex work" in a Commons debate about street children.

The first references to sex work as adult prostitution arrive in the year 2000. At that point, the 2000 reference quotes the name of a research report, "For Love or Money: Pimps and the management of sex work". The only other references to sex workers in that debate are in the context of exiting prostitution.

By March 2002, sex work was mentioned in the context of violence "rape as a weapon of war and trafficking in women for sex work" or in relation to trafficking.

I think 13-5-2003 is the first time that there is a Parliamentary mention of adult sex work, outside of trafficking or violence. And it is a debate in the House of Lords. In the context of HIV/AIDS it is said that "Experienced sex workers are normally aware of the risks and take the necessary protections."

[The Earl of Listowel]. In the context of sex offences more generally, Baroness Walmsley then talks of enabling "***genuinely voluntary sex workers*** to operate more safely and prevent them from coming into contact with the law quite so often".