

Blurred Lines: The Contested Nature of Sex Work in a Changing Social Landscape

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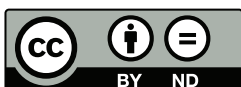
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Editorial – Blurred Lines: The Contested Nature of Sex Work in a Changing Social Landscape

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This special edition of the *Graduate Journal of Social Science* explores the contested nature of the sex industry, a global industry operating within socio-political contexts that have witnessed an array of changes in recent years. The papers in this collection contribute to advancing critical understandings of the ways in which the changing social landscapes have been experienced by those engaged globally in commercial sex work. In so doing, this edition seeks to agitate some of the polarised debates often present within sex industry discourses by exploring some of the oftentimes overlooked nuances – the blurred lines – between the different sex markets, between sex as work and other forms of labour, between agency and constraint, and between care and control. At its core, *Blurred Lines: The Contested Nature of Sex Work in a Changing Social Landscape* represents a shared vision to combine the voices of academics with those working within the sex industry and with practitioners, in order to offer a meaningful consolidation of research and lived experiences; one that does not simply grant lip-service to ‘empowering a marginalised and stigmatised social group’.

Co-creating knowledge: Broadening the research agenda

Although research into the commercial sex industry has burgeoned in recent years,



much has conformed to a traditional – and narrow – research agenda built around prioritising knowledge of female street sex work. Consequently, we have extensive data and theories related to the backgrounds, lifestyles, and working practices of female street sex workers, which is disproportionate to the true size of this sector. In fact, female street sex work comprises only a small sector of a large and diverse sex industry (Cusick et al, 2009), as illustrated within the broad typologies of sex work offered by Harcourt and Donovan (2005) and Sanders (2005). These typologies distinguish between *direct* sex work, where commercial sex occurs in a range of indoor and outdoor settings, and *indirect* sex work, which includes domination services, ‘webcam’ performances, phone sex, lap dancing and swinging clubs. While the majority of these activities occur indoors rather than on the street (Connelly and Sanders, 2015), much of the body of research has, at least historically, focused on the street sex market. This is no doubt linked to its visibility (Hubbard et al., 2008) and relative ease of access. There are of course some notable exceptions. Sanders (2005), Brents and Hausbeck (2005), and Pitcher and Wijers (2014), for example, all provide important research into the indoor sex market. Others caution against viewing sex work solely as a female occupation with male clients, instead exploring male sex work (Whowell (2010) and LGBTQ sex work (Smith and Laing, 2012).

Existing research has also largely employed traditional research methodologies, particularly the qualitative verbal interview or researcher ethnography. These methods fail to acknowledge the breadth and depth of knowledge which can be *co-created* through a range of research tools. Alternative research methods have been increasingly employed in recent years, including the use of visual methods and methodologies informed by the principles of Participatory Action Research (see for example, O’Neill and Hubbard, 2010). O’Neill (2001) describes Participatory Action Research as methods in which those who have traditionally been the subjects of research become active participants and even co-researchers. Adorno (1991: 4 cited in O’Neill, 2001) argues that utilising creative methods allows participants to ‘say the unsayable’; to find ways of expressing what is difficult to put into words. These methods lend themselves particularly well to working with sex workers and other marginalised groups as they are social research tools which attempt to subvert the hierarchies of power created in the academy, and those that place the researcher as the expert. As such, the possibilities of these meth-

ods for creating new knowledge and informing policy in the sex industry arena are extensive. Furthermore, sex worker researchers are increasingly undertaking auto-ethnographies, further blurring the distinction between participant/worker in the sex industry and researcher (see for example, Colosi, 2010; Egan, 2006).

This special edition seeks to broaden the research agenda by shifting the focus solely from female street sex workers towards exploring the heterogeneity of the sex industry and its constitutive sex markets. It also responds to calls for the inclusion and prioritisation of sex worker voices in academic research, showcasing work authored by sex workers and research in which sex workers were active participants or directors. It therefore allows a multitude of sex workers' narratives to emerge. During the production of this edition, we encountered difficulties in ensuring that sex workers' voices remained at its very core because the wish to be inclusive and challenging to the research tradition did not always sit comfortably with the requirements and expectations associated with an academic journal. The reader will note, therefore, that to overcome this we have parted with academic convention in some pieces. We believe that the more traditionally-academic papers, combined with the pieces based on lived experience and narrative, creates a synthesis of knowledge which we would like to advocate in future research and publications. It is only by challenging the traditional research agenda that we can fully embrace an engagement with those working in the sex industry.

Recognising complexity and diversity: Moving beyond the polarised feminist debate

Traditionally, sex industry researchers have tended to position their work within two established feminist paradigms and in so doing, polarised 'sex-wars' (Weitzer, 2000) have ensued between those typically referred to as 'radical feminists' and 'liberal feminists'. Broadly speaking, underpinning the radical feminist position is the notion that prostitution is a form of violence against women and ought to be eradicated (Farley, 2003). Prostitution is often constructed as sexual slavery (Barry, 1995) and it is posited that it is incompatible with gender equality since, from this perspective, the sex industry represents the epitome of male dominance and female subordination. Radical feminists frequently strive for the complete eradication of the sex industry: recently, they have found some success in their advocacy

around the rolling out of the so-called 'Swedish Model' of regulation. This model constructs the 'prostitute' as a passive victim, whilst simultaneously criminalised the client. As Levy (2014) points out, its many harms are too often ignored, dismissed or obscured behind a veil of sensationalist claims.

Those known as liberal feminists, on the other hand, argue that the sale of sex is an understandable response to socio-economic constraints and that many sex workers exercise a rational choice in their decisions to engage in the sex industry. From this perspective, the sex industry may offer a flexible and viable labour option, particularly for migrants from the global South wishing to pursue opportunities in the global North. Indeed, Mai (2011) utilises his research to argue that sex work may offer a dignified standard of living for migrants, many of whom are prevented from accessing other (skilled) forms of employment due to the restrictive immigration policies omnipresent in the global North. To this extent, it is not the sex industry per se that is inherently harmful but rather, its unregulated nature and the stigma surrounding the sale of sexual services. Lowman (2000), for example, suggests that a 'discourse of disposability' exists in which violence towards sex workers is condoned. With this in mind, often those from a liberal feminist perspective argue for the decriminalisation of sex work, positing that workers in this industry ought to be granted the same human and workers' rights as other members of society.

Historically, the heated debates between radical and liberal feminist advocates have occupied a central space within scholarly literature, as well as being present both in policy debates and in clashes amongst those working 'on the ground'. It appears that traditionally, many engaged in debates in this field have therefore felt pressure to align themselves with either a radical or liberal feminist position. Indeed, this concern is highlighted by Chapkis (1997: 5) who notes:

I am concerned about exposing myself to the righteous wrath of one, further injuring another, or misrepresenting a third. The certainty and conviction of those who disagree with me make my own enthusiasm for partial and contradictory truths feel inadequate.

This reluctance to stray outside of the two polarised camps has, at least in part, led to somewhat simplistic, 'one-dimensional and essentialist' understandings of the sex industry (Weitzer, 2010: 6). For some, radical feminists are thought to be at risk

of disempowering women by denying their agency, while liberal feminists may be accused of over-endowing sex worker's autonomy (Maher, 2000). In light of this, a gradually growing body of work is emerging which calls for acknowledgment of the blurred lines between the constraint and agency experienced by those working in the sex industry. Moving beyond the 'constraint-agency' binary, this work often examines how structural factors act to mediate the levels of exploitation and violence sex workers experience, with non-citizens, the poor and women of colour more likely to experience abuse, while middle and upper class white women remain better able to obtain high remuneration in the course of their sex working (Bernstein, 2007; Connelly and Sanders, 2015). To this extent, Wolkowitz (2006) argues that a more helpful term for considering the sale of intimate services might be that of 'Body Work'. This term accepts sexual labour as legitimate work, whilst maintaining the vulnerability of many of the workers who engage in it (Wolkowitz et al, 2013: 19).

This special edition seeks to add to this growing body of scholarship moving beyond the polarised feminist debate. It offers a nuanced account of the complex intersection of power and resistance that sex workers experience (Connelly and Sanders, 2015). In so doing, this edition provides a platform for work which attends to the ways in which the sex industry can simultaneously be empowering *and* exploitative. Ultimately, however, we suggest that the inequalities that pervade the sex industry are not unique to it but rather, are present across society and a range of labour markets. Indeed the gendered structural inequalities and sexist ideologies that exist globally, work in conjunction to subordinate women, and shame and marginalise those engaged in sex work. The reader will note, therefore, that the papers included in this edition do not come from one unified feminist position, but rather demonstrate a range of lived experiences within the sex industry. Here the editors made a conscious decision to include papers that, at least at times, act in contradiction, in order to demonstrate the heterogeneous nature of sex work. We thus follow the advice of Chapkis (1997), who encourages us to listen to the accounts of workers in all their messy complexities, and not, as 'competitors in the status of truth'. To this extent, we encourage academics, sex workers and practitioners to build upon this growing body of scholarship, by co-creating further knowledge in this field which does not conform to the traditional polarised debate. It is only by recognising the complex and diverse nature of the

sex industry – and acknowledging that multiple truths can, and do, exist – that we can move towards a more comprehensive understanding of this labour market.

Policy and its impact on the lived experiences of sex workers

While the global sex industry operates within socio-political contexts that have witnessed an array of changes in recent years, the aforementioned radical feminist perspective has remained extremely influential in guiding sex work policy around the world. Indeed, the assumption of coercion and exploitation is often present within policies that govern the sex industry, which emphasise the vulnerable female *involved in prostitution* and posit exiting as the only legitimate outcome. In the UK, where the majority of the papers included in this edition are based upon, we have witnessed a move towards further criminalisation of the sex industry in recent years. Currently in the UK, there exists a complex – and paradoxical – legal framework in which while the sale of sex is legal, it is almost impossible to sex work without breaking a number of other related offences (Sanders et al, 2009: 116). As Cusick et al (2009: 705) note, a ‘critical mass of female parliamentarians’ exists in the UK, who are ‘eager to be seen to be doing something for women, and who use(d) trafficking rhetoric and inflated trafficking figures which exploit(ed) migration fears’. Under the guise of tackling sex trafficking, an amendment to the *Modern Slavery Act 2015* was recently proposed by Fiona Mactaggart MP to criminalise the client, in line with the ‘Swedish Model’.¹ Collective mobilisation from sex workers and sustained challenges from practitioners, academics and others ensured this was defeated.

Beyond the UK, despite emphatic opposition from activists, the ‘Swedish Model’ has also found prominent support within the European Parliament, when in March 2014 Mary Honeyball’s proposals to criminalise the purchase of sex were granted non-binding resolution. This model continues to be the *en vogue* form of regulation. Indeed, Beran (2012) describes the policy exchange and convergence from Sweden to other Northern European countries – including Norway, Iceland and the UK – and in this edition Walker and Oliveira demonstrate that the policy situation in South Africa is similar. Yet although the ‘Swedish Model may be constructed as the radical feminist gold standard, it fails to recognise those who

choose to work in the industry (Maher, et al, 2013; Scoular & O'Neill, 2007), as well as the multitude of barriers for sex workers existing the industry (Sanders 2007). Nonetheless, despite sex worker unionisation and responses to policy consultation from academics and project workers that argue that criminalisation poses further risks to safety and increases the stigmatisation of sex workers (Munro and Scoular 2012; Phoenix 2009; Sanders 2005), across the globe new policies continued to strategise a zero-tolerance approach to prostitution.

Likewise, other critiques of the 'Swedish Model' argue that much of the 'risk' associated with sex work is calculated according to cost/benefits to the tax payer (Hester and Westmarland, 2004: 112 cited in Scoular and O'Neill, 2007: 772). As such, we can read the sex workers are secondary to concerns about the 'good citizen' and the 'community', from which sex workers are typically excluded. The construction of exiting sex work as the only legitimate outcome means that those sex workers who do not wish to exit, or those that even simply admit to enjoying their labour, are cast out as undeserving victims. This marginalisation not only subjects sex workers to symbolic violence, but also makes them more vulnerable to the realities of physical violence. Furthermore, policies that criminalise the sex industry are also accused of over-emphasising the role of 'pimps' and in so doing, deliberately underplaying women's choice and agency, however constrained it may be. McCracken argues that the issue of 'pimps' is far from simple, (McCracken, 2013: 58) and yet the focus on alleged exploiters continues to overshadow the experience of those working in a varied and fluid commercial sex industry. Similarly, critics of criminalisation policies argue that too often the larger context of the feminization of poverty and a wider precarious labour market are ignored.

Comparatively, the Netherlands has adopted an alternative approach which legalises prostitution under certain conditions regulated by the local authority. Integral to this model of regulation is the distinction between voluntary sex work and forced/underage involvement in the sex industry, with the later remaining illegal. With this in mind, policies that legalise are often celebrated by some for representing sex as a legitimate form of labour (Kantola and Squires, 2004). Yet evidence indicates that due to poor implementation of the law, the working conditions of sex workers continue to be worse than those experienced in other professions. Indeed, Outshoorn (2012: 237) suggests that a two-tiered sex industry has developed in which (white) Dutch citizens work in a 'licensed sector', while migrant sex work-

ers and minors are confined to a more exploitative 'non-licensed sector'. A lack of consultation with sex workers in the policy formation and The Netherlands' recent restrictive changes to sex industry policy, which attempt to reduce the number of sex workers as part of the gentrification of red light districts (Aalbers and Sabat 2012; Outshoorn 2012), could serve as a further challenge to the 'sex work as work' debate.

Awareness seems to be growing, therefore, that decriminalisation – a process involving the removal of all laws criminalising the sex industry – may offer the most effective policy option for minimising the harms experienced by those engaged in the sex industry (Sanders and Campbell, 2014). Indeed, evidence from New Zealand indicates that the decriminalisation model improves the welfare, health and safety of sex workers (Mossman, 2010), with sex workers better able to avoid or respond to violence as a result of their enhanced employment rights (Abel et al, 2010). A move towards decriminalisation also finds support in a study conducted by Sanders, Connelly and Jarvis-King (2015) alongside National Ugly Mugs, a third-party mechanism in the UK for sex workers and support services to report violence and share intelligence. Analysing large-scale survey data, they conclude that for internet sex workers, decriminalisation offers a number of advantages, including: enhancing safety by allowing sex workers to work together; improving sex worker's relationships with the police; and reducing societal stigma and prejudice.

This special edition seeks to draw attention to the misrepresentation of sex workers in current policy. The papers included here demonstrate that current policies often fail sex workers and trafficked individuals. Indeed, the global shift towards a model of regulation that criminalises sex work is considered to be both ineffectual and exclusionary (Agustin, 2005: 619). We believe that it produces harmful working conditions for those working in the sex industry and compounds the stigmatisation, marginalisation and 'othering' of sex workers. To this extent, the research findings and lived experiences offered in this journal seek to inform policy making, although disillusionment does exist amongst sex industry scholars and activists over whether the government uses research evidence in practice (Kantola and Squires 2004). Nonetheless, the editors advocate for a partnership approach between researchers and policy-makers, encouraging an effective relationship between research and policy development/formulation. We call for the government to review a wide range of research conducted by the academic com-

munity, in close collaboration with sex workers and practitioners, and to change policy accordingly. This, we hope, will lead to improved working conditions and lived experiences for those engaged in various capacities in the sex industry.

Overview of the papers

This edition begins with **Jet Young's** personal narrative: *Saving Us From Penetration: Ponderings of a Trans Rentboy*. Young, a transgender man, offers a thought-provoking reflection upon the lived realities of selling sex in the contested arena of the sex industry. In so doing, he offers a critique of the hegemonic feminist perspective – what he terms, ‘white, middle-class, English-speaking, University, Western feminism’ – exploring how its racialized, classed and cis-centred nature may function to vilify femininity. Notions of freedom and choice to engage in sex work are examined, focusing on how they are more readily recognised when sex is not for payment. Young also highlights the far-reaching effects of ‘whorephobia’, which operates to police women’s sexuality and femininity, and the way in which it has the most damaging effects for people of colour, the poor, trans, and/or the undocumented migrants. Young concludes that anti-prostitution arguments are too often based upon perceptions of how women *ought* to behave sexually in order to avoid being considered a ‘whore’, rather than the lived realities of sex workers. These lived realities are complex, involving the navigation of xenophobic immigration policies, criminalisation, transphobia, cultural violence, and stigma.

Gemma Ahearne, in her paper entitled *Between the Sex Industry and Academia: Navigating Stigma and Disgust*, then draws upon her own experiences as a lap-dancer to offer an account of the multiple identities of a former stripper and a current academic. Central to her paper is an exploration of the way in which stigma attaches itself – or is attached by others – to the ‘deviant’ bodies working in the sex industry. She examines how this stigma functions to potentially discredit, spoil and sully her academic work. Ahearne positions her experiences within the current socio-political climate operating in Europe of pro-abolitionism, arguing that it is becoming ever more difficult for those who have worked, or currently work, in the sex industry to admit to doing so whilst also performing in the academy. For Ahearne, to cast out the stripper means to maintain the boundaries of decency of both middle-class white femininity and the reflecting images in academia. As such,

Ahearne argues that stigma is a lived reality and encourages a self-surveillance to take place, where one is always imagining oneself as being viewed.

The self-reflective theme – and focus on the lived realities of the sex industry as told by authors who have worked in it – continues in **Dr Billie Lister's** paper. *'Yeah, they've started to get a bit fucking cocky ...'* *Culture, Economic Change and Shifting Power Relations within the Scottish Lap-Dancing Industry* draws upon data derived from her Ph.D research in which she, herself a dancer, conducted interviews with women working in lap-dancing venues across Scotland. Here, Lister highlights the precarious nature of the sex industry, examining the way in which economic and cultural changes outside of the lap-dancing market can result in dancers' declining earning potential and may alter the dynamics of power within the lap-dancing venue. She suggests that the economic recession, and the resulting competitive labour market, have dictated that dancers' main objective now is to earn money rather than enjoying the social aspects of their work. She argues, therefore, that her case study venue has shifted from being a 'social club' to a 'hustle club', drawing upon Bradley-Engen and Ulmers (2009) US typology of stripping. Lister posits, however, that women remain attracted to working in the – albeit, precarious – lap-dancing market: the ability to earn instant payment is an incentive rarely available in legitimised forms of labour. She concludes by urging Local Authorities to act to ensure that venues are more effectively regulated, a necessity in a market in which changes in supply and demand have negatively impacted working conditions, and a broader sex industry characterised by complexity and contradiction.

Facilitating and promoting the merging of academic debate with the debates sex workers have on a daily basis, **Rae Story** and **Glen Jankowski** offer an insight into the experiences of independent escorting. *Victor or Victim? Foregrounding the Independent Escort Experience Outside of the Polarised Debate* draws upon Story's own experiences as an escort, in addition to the accounts offered on a publically-accessible escort internet forum. Like the aforementioned authors, Story and Jankowski posit that ideological debates around the morality of sex work should not dominate over the voices of the heterogeneous collectives of people engaged in the sex industry. They seek to disrupt the dichotomisation of the sex worker as either 'victor' or 'victim' by exploring the nuanced, and at time ambiguous, lived experience of escorts. In so doing, the authors question the utility of the choice/coercion binary in a society founded upon the principles of capitalism, arguing that

it fails to represent the majority of sex workers' voices. In exploring some of the challenges independent escorts face, Story and Jankowski argue that often they are not unique but rather, affect women more broadly in a neo-liberal, capitalist system. They posit that the violence or the threat of violence, pressure to be commercially 'beautiful' and the economic hardship women face is exacerbated in a society which embodies socio-economic and socio-political inequality.

Dr Jane Pitcher builds upon some of the concerns raised in the four previous papers with the way in which the dominant discourse of victimhood is often applied to sex workers, a discourse that is founded upon radical feminist assumptions, perpetuated by the media, and evidenced in policy. In *Direct Sex Work in Great Britain: Reflecting Diversity*, Pitcher seeks to shift the focus of the lens away from its tradition position on female street sex work and on extreme examples of sexual exploitation. Indeed, similar to Story and Jankowski, Pitcher is concerned with highlighting heterogeneity in the sex worker population. She presents new estimates of the numbers and relative proportions of female, male and transgender sex workers engaged in the street and indoor sex markets and in so doing, highlights some of the methodological challenges of research based upon sex worker project data alone. She also reports on the diverse experiences and needs of indoor sex workers, to offer a convincing argument that criminalisation denies sex worker's agency and restricts their ability to work without experiencing violence. She thus offers a valuable contribution to the growing body of academic literature advocating changes in policy and practice which recognise the human and labour rights of sex workers. Throughout, Pitcher's paper lends further weight to demands for a more nuanced debate, one which moves beyond the dichotomisation of coercion and choice to reflect the diverse service needs of sex workers across the sex markets.

Pitcher's concerns about the way in which policies that criminalise the sex industry can facilitate and exacerbate violence against sex workers are shared by **Emma Smith**. In her paper entitled *The Changing Landscape of Scottish Responses to Sex Work: Addressing Violence against Sex Workers*, Smith draws upon her Ph.D research to explore the relationship between legislative and policy responses to sex work and violence in the Scottish sex industry. Smith argues that it is crucial to examine the stigmatisation of sex work and that due to this, there is support for services which actually function to harm sex workers – that is, often those that complement an abolitionist ideology. This is reiterated by Walker and Oliveira

below. Smith argues that her participants viewed measures taken against them by law and policy as potentially more violent and detrimental than physical acts of violence. In order to (re)imagine what violence against sex workers is, Smith suggests that symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1992) offers a theoretical framework. Smith argues that whilst developments in Scotland, such as brothel raids, are seen by the media as positive, they have negative effects on sex workers' lives, and they can actually reproduce and compound violence and stigma.

Next, **Dr Rebecca Walker** and **Elsa Oliveira** examine the blurred lines between migrant sex work and sex trafficking in: *Contested Spaces: Exploring the Intersection of Migration, Sex Work and Trafficking in South Africa*. Walker and Oliveira echo the concerns of other papers; namely that the false dichotomies of victim/ victor, trafficked/free serve to limit our understandings of the complexities of sex work. The authors refer to these as 'multiple realities' and argue that as social scientists we must explore these pluralities of identity and refrain from compounding crude binaries that do not address the richness and complexity of lived experience. Furthermore, far from trafficking being the result of 'demand' practices, government policy is harbouring the conditions for exploitative sex work to take place. Walker and Oliveira argue that it is the anti-trafficking movement who, through restrictive immigration policies, push migrant sex workers in ever more precarious conditions. The authors suggest that it is vital that we recognise the complexities and intersectionality that migrant women face in navigating the sale of sexual labour. Allowing sex workers to have safe spaces in which to talk freely means that we receive textured understandings, rather than those that derive from radical feminist ideologies which shut down those who refuse to accept a victim identity. They stress the importance of using creative methodologies that provide participants with the tools to express themselves in ways that traditional methodologies might not be able to offer.

Building upon the previous paper, **Laura Connelly's** short think-piece explores the blurred line between care and control by problematizing the complex functions of anti-trafficking NGOs in the UK. In *The Rescue Industry: The Blurred Line between Help and Hindrance*, Connelly argues that on the one hand, anti-trafficking NGOs provide valuable support to disadvantaged womyn by plugging gaps in provisions exposed by the retreating welfare state. She contends, however, that at the same time, these NGOs serve the interest of the neoliberal, neocolonial state. Indeed, anti-trafficking NGOs may work to construct all migrant womyn as passive victims

and in so doing, justify interventions that impose the values of 'the West' upon 'the Rest'. Not least, the rescue industry, according to Connelly, functions to legitimise the deportation of voluntary migrant sex workers under the facade of noble action. She posits that although some NGOs are critical of the state, they ultimately continue to operate within the existing neoliberal system and as such, create the illusion of change without offering a sustained and comprehensive challenge to the structural causes of trafficking. In so doing, Connelly seeks to draw attention to the need for greater scrutiny of the 'rescue industry' by those working outside of it but even more importantly, by those operating within it.

Toni Stone, a sex worker and documentary photographer, offers the final contribution, adding to the breadth of data and lived experience included in this special edition. We welcome her photo essay given the growing prominence of visual consumption and its centrality to culture and cultural construction (Pink, 2007). Images have also been celebrated for their power to challenge predominant ideologies and stereotypes. For these reasons, the editors are advocates for the use of visual methodologies within social research, and particularly research which takes places within contested terrains. Images hold endless narratives, making them both polysemic and powerful. Of these meanings, 'auteur theory' places importance on the intended messages within the production of the image: despite the image's apparent axiomatic nature, 'the photograph sees, but it sees the way it has been made to see' (Harper, 2004: 93). Barthes (1977: 145–6), on the other hand, argues that the producer's intent has become irrelevant and we have experienced 'the death of the author'. Instead, it is preferable to leave interpretative avenues open for the viewer to explore; allowing the multiplicity of meanings to emerge. Individuals' *ways of seeing* will bring meaning to the picture, negotiating the image's message with their own social identities (Berger, 1972; Fiske, 1994). For this reason, we have made the editorial decision not to offer verbal interpretation of this photo essay here but instead, to allow readers to explore the images for themselves. Further explorations of visual methodologies can be found in an earlier special edition of the *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, volume 10(2).

Conclusion

This editorial highlights some of the current concerns and debates present in sex industry research but moreover, those that are occurring 'on the ground' amongst

sex workers, practitioners, policy-makers and academics. We have sought to position the lived realities of sex workers as the focus of this edition, in an attempt to avoid contributing to the marginalisation of sex workers' voices. In so doing, we offer a rich synthesis of knowledge that challenges the traditional research agenda. This issue argues that as social scientists we must endeavour to go far beyond simplistic understandings and crude dichotomies; instead, we must work with sex workers to explore the rich textures of their (heterogeneous) lived experiences. To this extent, this edition explores the complex – and at times, contradictory – nature of the sex industry. The papers included here advance understandings of the ways in which the changing social landscape have been experienced by those engaged globally in commercial sex work.

We would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the hard work, and patience, of each of the contributors to this journal. Each of your contributions brings something different to the edition, making it full of rich empirical work and lived experience. It is our pleasure to showcase some of the emerging work, theories and ideas in this field. Thank you. A big thank you also goes to all the anonymous peer-reviewers, who provided such thorough and constructive feedback to the authors. Peer-reviewing is often such a thankless job but sincerely, without your work this edition would not have been possible. We would also like to thank the GJSS Team, particularly Remi Joseph-Salisbury and Arpita Das for inviting us to put this edition together, and to the copy-editors for diligently proof reading the edition.

Endnotes

- ¹ The 'Swedish Model' aims to end demand for prostitution by simultaneously criminalising the client, and constructing the 'prostitute' as a victim who requires help to exist.

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Saving us from penetration – ponderings from a trans rentboy

Jet Young



ABSTRACT : A Chinese diasporic trans rentboy, reflects on the contested arena of sex work. Ponderings on whorephobia as a strategy of imperialism, the continued oppression of femininity, and the murky politics of penetration.

Some lines are blurry from far away, getting clearer the closer you get. Other lines are defined when you gaze towards them in the distance, but get fuzzy when time or space draws you into them. Sometimes they cease to be lines, turning into myriads of varying shapes and shades. Lines on lines. Little ones you can't see. Ones that make up bigger pictures, nets, or borders.

I can see the seduction of clear lines, of 'having to drawing a line somewhere'. But who gets to carve those lines, and whose bodies are those lines and borders driven through?

I thought I'd share a bit about how various lines have passed through and over my body, as well as lines and borders I've crossed.

Before I started doing sex work, I transitioned. Before I transitioned, I was a butch androgenous diasporic Chinese woman.

I stumbled across what I was told was Feminism – white middle class English-speaking university Western Feminism, before I found out later that it was just one kind of feminism. I came across queer/women's/lesbian space a little earlier. I found those (white) spaces even more alienating, although my white queer women counterparts told me those spaces felt like coming home. I was envious and perplexed.



Inevitably, some of the pressures of sexist womanhood and restrictive femininity settled on my butch shoulders. But it was more like dust than a yoke for me. I could see it heavy on feminine cisgender and trans women, and also on femme and camp men. I see masculinity in queer space desired and seen as more 'natural', transgressive and radical, and femininity huffed at, dismissed and said to be 'normative'. I see trans men praised and trans women ignored. I see masculine men upheld, allied to and deferred to, and camp men mocked and pathologised. I see men stumble home in the dark on Friday nights and sleep drunk in parks, while women are followed home and cat called with violent invitations.

Later when I transitioned my butch andro self into a masculine man, I could see more clearly how femininity in any gender is scorned, derided and heavily policed. My masculinity in my new male body was a loud contrast to the sexist street harassment and constant sexism I saw around me.

I began to be praised loudly for doing the housework I'd always done, while my girlfriend's housework went expected and unacknowledged. Men apologised to me after they'd sexually harassed my feminine girlfriend before they noticed we were together, apologising for infringing unknowingly on my 'property', while not being able to see how disrespectful they are being to her. If I said, or repeated the same thing as a feminine person who had spoken before me in a group, it was my *masculine* voice that was listened and responded to, while her voice and ideas were allowed to dissipate into the group hum.

I've also noticed colonial, racialised, classed and cis-centred underpinnings to the vilification of femininity and whorephobia.

Colonial justifications follow deeply etched patterns of Empire penetrating 'virgin' lands. The Dark Temptress's, Dusky Maidens and Exotic Orientals are just begging to be taken. *Well it sounds like they're saying that, who knows what they're saying, they should speak English anyhow. They may resist, but they secretly want it.* Once 'given it' they remain inferior. The coloniser knows what's best for these women and lands, knows when they want it and how. Indigenous women, land and culture are rendered silent and inactive. The penetrating coloniser takes the lead role. Indigenous women, land and culture are to be used, and then stigmatised for being 'used'. And the 'user' is lauded and patted on the back.

Femininities of colour, class and diverse gender, that actively desire are dismissed as over-sexualised, or seen as having ulterior motives. We know the ste-

reotypes. The insatiable black witchy woman, the migrant slut that's with that white guy to get a visa or a citizened baby. The noble but savage dusky maiden. The oriental geisha – submissive, demure but with ancient sexual tricks (or ping pong balls). *And don't forget those coloured folk that breed too much and cause over-population, using up all the jobs and resources.* A classed dynamic of the gold digger, the hard bitch always on the hustle. A cis-centred violent rendering of trans women only, and always being sex workers.

Got to watch out for women that want it too much, or give it up without a fight, means they're whores or they're after something

Within an Imperialist dynamic, the entered/used site is always inferior and un-trustworthy, and must be controlled by saving, occupying or eradicating.

Mucking about within over-lapping spaces of 'Queer', 'Feminist' and 'Activist' arenas, I've been surprised at what a shit time femininity is given.

Decades of feminism might have changed the assumptions and rules about what unmarried women can do with their bodies, married women even. You can have sex before you're married, be a lesbian, have casual sex, have kids alone, and you can even enjoy sex. Women are allowed to have sex for desire. For their freedom and choice. But only if that choice is not about money. Women's agency is acknowledged, accepted and applauded in a thick matrix of gender, race, class and status, when it comes to desire and sex. But that same agency is ignored and dismissed as an impossibility, when considered around sex and money. The boundaries of the 'good' and acceptable woman have expanded. But the arena of the 'bad' woman still remains.

The rules surrounding femininity have changed a bit, but there are still rules that are policed and enforced strictly and violently.

The Virgin and the Whore have been rebranded for modern times. The Virgin doesn't have to be a virgin. But the Whore is still a whore. Except she's not.

The slur 'whore', and 'whorephobia' as a cultural violence, isn't only about sex workers. It's about feminine sex workers. You can't tell from looking, whether a woman is a sex worker. You can only assume. And those assumptions rely upon old-school enduring power blocks. The term 'whore' and its bludgeoning surfaces, are used to target women's sexual behaviour and feminine gendered expressions. It comes from the same family as '*She was asking for it, look what she was wearing, she looks like a whore.*' Also known as rape culture.

Whorephobia is part of rape culture and refers to the sexist controlling of women's behaviour, sexuality and gendered expression. It affects women and femininity, in all their shapes, forms and manifestations. For many people with feminine identities, the use of the term 'whore' is a threat. A slur and judgement always ready to be flung if certain things are done, boundaries transgressed. For feminine people that are also people of colour/poor/trans/undocumented, whorephobia isn't just an impending threat, it's also an assumed state that justifies violence.

I remember a contrast between two feminist groups, that made me chuckle. One group consisted of mostly white middle class, English as a first (and only) language, citizenized, uni-educated young women. Their main activity was protesting against sexist advertisements through letters and social media. The other group comprised of multi-lingual, intergenerational migrant and refugee women of mixed statuses of documentation and education. Their main activities were addressing child marriages, domestic violence within visa marriages and emergency housing. I have absolutely no doubt that the second group would agree that sexist advertising was awful and should be opposed. And I have no doubt that the first group would agree that child marriages shouldn't happen, that domestic violence occurring within a relationship where the abuser was the access for a woman's residency was horrific, and that emergency housing was a serious issue. The contrast and movement on the ground however, meant that both groups were engaged in very different things. And that the things they put their energy towards, were the things that affected their subject positioning the most.

This is what I've been thinking about when it comes to the groups of people who are anti-sex work. They are against *women* doing sex work, not men. And by stark sight of their actions (or lack thereof), they are more concerned with the perception of women being seen as whores and sluts, rather than the tangible circumstances that women who do sex work have to contend with. They are concerned with the reputation of women and femininity. Not the poverty, violence, racist border policing and profiling, incarceration, state violence that many women (some of which are sex workers) must navigate.

The vocal anti-sex work voicing, has an elite (white) agenda to it. The loud oversized worry about reputation is one that often seems to concern the middle and upper classes. You have to have a reputation in the first place, to worry about it being tarnished. And when the dynamics of gender is applied, it's been middle

and upper class white cis women, whose virginities, reputations and wombs have been violently guarded historically by raced and classed empire states. After all, the continual re-birth of the white nation must be defended by all genders, or else the coloured masses will out-number them and take over.

But there must also be a Public Relations Campaign to make this palatable. Here is where the colonial saviour comes in. Our control must look like we care, because care is in fashion. And maybe we do really care, but then there is violence in unexamined 'caring' and good intentions.

Enter stage left: The Rescuer Saviour barges into the debauched den of badness, to save and speak for the poor helpless woman.

'No need to listen to her, she's just been duped and suffering from false consciousness. We can speak for her, because we know what is better for her than she does. And if she does defend what she does, does she not know her actions taint all of us on a larger scale?! Her bad women ways make us good women look suspect.'

Exit stage right: Global economic inequity, racialised incarceration, poverty, state and administrative violence, police brutality and ... sex workers. *(Your part in our play is over, thank you goodbye.)*

Lead Saviour takes a bow.

Applause!

I'm wary of missionising saviours, based on their 'saving' and 'caring' history with indigenous peoples. I'm wary of saviours that would 'help' to 'cure' homosexuals, trans people, energetic children and women who would not take any shit. So I'm wary of women who try to rescue and save women sex workers without examining whether they are trying to save their own reputations, careers and subject positions, all while not caring about sex workers immediate realities. The 'alternatives' they often offer sex workers to exit sex work, are so patronising that one sex worker crunched the numbers for a minimum wage job the saviours and exiters told her to apply for, and found that she'd be getting into debt each week if she applied for that job. Funnily enough, none of the saviours offered her their well paid jobs ... This white saviour phenomenon of offering sex workers badly paid jobs is global enough that the logo of the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers has the red circle with a diagonal line across, and a sewing machine inside (apnsw.org). This logo

in direct response to sex workers being 'rescued' and made to work in garment factories sewing clothes as 'rehabilitation'. Another sex worker led organisation in Thailand made a fantastic skit about the holy alliance of NGO saviours (character portrayed with a superman style cape), social workers and the police, working together to target, arrest and make life more difficult for sex workers, while conveniently ignoring crimes that have a tangible negative effect. (*Last Rescue in Siam, Empower Foundation, 2012*)

I feel like the other main thing at play here, once you sort through the rhetoric, shoddy 'research' and rescuer-grandstanding, is the murky politics of penetration.

My thoughts on the politics of penetration go like this. From the various hegemonic narratives constantly at play, once you are penetrated you are eternally subjugated and dominated. The act of being penetrated is positioned as inherently degrading and not a good thing. So one of the reasons that sex work can't be seen as work, is that being penetrated as a woman, by a man, is degrading. Only love or desire mitigates that inherent 'degradation'. Not money. These underlying feelings about sex work, are pretty old-school essentialist, as well as sexist, homophobic, and colonial.

Women are penetrated (so inferior to men who penetrate), therefore 'real' men don't allow themselves to be penetrated because men's bodies are sealed and impenetrable and all powerful. Same with the colonial nation. It enters (colonisation), but does not want to be entered (border control, anti-immigration).

Some of the feelings that premised the arguments against penetrative sex and BDSM in the 80's, are also around penetration and this reductive belief about penetration. What acts are thought to be inherently dominating and others submitting, and that those states and acts are fixed, un-negotiable and un-navigable.

I think a lot of the anti sex work arguments stem from a place where people simply feel icked out when thinking about sex work. Not too unlike homophobic people feeling icked out about gay men because they immediately imagine gay male butt sex.

These ideas about penetration build upon an assumption that certain arenas of power are impenetrable, inflexible and fixed. It's sexist, narrow minded and patronising to believe that people are unable to navigate and negotiate with agency, circumstances and situations that are laden with complex interplays of power.

We all navigate overarching power structures every day. Agency within individual and collective constraints, constraints in individual and collective agency.

Hegemonic power affects much of our lives, but we don't hear narratives telling women that they shouldn't go for a job if there's a male boss because she'll be immediately exploited and objectified under capitalist patriarchal systems, and that her being an employee of a man, will condone the subordination of all women.

When various feminists silence and dismiss the voices of women, allow and encourage the state to further stigmatise, target and criminalise those same women, and then blame them for gendered oppression, it doesn't look like feminism to me. It looks like victim-blaming.

It's also telling that the positions that anti-sex work voices come from, tend to be white middle class women who are making their money and careers from being anti-sex work. And that the women they target and blame, are often already navigating white supremacy, poverty, transphobia, administrative violence and racist border policing.

It seems clear that their arguments are less about sex work, and more about the feelings that come up for them surrounding penetration and women's 'proper' behaviour, as they don't have much to say on male sex workers and trans women workers. Nor do they offer any meaningful and substantial alternatives that would survive a simple policy audit. They sound like bullies to me.

Well that's what it looks like to me as a male sex worker who uses his cunt to help pay the rent.



Between the Sex Industry and Academia: Navigating Stigma and Disgust

Gemma Ahearne

This personal narrative essay will act as a non-linear reflection of being both a former lap-dancer, and working in academia. The exploration will examine how the author is pulled between various identities in an attempt to make sense of inhabiting a fragmented identity in the workplace. In this piece I explore the embodiment of stigma as a layered process; from Goffman's (1963) notion of a spoiled identity, to the idea of performing appropriate femininity, and the subsequent layering of stigma, disgust and sticky emotions. Namely, that negative emotions provoked by popular debates of the sex industry produce a sticking of disgust to the body. The former lap-dancer-come-academic is stranded in an unfamiliar place, where she is aligned with the Other, contagion, dirt and pollution. She will never be just a former lap-dancer again, nor just an academic, but instead takes on a haunting presence, an ambiguous figure, trapped and pacing the boundaries of acceptable academic and inappropriately performed femininity in the shape of the stripper.

Dr Jude Roberts offers the perfect example of how a woman's identity may be fragmented and spoiled by association with the sex industry (Ahearne, 2014). Roberts is a young female academic who reveals she consumes porn in a BBC News Night debate. Within seconds her title on screen had changed from 'Dr Jude Roberts' to 'Jude Roberts Porn User'. Roberts argues:

'Replacing my academic title with 'porn user' at just that moment feeds into the narrative that says that we can either be intellectual or we can be sexual, but we cannot be both.'

I find the quote particularly pertinent and it resonates clearly with my own experi-



ences as an early career researcher. There is still a great societal discomfort and unease with accepting that a woman can be both a serious professional and a sexual being. It is deemed that one must overshadow or erode the other. A woman can 'better' herself by moving away from stripping, but to admit that one still engages in stripping, or enjoyed it, troubles onlookers. The virgin/whore dichotomy dictates the distress at being presented with a woman who is both academic and porn user, or academic and lap-dancer, or academic and sex worker. Whilst the 'former' lap dancer means the deviance has desisted, and can help to alleviate fears, (because it is in the past, it is contained) it does little to halt the haunting presence of the deviant identity, that the pollutant could spill out and infect others. 'What about the children' translates to 'what about the students!?' How can the students possibly take this woman seriously? Why should colleagues take this woman seriously?

Comments left underneath an article on Dr Rachela Colosi, a former dancer and academic who conducted ethnographic research in the lap-dancing club where she worked, are typical of what a woman risks facing once she 'outs' herself as a former dancer (Liverpool Echo, 2013). 'Will she be dancing as part of the seminar' and mocking of the topic of her Ph.D in order to reduce her credibility. Her identity here is spoiled; she is discredited due to this mark. I have experienced this personally whilst at a conference delivering a paper, where a male delegate openly mocked my research area. And could not see past my former stripper status; this tainted his view of my work and possible credibility. My identity was completely spoiled in his eyes (Goffman, 1963) and spilled into my paper, blocking my identity as authentic academic and discrediting me. This also has an internal affect, whereby the outsider is made to feel like an imposter. One can be treated like a novelty, an object of curiosity, but rarely as an active intellectual subject. The insider status of former lap-dancer rarely translates to a widespread concept of expertise. And the fact I could be blamed for my own stigma (Allport, 1954) compounds the legitimacy of such treatment.

To admit to being part of the sex industry is in some academic circles, paramount to tyranny. The influence of radical feminism looks large both in policy and the academy. The affective role of fear is theorized by Dr Clarissa Smith (Ahearne, 2013) where the roaming ambient sex panics send the message that 'we are all at risk'. The danger hangs like a phantom in the air, and the media deliver a relentless

siege of bullets in the forms of 'sexualization' 'objectification' and 'pornification,' often used uncritically, both in the press and the academy, they set the context of fear, anxiety and a strong drive to protect women, and children, from the predatory danger 'out there'. Lap dancing, porn, sex work, pop videos and clothing are all sewn together under the 'sexualization' banner. Certain sections of academia are often as guilty of this panic as the mainstream media, with all commercialized sexual services conceptualized as violence against women, inherently harmful and something to eradicate. The moral values spill out and construct moral geographies of working space. Hammond recalls a friend informing others at an event that she was 'doing a Ph.D on prostitution' and inferring she herself was involved in selling sex (Hammond and Kingston, 2014: 23). Diminishing a woman's academic identity (Ibid) is a way of casting out, and a way of upholding boundaries and attempting to avoid stigma by association.

Along with the emotional strain and emotional labour of lap-dancing that Colosi mentions (2010) there is also the under-documented emotional toil of being a former lap-dancer; of deciding when to reveal, when to 'pass', and how to navigate different terrains such as work, home, friendships with the information. When a male professor from a different institution sent me inappropriate direct messages on twitter relating to lap-dancing, I blamed myself for revealing my former status. Having a history of working in the sex industry in any form gives you a deviant identity. If you have ever lap-danced, performed in pornography, or worked in glamour modelling, that self stands still in time, a photographed permanent self who can be recalled and held accountable. Even if you choose to hide your former identity, it remains beneath the service; stigma operates on a layered basis. Aggressive comments particularly originating from a radical feminist discourse can be directly thrown at you; the former lap-dancer must be prepared to be asked personal questions in public. A loud and aggressive conference delegate demanded I answered her questions at an event, 'So have you ever been paid for sex?' 'Don't you think it's a bit seedy?' 'Why did you do it?' 'Don't you think it negatively affects all women'. Involvement in the sex industry means you are viewed as a harmful pollutant that risks harming others by your very presence and fails to adhere to and uphold conventional value systems.

These (often unwelcome) questions can be fired at any time, often relating to the 'violence against all women' discourse, claims of gendered exploitation and

the implication that one must be damaged in some way. How can I possibly call myself a feminist? Colosi's work is important here as she makes the valid point that dancers often feel they must cite money as the reason for their occupation, because to admit to enjoying a deviant occupation is too stigmatizing. To admit to enjoying one's work as an exotic dancer, to not feel shame or to even feel pleasure is a reason to be cast out and marginalized. Sibley draws upon the works of Julia Kristeva and Elizabeth Gross when he argues that maintaining borders involve casting out (Sibley, 1995: 8; McClintock, 1995: 2). I would argue that when the other cannot be cast out, in a work setting for example, the other is constantly made aware of the stigmatizing condition through mockery or questioning, and spatial exclusion is also reinforced. Colleagues and friends can both simultaneously include you and exclude you from the perceived deviant group: 'A lot of them are slags though aren't they ... I don't mean you', 'You're different', 'You don't look like one' 'You don't look the type'. They recognize you might fit into that category, but make attempts to distance both you, and by association themselves, from being too close. These are attempts to clean the association, to distance the proximity between them and 'other'. They are also attempts to make sense of and maintain neat categories. The idea of fluid or multiple identities produces a lot of angst, anxiety and uncertainty. After all, if I know what I am in relation to another, and their identity is in flux, that uncertainly paralyses my claim to a solid identity. By distancing the subject from a category which they might fit, the colleague is trying to maintain purity, and to help manage both associated stigma and the source. It is an attempt to resist sexualizing space (Longhurst, 2001: 22) and to contain pollution from seeping into this respectable place

The lap dancer serves as the abject 'other' to fix wider cultural anxieties surrounding sexual behaviour to the source of what Papastergiadis (2006: 429) refers to as an ambivalent anxiety. Through her body we read cultural decline and decay, the disease of excess and hyper-consumption of sexual services and imagery. Drawing on the work of Giorgio Agamben, Nikos Papastergiadis talks of the Invasion Complex:

'The fantasy of the anxious self relies of strong boundaries and heightened vigilance against any sign of violation. This boundary becomes invested with the need for security against decline and contamination' (2006: 433).

The lap-dancer, or former dancer now working in academia produces a plethora of uncomfortable emotions from fear, disgust, anxiety, hate and pity, for her body represents an unsure danger, one that roams and returns at different times in different forms. From the pole dancing society at university to the pole dancer in a Rihanna video, the stripper loiters as a cultural harm, a reminder of a murky underworld, a seedy figure who poses a threat to 'impressionable young girls'. Ironically the highly-marketable pole fitness world also does not want association with 'real' lap-dancers (Lister, 2012: 53) angry of the secondary stigma to the sex industry. Pilcher observes that strong social norms continue to regulate sexual behaviour (1990: 80 cited in Lister, 2012: 53) the 'actual' stripper is still a problem; she violates social and gendered sexual norms. Due to these sex panics and fear the lap dancer is only seen through one dimension of her being (Sanders & Hardy, 2014: 38).

Being an academic with a past in the sex industry, or indeed an academic researching the sex industry, brings with it the societal pressure of managing (or rather containing) femininity so as to not take up too much space, not provoke unwanted attention. Hammond and Kingston discuss this phenomenon in their paper 'Experiencing Stigma as Sex Work Researchers in Professional and Personal Lives' (2014). It is the female researcher's responsibility to contain her femininity and guard against excess. It is her responsibility to manage a good character. We know who we are by what we are not, therefore boundary marking and reinforcing is imperative for keeping the 'other' out, and for those who blur these boundaries such as sex work researchers, they become part of the danger. The dirt, deviance, stigma and disgust from the topic of sex work sticks and infiltrates the researchers who experience associated stigma (Goffman, 1963). Ahmed's (2004: 79) work on the cultural politics of emotion accounts for such anxiety as a 'not-yet-ness' which 'means the work of defense is never over'. Those who permeate the boundaries between respectable academic and fallen-woman pose the same threat to normative values. 'Normal' women do not take their clothes off in a club for a living, and 'normal' women do not wish to research such subjects. Hammond demonstrates this when she reveals someone insinuates she must have been abused as a child to have her research interests (Hammond and Kingston, 2014: 397).

It is the responsibility of the female academic to ensure her femininity 'fits' the masculine space of the academy, uber-long hair, red nails, noticeable breasts are indicators that the woman does not belong. The woman's body must not seep into

public space, she might be told her top is too low, too tight, too 'sexy', or in my own case, that I should not wear trousers because my bum 'sticks out'. Once one admits a past in the strip club, one's body becomes a public concern for commenting on and regulating. The female body is public property, regulated, policed and disciplined in a way the male body will never come to know. She must fear the 'body beyond governance' (Skeggs, 2005: 965) and the inscriptions of anti-morality that it imposes. Skeggs argues that:

'It is up to the individual to 'choose' the repertoire of the self. If they do not have access to the range of narratives and discourses for the production of the ethical self they may be held responsible for choosing badly, an irresponsible production of themselves' (Skeggs, 2005: 973).

The constant (re) presenting of the self is tiring additional emotional labour, and is often categorized by leaving one's own viewpoint to imagine what the other actor is thinking. Allie J. Carr accounts for this insecurity by asking:

'How do I look? I'm thinking, while you are all looking at me. From where I am standing this is an exam. I'm wondering what you're looking at, what you're seeing' (Carr, 2011: 1).

Goffman's concept of 'presentation of the self' is useful for understanding how the dancer might choose to perform a role in academia

'a status, a position, a social place is not a material thing to be possessed then displayed; it is a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well articulated. Performed with ease or clumsiness, awareness or not, guile or good faith, it is none the less something that must be realized' (1959: 81).

From an embodiment perspective, the lap-dancer remains alive, and conscious effort is given not to reveal her; to avoid slipping into character unexpectedly or unconsciously. Egan reveals how participants feel about 'slipping into dancer mode' (2006: 58). Egan argues that these fissures or slips can be troublesome, dancer 'Trena' recalls that when out with her boyfriend she started 'working the room like

I was at work' (Egan, 2006: 60). Care must be taken from the way I hold myself, the way I walk, the way I flip my hair. The constant self-management of projecting a certain self:

'Goffman defines the self as creative and active, capable of performing and producing not simple a single, unified self but a multifaceted self with the ability to deal with different situations and encounters' (Swingewood, 2000: 17).

The embodiment means I feel the lap dancer, and the inscriptions upon the body which may be interpreted in negative ways. Walking with hunched shoulders so that my body does not spill out, so that my chest does not protrude, preferring back ache to being physically out of place. Sounds, smells, certain shoes and clothing, names, types of lighting transport one from researcher to inner dancer. Egan argues that for dancers:

'modalities of subjectivity are constructed and reconstructed continuously as dancers move throughout the various social cartographies where they have come to know themselves ...' (Egan, 2006: 63).

A guided walk I gave of Sexual Entertainment Venues in Liverpool became the site of such slippages and modalities of subjectivity, as I felt torn between the 'objective' lecturer and the lap-dancer, hyper-aware of guarding against slippages, whilst acutely aware that the lap-dancer had valid insights that theory alone would not provide.

The woman pictured is of course me, and not simply me in a certain context, but a part of me. Frank argues that traditional middle-class femininity is associated with sexual modesty, and that women who dance naked for strangers have transgressed a significant class boundary (Frank, 2002: 264). I would



(Me as lap-dancer, 2006, Matt Ford photography, copyright my own).

second this assumption that the woman who chooses to dance for cash has transgressed an accepted class boundary and by refusing to feel shame is transgressing another boundary. Hanna argues that exotic dance is 'a form of expression, communication, and within the realms of dance and art' (Hanna, 1998: 62). Academia is as much of a performance as stripping, as is femininity, and to acknowledge the lap-dancer self as a facet of my identity is to welcome an exploration of body politics. My body is not, and never has been an object, but rather a sexual subject. The mutual exclusive selves (Egan, 2006: 56) of lecturer, researcher, dancer, wife, and friend do not exist, and instead a continuum of selves circulate. Resistance then is owning these different parts of the self, and embracing the stripper as not only a performance, but as a valuable live experience. Acknowledging that teacher or academic does not exist in spite of the dancer, but perhaps in part because of her.

The narrative of the stripper self in academia is necessarily messy and non-linear. She slips, perforates, dominates and shrinks at different times. In conclusion, despite changing landscapes and an argued proliferation in both the expansion of the sex industry and the 'sexualized culture' which contextualizes it, I argue that stigma and exclusion for those who have either undertaken work in the sex industry or research it, remain as strong as ever. The emotional labour involved in being a former lap-dancer and managing a professional image means much self-surveillance and critique. One might be labeled merely as stripper or sex worker, or receive mockery of one's chosen Ph.D area in a way to diminish legitimacy as an academic. The idea that a woman can be either an intellectual or sexual, but not both, remains intact. Likewise stigma can spill out to spoil not only one's identity, but the credibility of academic work. Alignment of self with a 'seedy' industry means blaming the self for unwanted attentions, and the visible body becomes a public body, on display for others to question. Colleagues can use humour to 'other' the lap-dancer, or to draw boundaries between dancer and 'other dancers'. The presence of multiple identities can provoke anxiety in others, posing a threat to normative values and understandings. The female academic must shrink to fit her space, not draw too much attention to herself. To 'out' oneself as former lap-dancer is risky, and carries with it risk of stigma and exclusion.

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‘Yeah, they’ve started to get a bit fucking cocky ...’

Culture, Economic Change and Shifting Power Relations within the Scottish Lap-Dancing Industry

Billie Lister

ABSTRACT: This article is informed by data taken from wider findings from a Ph.D study in which the author worked as a stripper in a lap-dancing venue in Edinburgh, Scotland, UK. Edinburgh is the capital city of Scotland and, at the time of writing, is home to five venues. The data was collected over a ten month period in 2011. The findings are generated through in-depth interviews with a number of women who worked in lap-dancing venues across Scotland, and the findings reflect their experiences of their involvement in this changing industry. By using dancers’ voices, this work contributes to the growing body of literature which supports the complex and contradictory nature of involvement in the sex industry (Bradley-Engen and Ulmer, 2009; Sanders et al, 2009). In doing so, I reveal how dancers’ working experiences are fluid, and subject to change in accordance with economic and cultural shifts outside the venue. These elements, I argue, directly impact not only upon the generation of income, but also on the power relations within clubs, resulting in a far more precarious form of labour than previously. It is suggested that dancing as a strategy for sustaining a viable income as a stand-alone form of work ended in 2008 in response to the economic crisis (Sanders and Hardy, 2015). Until then, although always precarious, dancers reported that their work provided them with an acceptable standard of living (Sanders and Hardy, 2015). The findings of this Scottish study support Sanders and Hardy’s research, which took place in England. The definition of economy used here differs from that used by Brents and Sanders (2010, 43), who refer to it in combination with mainstreaming and involves ‘processes that push businesses towards smoother



integration with mainstream economic institutions'. Within this article I refer to economic impact as a wide spread reduction in disposable income amongst average workers (Sanders and Hardy, 2014) that has contributed to the declining earning possibilities within the lap-dancing industry as the result of the economic recession.

KEYWORDS: Sex work; Gender; Power; Labour; Mainstreaming

This article contributes to the growing body of literature which supports the complex and contradictory nature of involvement in the sex industry (Bradley-Engen and Ulmer, 2009; Sanders et al, 2009). Using participants' voices, I reveal how dancers' working experiences are fluid, subject to change in accordance with economic and cultural shifts outside the club. These elements, I argue, directly impact not only upon the generation of income, but also power relations within clubs. Brents and Sanders (2010, 43) refer to the economy as working in combination with mainstreaming, involving 'processes that push businesses towards smoother integration with mainstream economic institutions'. Here, I refer to economic impact as a widespread reduction in disposable income amongst average workers (Sanders and Hardy, 2014) that has contributed to the declining earning possibilities within the lap-dancing industry as a result of the economic recession.

The study revealed that not only was there less opportunity to make the same amount of money as in previous years, but also that this, combined with other economic shifts and cultural changes, had served to alter the dynamics of power inside lap-dancing clubs. For example, women felt that during the 'glory days' of lap-dancing, they were empowered and had better relationships with each other, club owners, managers and customers. Currently, dancers feel significantly disempowered, not only due to a reduced income, but also as a result of changing customer behaviour, soured dancer relationships and declining working conditions as a result of club owner's attitudes. A marked reduction in customer willingness to spend, in combination with increasing numbers of dancers, has resulted in a highly precarious working environment.

Finally, lap-dancing working environments are not static and are subject to change in accordance with club rules, customer demand, and cultural taboos. I have utilised a typology of strip clubs used by Bradley-Engen and Ulmer (2009) in order to show how the atmosphere in one of the clubs which featured in the research, Supernova¹, had shifted from that of a 'Social' club to that of a 'Hustle' club.

Declining income potential

Other UK studies investigating the lap-dancing industry have suggested that dancers were particularly financially empowered pre-recession as a result of the income that could be generated via the lap-dancing industry (Colosi, 2010a). Many women were able to accumulate property and live comfortably from the proceeds of this, which was only made possible due to their involvement in dancing (Sanders and Hardy, 2014). Dancers noted that the financial rewards that could once be reaped from the industry were high. One of the main changes which has impacted on dancers is the drop in income that can be made via dancing. Those dancers who had spent a number of years in the industry reveal the dramatic decrease in their money making potential;

'Back then when I started there was so much money in the club. Day shifts, you couldn't move, night shifts, during the week, packed. On a Wednesday night you could make three hundred pounds just by fannyng² about. You didn't even have to try ... it was totally different to the way it is now. Even if you didn't actively work you would still come out with a big wad of money' – Lisa

'When I started (2000) yes, there was less dancers, more money floating about from customers ... you could quite easily pull in a grand a week' – Rebekka

'On average I was making £1100 a week for Wednesday, Thursday and Friday and Saturday night. I used to make on average £200 each day shift. £500 on a Saturday night. I don't make anywhere near that now' – Athena

In addition, the actual nature of the work had changed, with dancers now having

to approach customers – rather than the other way around;

'You won't make anything if you sit on your arse all night ... it just doesn't work.
Generally, you have to get out there, you have to speak to people, keep going'
– Chloe

'If I don't approach customers, I don't make any money. That said, a lot of men
get off on turning you down and insulting you. You receive no financial return for
this and it is the most gruelling part of the job' – Tania

The growing supply of workers into the sex industry can be attributed in part to the increased competition for employment within the formalized labour market. There is pressure upon individuals to obtain qualifications with which they can compete for careers that can offer long-term security. Standing (2011) has noted that citizens are increasingly 'sold' further opportunities to study and add to their CVs, simply, a First Degree may no longer be 'enough' to obtain a professional career. The increasing costs relating to fees for tuition does not apply to students in Scotland, as course fees for a First Degree are currently paid for by the State. Postgraduate fees, however, are not, and neither are the accompanying costs of living. As such, perceived pressure to continue education by enrolling on costly Postgraduate courses may contribute to the growing supply of individuals willing to enter the industry.

As the formal sector becomes increasingly competitive, lowering disposable incomes, something which is outside the control of dancers, impacts upon demand for lap-dances as individuals have less to spend on non-essential purchases such as entertainment. This is shown within this research and also that of others (Sanders and Hardy, 2014). Furthermore, it is perhaps unsurprising that due to a lack of work options, and a decline in real wages, the cash-in-hand element that characterises the informal economy has drawn increasing numbers of women to various elements of the sex industry, including stripping. This means there is more competition for fewer paying customers. Dancers also felt, to some extent, that customers were more empowered due to shifting supply and demand dynamics. Indeed, the very fact dancers must now approach customers as opposed to waiting for them to make the 'first move' in the transaction, undoubtedly alters the

power dynamics. Dancers felt strongly that customers were quite aware that they 'held the purse strings'. As a result of increased supply and reduced demand, dancers were more reliant on customers choosing to spend their money on a dance with them as opposed to other dancers.

'It's quite hard sometimes – see if you're having a bad day and you're not making any money and everyone else is, and you speak to a guy, and he doesn't want you, and you walk away, and then someone else goes for a dance with him ... And I think the guys can sense your anxiety when you are not doing well and you just feel like shit don't you? ... they can sense you are stressed out. It is exploitation when that happens' – Donna

'Now, very rarely do I get asked if I want to dance. When I first started it was mainly 'are you free for a dance, are you free for a dance, are you free for a dance' – Sammy

Billie – Has it affected the way customers behave?

'Yeah, they've started to get a bit fucking cocky. They can say things like 'why would I want to dance with you?' – Sammy

Here, Jamie directly connects the numbers of paying customers in comparison to dancers to the degree of power held by dancers;

'And you know, lots of girls will do it now, there's a lot of competition, I hate to say it but guys have more choice. And they know that. They'll drag their feet buying dances. I think the more girls that are on in a way, the less power we have' – Jamie

Clearly, further work needs to be done with customers of lap-dancing clubs in order to decipher their feelings with regards to how much power, if any, they feel they have as customers or potential customers. Such investigation was outside the remit of this study, however women's experiences strongly indicate not only a shift in economic power, but also an *awareness* of this, both from the perspective of dancers and customers. Others have noted the problems inherent in gain-

ing access to study the sex industry (Sanders, 2006; Crofts, 2014). This access is particularly difficult when customers are involved (Sanders, 2008; McKeganey and Barnard, 1996), with comparatively less research done with customers of sex workers than sex workers themselves (Earle and Sharp, 2008). Earle and Sharp (2008) suggest that the stigma associated with those who buy sexual services deters clients from getting involved in social research.

The 'deskilling' of the industry has meant that it is far 'easier' to obtain work as a dancer at Supernova, which has also led to more women being able to present themselves for work. Although women are expected to maintain stereotypical, Westernised styles of beauty, the requirement to be able to perform pole tricks appears to have declined. The 'deskilling' of the industry has been highlighted by others (Sanders and Hardy, 2012), however dancers at Supernova noted that there had been a move from there being a requirement for being a skilled dancer to a situation whereby the owner would let 'anyone' work, even if they were not skilled on the pole.

'In the past it was hard to get a lap-dancing job. But now they are taking anyone. Supernova and Galaxy were a lot more selective ... it was quite hard to get a job there. Most people who auditioned didn't get the job, and places like Supernova were doing really well' – MM

'It used to have quite a high standard in that it was notoriously hard to get a job, so it was regarded as a compliment ... you had to be a good dancer, have stage presence. He (club owner) lowered that standard for whatever reason' – Morag

The deskilling of the industry then, coupled with a rise in the numbers of women who are willing to try this form of labour, has also contributed to a growth in supply.

Culture

It has been suggested that cultural norms have shifted, with activities such as visiting a lap-dance club now being considered to be 'less taboo' (Attwood et al, 2009). The terms 'sexualisation' and 'mainstreaming' are used to describe the ways that sex and sexualized themes are becoming more visible in Western popular culture (Attwood, 2009, xiii). Commonly cited examples are the visibility of stores selling

obviously 'sexy' lingerie and sex toys such as Ann Summers on the High Street, and the availability of pole dancing classes (Holland and Attwood, 2009). Interestingly, from the dancers perspective, this heightened visibility has had a negative impact on the demand for lap-dancing since it has removed much of the allure and deviancy of visiting clubs, which, the dancers argued, was one of the main reasons why customers wanted to buy dances.

'... lapdancing's way more popular now than it was eight years ago, way more popular. It's less taboo to do it, more girls are doing it now, it's just more acceptable' – Sammy

'I don't think the industry is going to collapse in total. But the fact it is less taboo now, takes the edge off it. But people used to make huge amounts of money, and that doesn't happen anymore' – Chloe

This idea of dancing being less deviant also contributes to the increasing supply of dancers. This, in combination with a fall in customer numbers, results in a workplace which is less financially lucrative than it was previously;

'There's a lot more girls who are willing to get into it now too. There are always girls asking to audition. We are very expendable' – Felicity

Despite these changing attitudes, a paradox remains. Lap-dancing work continues to be unrecognised as a legitimate source of labour which goes in some part to explain why there continues to be an element of stigmatisation surrounding this occupation (Sanders and Hardy, 2014). The issue of mainstreaming and the idea of lap-dancing as an occupation being 'more acceptable' is, however, complex and contradictory. Although women suggested the work was indeed culturally less taboo, Scottish society was not quite ready to acknowledge it as a legitimate, 'decent' form of work. This became apparent during interviews. Although women felt lap-dancing was more socially acceptable, the majority of respondents in this study had reservations regarding outsiders discovering their occupation;

'I wouldn't want people to have that kind of knowledge that they could use against me. I don't think there's anything wrong with lap-dancing. It's just ...

I mean, sex is everywhere, and it can make okay money, but at the end of the day you do still get judged' – Jamie

'I did a college course, and I told people what I did, as I thought it was art. And I thought they would be open minded. And there were girls in that group who were really bitchy about it. And nasty. They made me feel really bad' – Donna

Those who are opposed to the existence of a lap-dance industry argue that it is demand from men which provides the climate in which the industry can exist (OBJECT, 2008). Sanders and Hardy (2014) have recently suggested that the industry has remained buoyant despite the recession not due to an increase in customer demand, but because of a continuing, regular stream of women who are prepared to pay to work as dancers. The findings of this study appear to confirm this; a reduced number of men were paying for dances, however this was not matched by a decline in women making themselves available for work. In the venues that featured in this study, owners generated income from the payment of either house fees, which dancers were required to pay in advance of the commencement of their shift, or commission, where owners retained a percentage of the value of each dance sold. This means that owners at least are guaranteed of generating income through dancers and also from the customers that visit the venue. Customers are generally expected to pay a door fee in order to gain entry to a lap-dancing club, however two of the clubs discussed in the study, which informs this article, operated during the day, something which is not common in Scottish strip clubs. Customers were able to purchase a dance for five pounds instead of the usual ten pounds which was charged in the evening. Although customers were not expected to pay to gain entry, they were obliged to buy at least one drink. Interestingly, after fieldwork was completed, one of the two clubs decided to cease operating during the day, so minimal was the demand, thus reinforcing the lack of demand for lap-dances.

Here, a dancer notes that a drop in demand meant that the owner lost the money he normally made via the provision of evening entry fees, which led to him recouping this loss via dancers' fees;

'I think he just started getting greedy. With recession and stuff he was losing money – he used to make all of his money at the door. That place used to be jam

packed, there was constant stream of customers. I think he is wanting to make his money back through commission' – Lisa

To do this, the owner allowed far more women to work on any shift than required; simply, demand did not match supply. Despite this, women were still required to pay their house fee. This placed women in a precarious position, as they were competing with more dancers for less customers, putting them at risk of losing money rather than making it. Here Jamie expressed her anxiety that she might not recoup the thirty pounds she was required to pay to work in an Edinburgh based club on a Saturday afternoon;

'He lets far too many girls work and there is hardly any punters. I suppose he has to charge something, but it's so unpredictable at the moment, I've done Saturday day shifts and I'm competing with twelve odd other lassies and sometimes I am shitting myself because I might not make my thirty quid back' – Jamie

Disposable Bodies

A constant supply of women who were willing to dance also meant that owners had no motivation to improve working conditions. Bradley-Engen and Ulmer (2009, 43) succinctly describe the new found situation dancers face, arguing 'When there is an ever-ready supply of dancers, they become nameless and faceless'. In Scottish clubs, women were very much considered to be 'expendable'. This was the result of a constant flow of dancers without the demand required to sustain these dancers. The dancers felt that the behaviour of the owner of Supernova suggested that he was all too aware of his position of power;

'I used to have the philosophy where it was like, you couldn't complain about anything because it was a case of, well if you are not happy, go somewhere else'
– Lisa

Decline in working conditions / Health and Safety

Despite the fact women pay to work at clubs, owners commonly failed to maintain the upkeep of their venues. The following quotes refer to Supernova, a club situ-

ated in Edinburgh;

Well, at Supernova, they should have lockers. The stage is a death trap ... the stool you use to go onto the stage, well that was rocking back and forward, it wasn't sturdy and it was a total death trap. You know it's hard enough to get up on that stage without a fucked stool and you know one day Morag was getting up on stage and she cut her foot, fell down, bruised herself and nothing was done about it. So there was no stool for ages, then he took a chair from downstairs and started having us use that – he's so cheap it's unbelievable. I don't think he gives a shit about the dancers – Felicity

My main problem is with the air conditioning. And he has had the same air conditioning system in there since I started eight years ago and there were problems with it then ... he will not spend money on it. And that kinda bothers me. That lap-dancers needs are kinda secondary because you're disposable. Like, there is ten other girls just fucking itching to take your place – and he knows that. You're totally disposable to him – Sammy

'I think they need better air conditioning. There always needs to be a candle so we don't slip on stage. The bars in the booths needed to be cleaned every day ... the curtains we used to have were disgusting. It was gross. He doesn't seem to like spending any money on the place unless he really has to' – Donna

Despite the lack of will from owners to improve the workplace for dancers, they were well aware of their disempowered position – particularly in comparison with how their working life in the venue was before;

'You just kinda go along with the good and the bad, you know. At the end of the day the management have most of the power, and it's not like we can go on some sort of protest about it' – Felicity

'It used to be pretty lax, not as in uncaring, but it was liberal, it wasn't us against them, it was more the managers and the dancers against the public. Now it's like the management against the dancers. Things got a lot less, erm, appear to be, a lot less friendly' – Rebecca

Changing work dynamics at Supernova – from a ‘Social’ club to a ‘Hustle’ club

Bradley-Engen and Ulmer (2009), in their research on US strip clubs, propose a typology of venues, in which they are categorised into three ideal types; Hustle, Social or Show clubs. The working environment of Supernova as it was during fieldwork shared some similarities with their definition of a ‘Hustle’ club – that is, venues in which dancers’ efforts centre around the manipulation of customers in the hope that they will spend more money than they actually intended to (Bradley-Engen and Ulmer, 2009). In the past, when there were a higher number of customers willing to spend and fewer dancers, Supernova appeared to share more characteristics with a ‘Social’ club, a lap-dancing club where having a ‘good time’ is considered crucial by owners and dancers alike. The key difference between Supernova and the ‘typical’ Hustle club set by Bradley-Engen and Ulmer (2009) is that Supernova now tends to attract a smaller number of clients (although this, as I have demonstrated using dancers’ words, is a result of economic and cultural factors). Before the economic crash of 2008 (Sanders and Hardy, 2014), Supernova catered for a large customer base which has since dramatically dwindled. The typical Hustle club is characterised by a high turnover rate and few ‘regular’ customers (Bradley-Engen and Ulmer, 2009). Supernova, in comparison, had its fair share of regulars, who tended to frequent the venue during the day. Such customers were considered as the providers of ‘guaranteed’ income by dancers, since they generally bought one or more dances per visit. Regulars would often stay in the venue for the entire afternoon, not only buying dances, but also engaging in chat with dancers. The fact the venue had become very quiet during the day was beneficial for these regulars, as they essentially had long periods of time to chat with dancers. Such chat, unless facilitated as part of a private dance, was free of charge. In some respects these regulars had a degree of power over dancers. Previously, when demand for dances was higher, customers would often be expected to pay to spend time with a dancer, with the rationale being that her time could alternatively be spent more profitably with a paying customer of which there were many to choose from. At the time of fieldwork, dancers often invested much time in a regular visit to Supernova. Generally these men would buy a dance, however some also expected the women to engage in unpaid, emotional ‘talking’ labour before electing to buy a dance. Some regulars came specifically only for unpaid conversa-

tion. Thus, the changes to supply and demand in the venue resulted in men being in the position to spend long afternoons chatting to women without paying them for their time. It should be borne in mind that while regulars usually bought dances, they did not always buy them, leading women to compete to be the regular's 'choice' on that particular visit. This often leads to strained relationships between dancers as Jamie notes;

We were having a bad day one day and one girl went totally mental at me for approaching a customer too soon. Even though he is a long time regular and everyone knows he buys a dance off most of us when he comes in. Anyway, she was being out of order as he had bought a drink. But I think she was just getting stressed out because there were no customers – Jamie

Dancers noted that the 'fun' had been taken away from the work, due to increased pressure to make money. This had served to sour relationships between dancers as Jamie indicates. Sanders and Hardy (2014) found that dancers in their study of dancer experiences in Leeds found their work to be far more enjoyable than other legitimated forms of employment such as administration or sales work. Colosi (2010b), in her research of UK strip clubs, also refers to lap-dancing as 'anti-work', that is, work which is viewed not so much as 'work', but as something which is an enjoyable pastime. At Supernova, dancers felt strongly that any fun had been removed from their occupation, as competition increased for a smaller number of paying customers;

'I used to love Supernova because it used to have a really good atmosphere and everyone would be having a laugh and it was just a really good atmosphere in the club, like you'd come in and it was like some school disco you had come into because everyone was just so much about having a good giggle ... I think girls are a lot less likely to have a laugh now. Because there is more pressure to make money. In the past it wouldn't even pop into your head that you might have a bad night – you would come in, have a laugh, and you would make your money, without having to think about it too much' – Lisa

'I've never really had any problems at all and I've always gotten on with everyone. But recently I've noticed, especially since I got back from maternity, the

atmosphere has really gone down, it's changed an awful lot. I don't know why it is, if it's the lack of money going about' – Belinda

It is the 'fun' element of the work that characterised Supernova with the definition of a Social club. Bradley-Engen and Ulmer (2009) note that in Social clubs having an enjoyable time is more important than making money. Although money was always cited as one of the main reasons for dancing at Supernova, dancers argued that previously, making money went side by side with fun and a 'party atmosphere', which is the principal characteristic of the Social club. Social clubs are typically small, with the main stage featuring only one or two dancers at a time. This reflects the set-up of Supernova, which was a small lap-dancing club with only one stage, with private dance booths situated atop a staircase, out of view of the main customer area. In the Social club, dancers are incorporated as part of the club's overall 'good time' atmosphere (Bradley-Ulmer and Engen, 2009, 45), with the club making most of its money not through dancer fees, but through the sale of alcohol. Social clubs in the US tend to be situated in areas with smaller, more stable populations, which means dancers are more valuable to club owners. This is because, unlike the current situation at Supernova, there is a far smaller pool of women who are willing and able to work as dancers. This contributes towards a more balanced relationship between club owners and dancers (Bradley-Engen and Ulmer, 2009, 46). In previous years, when less women were approaching lap-dancing clubs for work, more positive working relationships with club owners, dancers and customers were reported in Supernova. However, as supply has grown, dancers have become less valuable and this has contributed to Supernova's shifts towards the working environment typical within a Hustle club. Social club dancers in Bradley-Engen and Ulmer's study were quite aware that, because they were less expendable, they had more 'bargaining power' with club owners. For example, club owners were happy to negotiate with dancers with regards to working times and picking shifts (Bradley-Engen and Ulmer, 2009).

Conclusion: What does the future hold for the lap-dancing industry in Scotland – and why do women keep returning?

Despite the increasingly precarious nature of the lap-dancing industry in Scotland,

women continued to turn up for shifts. This was despite the very 'hit or miss' nature of the work; the odds were generally not in women's favour that they would leave a shift with the same amount of money they had become used to in previous times. However, it is the very 'Russian Roulette' nature of the industry which encourages women to return again and again. It would appear that, as long as the *possibility* to walk away with large sums of money remains, women will continue to turn up for work.

'I enjoy the good potential for making money, the laughs you have when the atmosphere when it's good' – Morag

'Last Monday night there were only three girls and I made £190, which is really good for a Monday night, because there were only three girls on' – Sammy

In addition, the instant nature of the payments are enticing, even if these are not particularly high. This is something which legitimated forms of labour are unable to compete with;

'As long as I've got enough to get my shopping and that. Cos you know there have been times where I've had nothing at all till seven, then I've come out and went straight to Tesco to buy food. With a normal job I'd have to wait for pay day' – Jamie

'I think if you are in a tight spot financially, it's obviously easier to make some quick money in this job, rather than another job. Where you have to wait a month or three weeks to get paid' – Chloe

This article has suggested that shifts in supply and demand into the lap-dancing industry have served to create a more exploitative form of work for women, and has used Supernova as an example of how the atmosphere has been shifted from that of a 'social' to a 'hustle' atmosphere, as typified by Bradley-Engen and Ulmer's (2009) research on US strip clubs. Scottish lap-dancing clubs are currently unregulated from the point of view of dancer working conditions and the ways in which they operate as a business. Because of this, it is difficult to generalise across clubs, indeed it would probably be more accurate to consider the changing nature of the

industry on a club by club basis, with Supernova being used as one example here. That said, it is clear that there is a need to also consider macro factors such as economic and cultural change outside clubs, as these impact on supply and demand, which in turn affects relations inside clubs.

In their recent research into lap-dancing venues in England, Sanders and Hardy (2014) noted similar problems which may affect the longevity of this industry, with a decline in custom and revenue, reported not only by dancers, but also venue owners and managers. However, venue owners remain the principal benefactors in this industry, if women continue to pay to work in their venues. One of the factors affecting dancers in this research was a lack of motivation on the owner's part to keep the working environment clean and safe; despite dancers paying to work in them. Sanders and Hardy (2014,153), in conjunction with dancers, have published policy recommendations for Local Authorities who license Sexual Entertainment Venues in England and Wales in the hope that the well-being of dancers can be taken into account by owners. However, these recommendations, which include the banning of fining and an obligation to provide adequate changing and kitchen facilities, are not mandatory and are not currently provided to club owners in Scotland. Furthermore, Sanders and Hardy (2014) noted that the health and safety officers who were involved in their study were far more concerned with how safe buildings were for public and employee use than they were for dancers themselves, thus directing attention to an issue which is likely to present itself so long as performing in lap-dancing clubs is not considered a legitimate form of work by the State. Simply, Local Authorities are legally obliged to ensure premises are safe for the use of public and employees; the rights of the self-employed are thus of less importance.

Understandably, dancers' primary aims are now based around making money in a competitive climate, rather than enjoying their work to any extent. Although they were well aware of the changes in power relations within their workplaces, they were resigned to their situation. Although not mentioned by dancers, one reason for this may be that, in Scotland, they are only a small number of venues in which women can work. Thus, the choice to move elsewhere does not exist to the same degree as in large cities such as London, where there are far greater number of venues. If money cannot be made in one venue, dancers can migrate to another. In Supernova at least, fun no longer forms part of the process of making money

due to a reduction in custom and an increase for the custom that still exists. In such a climate it is even more crucial that Local Authorities act in order to ensure that this industry is better regulated, so that venue owners are obliged to maintain workplaces and practices such as fining are removed from the workplace.

Endnotes

- ¹ Supernova is a lap-dancing club located in Edinburgh, Scotland. At the time of the research, the club offered fully nude, clothed contact dances in private booths and opened daily from 12pm until 1am daily. Due to a reduction in demand for dances, the club now operates from 7pm-1am daily.
- ² Scottish slang, literally meaning vagina. In this context, it means "Wasting time or messing about". Lisa refers to simply having fun in the workplace through conversation and drinking.

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Victor or victim? Foregrounding the independent escort experience outside of the polarised debate

Rae Story and Glen Jankowski

ABSTRACT: The sex worker as a sociocultural ‘phenomenon’ occupies a liminal space, simultaneously absent from sociopolitical acceptability yet ever present in often inflammatory, ‘condemn/celebrate’ discourses. In this paper we aim to contribute to a destabilising of the dichotomisation of these representations by referring to the lived experience of independent escorts. In addition we attempt to contextualize the sex worker in consumer capitalism through which notions of choice and exploitation, that arise from both sides of the ‘condemn’/‘celebrate’ debate, are rendered oblique. We draw upon the author’s own experience of being an escort as well as accounts from a popular escort internet forum¹ to illustrate the issues escorts share with women as a wider social demographic, including violence and abuse, appearance pressures, and economic hardship. By situating escorting as a form of self-employment labour, within the practical reality of neo-liberal, consumer capitalism, we aid in the nuancing of the debate, foregrounding the escort experience over prior, moral ideologies. We also promote the merging of the academic debate surrounding the sex work industry, with the grassroots debate that forum member escorts have on a daily basis. We conclude it is important to demystify and destigmatise escorts so they are not regarded as ‘victims or victors’ or other grotesque parodies, but a real, diverse people and members of a labour force.

KEYWORDS: Sex work; Escorts; Liminality; Escort forum; Capitalism



One of the primary goals of this paper is to contribute to the demystification of escorts as mythic, liminal beings held up by various ideologies (be they factions of feminism, conservatism, or other) as either 'High Class' courtesans, destitute victims, or even decadent social pariahs (Ahearne, 2013; Hulusjö, 2013; McLaughlin, 1991; Pheterson, 1990). Whether it is the well-meaning desire to resituate escorts as 'empowered' victors of contemporary femininity, or victims of a brutal patriarchy or social inequity, convoluting visions of the escort into social archetypes does a great disservice to the complexity of the escort experience. It also serves to delegitimise the multiplicity of varying sex worker voices, so diverse as to never coherently be speaking in any specific direction, and whose lives cannot be assimilated as beacons of any particular world view.

It is difficult to ascertain just how many independent escorts there are in the UK at any one time (Vandepitte et al., 2006). It is even more difficult to demarcate sex workers in general into distinct 'categories', such as agency workers, brothel workers and indies (independent indoor sex workers; Sanders, 2006). One of the most popular advertising outlets for independent sex workers has a forum space dedicated to discussing escorting issues. On this website, the amount of listed female escorts, at the time of writing is 24,979. This is a significant number given it is estimated that there are only between 50,000 – 80,000 women in the UK who work as sex workers (Balfour and Allen 2014) though it is difficult to ascertain how many of this number are actually independent, and are not in some way pimped, trafficked or operating with the third party agencies. It is also difficult to ascertain how many of these profiles are full time escorts, occasional or part time escorts or of women no longer actively working. There is potential also, for even non escorts to use such sites, to sell 'content' such as pornographic photographs, either of themselves or even pilfered from other places on the internet, thereby skewing the overall numbers (Extra Lunch Money 2012; Trowbridge 2008). Nonetheless, it does demonstrate the increased prevalence and visibility of the independent escort within the wider industry, and the importance of modern media in that cultural gestation (Sanders, 2006).

The increased visibility of the independent escort is one of the reasons why the authors of this paper have chosen to focus on them. Aligned with this, one of the authors' own experience as an independent escort has helped to frame the debate in a different way than to the traditional 'outside-in' approach of other writings

on the subject. The independent escort is differentiated from other forms of sex worker, firstly by her direct sexual and social contact with her clientele, secondly by her general manifestation as an organiser of her own working space (be it a hotel room, a long term lease, or intermittent room rentals), her own marketer, often using the cheap and available means provided by the internet, and the sole communicant between her and her clients. However, the authors are also aware that many independent escorts, the author included, may not always and absolutely be so, and that the continued availability of licensed massage parlours, brothels and agencies may mean that the working conditions of sex workers may undergo many configurations throughout their occupational lives. The writers also do not wish to be seen to disregard the experiences of male and transgendered demographics; indeed escort forums are available and may be used by all sex workers. However, not only do cis females make up the largest independent escort demographic, the debate is also framed using theories surrounding feminism, gendered poverty and consumption, and as such it is (generally) the cis, female experience that is detailed. Added to this, the authors are also aware that much of the debate could be applied in differing ways to male and transgendered workers.

By now drawing upon posts from an escort forum, the authors hope to highlight not only the specific concerns of independent escorts, but also how these concerns are often the same issues (as shown by feminist research) that affect women in general, such as economic problems, the threat of violence and the pressure to be commercially 'beautiful'. As this forum is publicly accessible (i.e., does not require a login) and all quotes used have been anonymized, the usual ethical issues of deception and informed consent in research are minimal (Bassett and O'Riordan 2002; Walther 2002).

Selling excess: The context of late, consumer, capitalism

Contemporary capitalism allures its inhabitants into consumption through a robust and ubiquitous doctrine that seeks to convince the potential consumer that beauty, success and popularity (i.e., the 'Good Life') will only be one more product purchase away (Dittmar, 2007; Kasser et al., 2014). Any number of advertisements will no longer detail the practical usages of the product, but rather how the prod-

uct is an essential accoutrement of the 'Good Life'. The paradox of capitalism is that, as every item seems 'essential' to lifestyle, it is also equally disposable. Products may no longer be flogged on the merits of their durability or longevity, but on their fresh, updatedness, on their fashionability and trend. This is planned obsolescence, and in the blurring of boundaries between corporations and cultural life and the promotion of consumption as a lifestyle, the advertising of 'must have purchases' renders consumption mindless, endless and normative (Klein, 2002).

Unfortunately, little recourse is paid to consumption's toll on individual, public or environmental wellbeing. Neoliberalism is also added to this cultural milieu, a concept wherein the individual is held wholly culpable for their own health, happiness and success. Any structural barriers surrounding ethnicity, gender, class or otherwise, are erased. The consequences of this mean there is a powerful pressure for individuals to better themselves through a consumer lifestyle, irrespective of how accessible that lifestyle actually is.

In bitter contrast, a global economic recession and successive right wing or centrist governments have meant welfare benefits have been slashed, the cost of living has sharply increased and wages have stagnated (Karamessini and Rubery, 2013). Women are the largest recipients of welfare, low incomes and bearers of unpaid labour, meaning such actions disproportionately affect them (Karamessini and Rubery, 2013). Thus, the many women who do work long hours and who are on low incomes are left not only unable to make a basic living or support their families, but also unable to realise the more 'rounded' existence that our contemporary cultural ostensibly offers (i.e., the 'Good Life'). This consumerist lifestyle extends to more than just beauty and fashion products, but restaurants and leisure activities, cultural entertainments such as cinema and theatres, foreign travel and even, with the spike in University fees, a higher education. Many or all of these aspects of the 'Good Life' are either mostly or totally unavailable to many low wage earners or benefit recipients.

Sex work as a viable option

With this context in mind, where there are 'billions of losers for every handful of winners' (Greer, 2007: 4), the escort industry, with its flexible hours, perceived high financial rewards (though these can differ greatly) and (perceived) openness to

those of any education, background or otherwise, could be seen as a route to financial stability and sociocultural furtherance. Indeed, the promise of instant, high earning potential for time-flexible work can be highly seductive when compared to other low-paid forms of labour. An example of this is provided by Elizabeth Pisani (2008) in her book: *The Wisdom of Whores*. She describes her moment of disillusionment with her work when she attempted to persuade Thai sex workers to leave their jobs (in her role as a HIV preventionist). One Thai sex worker asked Pisani whether she herself would leave a relatively well paid job only to spend endless hours toiling in the local sweat shop factory for a fraction of her wage. It is indeed the case, that whatever the real or perceived consequences that the selling of sex may entail, low paid, long hour, 'unskilled' occupations are understandably not real alternatives for many sex workers. As Sydney Barrows and William Novak observe 'a prostitute is simply a woman who hates poverty more than she hates [sex work]' (Barrows and Novak, 1987: 130). However, the fact still remains that despite accessibility and flexibility, that even during periods of high unemployment, many women still do not become sex workers. Despite all structural circumstances, sex work is still subject to the notion of choice, rendered through the personal prism of individual moralities and experiences. Of course, what choices women make depends on the number of options available, but given even an insignificant number of options (for the vast majority of women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds) what choices women make depends on how those choices are perceived, by themselves or by others. It is important, then, to consider sex work from within both a socioeconomic, but also sociopolitical context.

The dichotomisation of the escort

Radical feminist Gail Dines claimed in 2012, with regards to her anti-porn stance, that there is 'no study, argument, or theory that will persuade [me] otherwise' (Dines, 2012; Parreira, 2014). As Weitzer (2005: 934) further notes:

In no area of the social sciences has ideology contaminated knowledge more pervasively than in writings on the sex industry. Too often in this area, the canons of scientific inquiry are suspended and research deliberately skewed to serve a particular political agenda. Much of this work has been done by writers

who regard the sex industry as a despicable institution and who are active in campaigns to abolish it.

But even when evidence is collected in the debate, it can often be flawed. Research on sex work may be carried out by the very same organizations that provide support to those in the industry (e.g., Bindel and Atkins, 2008). Whilst understandable considering the scant resources available to the third sector, this can mean that the sample researched may be those women² who face specific problems that the organization caters for (e.g., addiction, violence etc.) rather than a diverse pool of women that at least can begin to represent sex workers in all their variety. If evidence is based upon the women who are only accessible to the organization, such as intravenous drug users or those who need the support of crisis centres, then it stands to reason that this would create a ‘sex worker equals vulnerable victim’ bias. Indeed, a growing number of escorts who work independently from home have often been ignored in research (Hubbard and Prior, 2013).

Added to the inadequacy of the generalisation of this research, the debate often homogenises sex workers, with proponents of specific belief systems attempting to coordinate the beliefs and behaviours of escorts in order to further their specific political aims. In reality, the sex work industry is hyperdiverse, complex and not easily categorized. Weitzer (2005: 946) is rightly critical then, not only of the radical feminist stance that sometimes depicts sex workers as war victims (e.g., Burchill 1986), but also of works that celebrate and romanticize sex work:

Studies [that] marshal the ‘best available examples’—typically upscale call girls and escort agency workers—to argue that prostitution is or can be empowering and lucrative. For some workers, this is indeed the case, but these ‘best examples’ are no closer to the norm in prostitution than the worst examples.

The concept that individual sex worker’s trajectories through the trade are as straightforwardly categorical as ‘High Class, Happy Hooker’ or its bleaker, abused street walking alternative is indeed disputable. The membranes of the industry are various, complex, and permeable; independent sex workers, escort agencies, small brothels, licensed massage parlours, ‘grey area’ sex work such as ‘sugar daddy’ relationships, all intermingle with secondary sex work practices such as phone

chat and webcam services, as well as the expansive panoply of internet pornography (Sanders, 2006). Indeed, because of the proliferation of the internet, and its utilization as a tool for sex entertainment practices, there is a great deal of cross fertilisation in the daily lives of the workers. So commercial porn performers may supplement their incomes with escort work (using their status as a 'draw' and an opportunity to charge higher fees), escort workers may sell home video clips and photographs, massage parlour workers can moonlight as phone chat providers, and so on. The 'High Class/Low Class' dichotomy may in fact be an archaic concept that does not fit into the current context, wherein the price charged for a sex act has more to do with visibility rather than mystery, and pornographic availability rather than exclusivity, within the wider topography of a burgeoning digital arena.

It is therefore likely that the pressure for escorts to come down as victor or victim means any nuance or ambiguity of experience is not acknowledged. More study on the experiences (and more cultural awareness) of the sex worker across her career, the variations in the payment she receives for differing practices and the alterations in her lifestyle and work, are needed. A demystification of the mythological sex worker, who resides within the cultural fantasy as either ceaselessly sensual or pitifully profane needs to be replaced by a pragmatic resituating of the sex worker within her complex reality. This is most important, because as will be demonstrated, ideology has often led to changes in legislation and thus the lived experience and even safety, of escorts and sex workers may have been compromised.

The criminalisation and politicisation of the sex worker

When I heard Mary Honeyball talking on LBC a week ago, I felt so angry she was talking pure lies and to people who do not work in our industry I can imagine them believing what she says. I will be complaining to my MEP and voicing my opinion on this, I think we all need to voice our opinion to make sure people like Honeyball don't get their way, if we all stay quiet they might eventually win (Forum poster, 2014a).

As the above forum user warns, the exclusion of escort voices to the contemporary sex work debate may carry severe repercussions. Legal changes may occur

without escorts being consulted, which regardless of intention, can lead to greater dangers for escorts, such as deterring only those clients who do not commit physical violence or stopping escorts from organizing together for safety. To ignore the wishes of escorts, with regards to legislation is to infantilise them and deem them incapable of understanding their own industry and what changes would make safe their lives and circumstances.

[The Guardian article about trafficking] purport[s] to be about criminalisation, goes off on the usual tack of pimping, trafficking, etc. A rather depressing read which just seems to airbrush Independents (and agency girls) out of the debate altogether. It gave me this chilling feeling of a deliberate agenda somewhere whereby we just don't exist. So that makes it a whole lot easier to bring laws like this into effect, as its always argued to be helping street girls/trafficking victims etc. (Forum poster, 2014d).

Whatever personal ideologies may be held, it is imperative to work from the point of accepting escorts 'as they are' within their occupational decisions, however restricted they were in making it and whatever existential ideals we have about the nature of choice in general. Rather than dichotomising escorts into either empowered women operating under a banner of modern sexual freedom or powerless victims of repeated abuse (with a view that the sex negotiation is inherently abusive) we should be understanding escorting within a two tiered framework.

Firstly, there is an inequitable capitalism at work that few of us have any immediate power or easy influence over, and that cements inequalities and creates greater divisions between the rich and the poor. However, the problem of inequality and cemented hierarchies (where the 'leaders' have access to privilege at the expense of the Other) should be approached holistically, without denigrating and singling out specific activities, such as sex work, as greater representations of, for example, gendered inequalities in other institutions and labours, such as marriage, domesticity, childcare and so on.

The second tier of our understanding, therefore, is in relating escorting to this 'bigger picture', whilst recognising the right of escorts to wellness, safety and self-determination as much as is possible for any human worker within that picture. Calling all sex work: 'violence against women', picketing lap dancing clubs, refusing to review legislation that does not permit women to work together for safety

and companionship, and attempting to criminalise the worker's clients, does not help escorts. If, for example, criminalising clients further threatens the safety of escorts – by frightening off non-violent, otherwise law abiding clients, and resulting in escorts taking more risks with who they see – then the wider, perhaps well intentioned aim of cutting off demand to diminish supply, is short sighted.

One of the primary purposes of this article is to further help nuance the debates around the sex industry. Whatever our political aims, it is paramount to remember that sex workers have to exist within the walls of these debates and often have to live with their existences detailed via academic and journalistic forums; mythologised as victims of repeated rape, abusive pimping and fuelled by the internal chaos of addiction and mental illness. Even worse, the inflammatory nature of the debate, even at some ostensibly feminist ends, has occasionally spilled over into hatred, as the oft quoted Julie Burchill stance demonstrates: 'when the sex war is won prostitutes should be shot as collaborators for their terrible betrayal of all women' (Burchill, 1987: 9). As Hannah Betts suggests:

[There is] a cohort of feminist critics who, in abhorring the activity, choose to hate the perpetrator. This is evident not only in Julie Burchill's string 'em up stance, but the notion that, as all prostitution is rape, sex workers cannot know their own minds, or be in control of their bodies, and thus consent. The upshot is a curious coalition with streetwalker-hounding religious extremists who are unhappy not merely with the low-hanging fruit of selling sex, but with women having sex at all (Betts, 2013, para. 4).

The ideologies surrounding escorting, particularly feminist and socialist, are in most cases intent upon trying to secure a better, less oppressed future for women and the lower socioeconomic demographics, and rightly point to the failures of neoliberalism and unregulated capitalism in this respect.

As such then, it is easy to see why a valid argument against the frameworks from which sex work arrives becomes concentrated onto the workers themselves, to the detriment of the overall debate. Without intending to then, the picketed lap dancing club becomes an attack on those who embody the lap dancing club: the lap dancer rather than the club, the society or the culture. Despite the protest, patriarchy still holds fast, capitalism thrives, and neoliberalism continues to foist culpability on individuals rather than on corporate or governmental institutions⁴.

Arguably, political ‘adversaries’ such as feminists and socialists, are tantamount to the escort as they are both in some senses ‘Other’, the former two political and the latter social. In fact, the idea that feminists and sex workers are diametrically in opposition ignores some sex worker’s own feminism. Indeed, that feminism itself may be diverse. Discussion on the escort forum demonstrates that for some escorts, the over-arching belief in women’s choices and right to safety and self-determination, does not eradicate issues of misogyny, sexism and objectification from within their work. As one poster writes;

I’m definitely a feminist and don’t think sex work and feminism are incompatible at all. I think that everyone should be equal regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, skin colour etc. and everyone should be free to make their own choices in life. Sex work is a job, one that I’m forced to do because of capitalism because I need to be able to support myself. I don’t feel the need to justify how I make money to anyone. That said, I do find it hard to deal with the sexism within this form of work. Having clients tell me about past affairs, cheating, how they can’t find any attractive women to fuck them etc. and their views on women in general really makes me want to give them a sharp kick at times. I can’t hold myself responsible for their opinions though, if they objectify women that’s on them, not me. Also having to conform as much as possible to society’s definition of attractive (i.e. long hair, skinny, big boobs, feminine) is something I find difficult as it makes me feel less like my real self... But ultimately I choose to dress this way and act this way when I’m working (even if I don’t like it). Feminism is about having choices and freedom without being oppressed for those choices. I don’t see this job as oppressive, it’s something I don’t particularly like doing but then I never liked my minimum wage job much either (Forum poster, 2015).

In essence, the poster summarises the awkward relationship between issues surrounding feminism and sex work, within an economically hierarchical environment. As has been stated, how much anyone chooses the life that they live is dependent on the variation of options available. That we ought to not criminalise sex workers, that we ought to respect their decisions, and value and validate their voices, does not mean that we invalidate any critique of the varying forms of economic or cultural inequity.

‘Slow at the minute or is it just me?’

Independent escorts will charge a wide variety of prices for their labour. With the minimum wage for ages twenty one and over at a pitiful £6.50 it is easy to see why an independent escort charging over £100 an hour or more, might help paint the picture that escorts are high earners. However it is not that simple, as a long running and popular thread on the escort forum details (Forum poster, 2008). The thread has organically gestated into a sounding board for escorts who are concerned about their earning potential, who feel unable to make enough money to pay their bills and debts, or who are trying to understand why they might not be making as much money as they did in previous years. Despite high earnings per hour, a seeming drought in bookings has catapulted many of the users into a position of having to worry about their basic, economic needs. As two forum posters complain:

Things are so slow for me at the moment, I'm in a small town & I've had no bookings today whatsoever. The only inquiry was from a previous client saying he "might" want to come down and see me tomorrow and if he did then he'd let me know ASAP, he hasn't gotten back to me so I take it he's not coming. I've just paid my rent, so I'm absolutely broke now so I'm really hoping next week will be better. I've been quite worried as of late, that the way things are going I might fall behind on my rent which isn't an option because my landlord would kick me out right away, he's said as much (Forum poster, 2014g).

I've earned a grand total of...wait for it...70 quid in the last two weeks. In the whole of [month], I'm not even close to a grand in total. I'm really in the shit right now, I don't know what's gone wrong. I've been on [this forum] all month as well as agency work & I have had 0 bookings from that. Worried and stressed doesn't even begin to explain (Forum poster, 2014h).

Much of the thread content precedes and proceeds in a similar vein. Though some escorts counter with their own experiences of relative economic success, a running current of feeling that the economic situation for independent escorts has weakened, predominates. Primary to this, is a strong feeling from many escorts

that the recession, fee stagnation, increased competition from migrant workers and higher levels of customer expectation, are to blame. As one poster suggests:

The [sex provider] scene has become saturated with thousands of [sex workers] flooding the market. Every other profile on [this forum] is [Eastern European]... As I see it there is no way back to the good old days, instead of 100's of [sex workers], clients now have the choice of 1000's and supply has well outstripped demand. I have seen the hourly rates in [UK city] tumble because sex workers are competing with each other for clients. £55 per hour is now not unusual (Forum poster, 2014i).

The evidence taken from such threads does not, of course, automatically mean that all or even many independent escorts are struggling financially, but its presence as a popular and long running thread on such a prevalent forum for escorts, does support recent evidence that the economic prosperity of many escorts has diminished in recent years (The Economist, 2014). As opposed to more abstract concerns, such as the moral dubiousness of men paying for sexual services³, it is the specific and pragmatic concerns of economic validity that many sex workers contend with. Indeed, for escorts the pressure to keep afloat, can add to wider pressures on idealised femininity and commercialised attractiveness, as the next section demonstrates.

Sex workers in the beauty marketplace

A primary 'selling point' of an independent escort, and indeed any other sex worker, is her appearance. Thus the pressure to 'look good', which women experience as a general rule, as an escort is heightened. As one forum user demonstrates:

[Recently] I am having what I can only describe as a crisis of confidence across the board in life. With how I look – I am [in my forties] now so I have lines, wrinkles and quite right too – I am not vain but I have lost confidence in my appearance (Forum poster, 2013a).

This quote reflects an uncomfortable anxiety about their appearance that many escorts experience when business is far from 'booming'. Like many women and

men, the escort can readily attribute ‘failure’ due to her own perceived unattractiveness rather than any other external factor beyond her control (e.g., economic recession, local competition or otherwise).

Of course these concerns are not specific to escorting and research has, for decades, shown that women’s shame about their appearances is normative (Matthiasdottir, Jonsson, and Kristjansson, 2010; Rodin, Silberstein, and Striegel-Moore, 1984). Pressure to be commercially beautiful is not limited to the sex industry, as the mass media, fashion, beauty and weight loss industries profit from this as well (Jankowski, Fawkner, Slater, and Tiggemann, 2014; Kilbourne, 2010; Wolf, 1991). As one forum user succinctly highlights, there is a heavy financial, mental and cognitive cost to appearance pressures, but as she also notes, this does not relate specifically to escorts but to the culture imposed on women (and to a lesser extent, men) more generally:

I hate to sound like a tedious feminist but the amount of money women spend on beautifying (with half the things making no difference to anyone else at all) is really quite bewildering! Probably taking £1000s a year away from a potential travelling fund or property purchase or pension etc. I have been experimenting with seeing how simple I can make my personal care routines and how much money I can save for a couple of years now, and it’s mainly good cos it’s just a huge weight off my mind. After all, I have a house to buy this year (Forum poster, 2014f).

Social isolation and marginalisation

Choosing this job means you have to isolate yourself and by doing so you will definitely be lonely. We are all lonely and isolated but you tend to get used to it as time goes by. I only make an effort to see friends and family once in a while mostly in the summer but otherwise can’t be bothered in the winter. It’s very normal to be lonely and isolated if you don’t want the whole world to know what you are up to (Forum poster, 2013b).

The escort forum has a section offering the chance for escorts to look for ‘security buddies’, ‘touring partners’ or just simply casual acquaintances or friends. Because of the liminality of the escort role (which can result in having to hide their job from

friends and family) many escorts on the site detail loneliness and marginalisation as negative aspects of their occupation.

The taboo surrounding the industry may also mean that an escort may not engage in romantic relationships, as another forum user writes: 'I'm not in a relationship because I don't want to have to tell anyone *or* lie to them' (Forum poster, 2011a). However, this may not be the experience of all workers. Whilst wishing to break social taboos that prevent escorts from seeking social engagement, we must be careful not to fall into the trap of tarring them with the cliché of the loneliness of the 'promiscuous woman', rather than satisfaction of the 'happily married wife'. Romantic relationships in particular do not necessarily provide women with greater levels of wellbeing and there is research to suggest that women are in fact happier after they have disposed of unsatisfying marriages (Clark and Georgellis, 2013). In fact, the reasons that women stay in marriages may be similar to the reasons women continue to conduct sex work. In speaking about the research Professor Yannis Georgellis explains that: 'We took into account the fact that divorce can sometimes have a negative financial impact on women, but despite that it still makes them much happier than men' (Georgellis, 2013). Therefore, due to women's often more vulnerable socioeconomic situation, escorting may not be the only activity some women do to bolster their financial security, whatever the effects might be on their personal contentment.

Violence and abuse

A preliminary reading of one of the forum's rooms regarding clients to avoid, seems to suggest that reoccurring problems that are reported amongst independent escorts are verbal abuse, appearance 'put downs', threats of exposure, stalking and pressure to practice unsafe sex.

He returned for second booking tonight and went around blowing some of candles out until she insisted on keeping some of them lit, she noticed he was more 'full on' this time at the start and when she went to check condom just before penetration it was ripped (client had been wanking his cock just before this). She gave him the benefit of the doubt and put another condom on and when he was ready to finish he asked for doggy – she checked the condom again and it was fine but noticed afterwards he was 'wriggling about' behind her trying to

get comfortable and when he had finished the condom was ripped again and he had come inside her (Forum poster, 2014c).

That is not to say that other forms of violence do not occur, but as is the case for women generally, and as even a cursory look at the Every Day Sexism Project details, it is not simply the threat of horrific violence, but the regularly ‘minutiae’ of sexism that escorts, as a largely female group, face.

Whilst violence and the threat of violence are real, particularly for street sex workers, and should not be minimized (Lowman, 2000; Sanders and Campbell, 2007) it should also be contextualized within a more general culture of sexism and misogyny. Violence against women is increasingly recognized as an epidemic and a serious violation of women’s human rights (Krantz and Garcia-Moreno, 2005). The reason escorts may be at the forefront of this debate is because they are more privately ‘accessible’ to a wider variety of men than other women, but the reason they are abused and killed is not because they are sex workers but because the perpetrators are violent misogynists. Forensic psychologist David Canter explains:

From the reports we’re getting from these women, the people who are violent are not an unusual sample of the population of customers... these people are in their 30s, and seem to be local individuals, often reasonably well dressed [...] Frequently, our studies report a huge range of abuses in the family – beating their wives and assaults against their children. If these men find the opportunity to indulge in that violence and get away with it against strangers [...] then these opportunities will be acted on (O’Kane, 2002, para. 27).

If we are to fight back against the abuse of women, we must recognise that escorts suffer sexism, violence and abuse precisely because women suffer sexism, violence and abuse. If escorts or other sex workers experience more abuse, then it is arguably because of a belief by the perpetrators that they will be no retribution for their acts (Browne, 1993; The White House Council on Women and Girls, 2014). Again as Maggie O’Kane argues this is often due to police and state negligence:

The vast majority of murder cases are solved, yet in a third of all prostitute murders, the killer is never found [...] They are shite, killed by shite; who gives a

shite?’ one police officer reportedly told the Sunday Times after a prostitute murder in 1995 (O’Kane, 2002, para. 28).

If we are to bring down the disproportionate rates of violence against escorts we must, firstly, view it from within the scheme of generalised social misogyny that views female bodies as ‘up for grabs’, whether is a murdered streetwalker or an inebriated college student forcibly, digitally penetrated by her peers. Secondly, we must not get side tracked by arguments that suggests sex for pay is an inherent violence, and attempt to legislate as so. Rather, feminists should collectivise with sex workers to draw attention to the poor rates of conviction for those who abuse both sex workers and women more generally. Rather than criminalising all those who pay for sex, our resources should be combined and concentrated on calling out those who conduct measurable harm, and on scrutinising those whose job it is to defend and protect the safety of escorts.

Conclusion

Nowhere can sex workers’ position of liminality be greater seen in the tendency to refer to sex work as the ‘selling of the body’. The implication is that the escort’s greatest and most abundant commodity is her sexuality, and if she sells it she ‘sells herself’ (McNeil, 2011). The phrase further implies whatever intelligence, experience and life the escort has is redundant; that once she has engaged in paid for sexual activity, she falls down some never ending rabbit hole, wherein her selfhood must flummox through the vagaries of ideology and moral crusade. Wherein her image of herself must be contorted to fit the convex or concave of a political, circus mirror. It does not make any sense to talk about those who are involved in sex work, as though they were somehow outside of a commodification culture, wherein almost anything is up for sale or rent, whether it is hair (Khaleeli, 2012), organs (Scheper-Hughes, 2014) or even the rent of one’s womb for surrogacy (Twine, 2012).

This paper has sought to be a part of a conversation that wishes to take the rigidity of moral purpose out of the debate on sex work, how its operation should be written into legislation and how its workers’ rights can be protected. Do the authors feel that the selling of sexual services is the apex of human achievement,

particularly in regards to its gendered, racial and classed manifestations? Perhaps not. But that is nonetheless an arbitrary and often philosophical debate to have, and one that should not preside over legislation in place of more immediate, pragmatic concerns. It also must not speak above those collectives of sex workers whose concerns over their safety, their economic stability and their political rights trump more metaphysical ones. To support and listen to them would help to diminish the inflammatory dichotomisation of the debate, and the unhelpful, and untrue, dichotomisation of the sex worker as a victim or a victor. She may be both. Or frequently, neither.

Endnotes

- ¹ The authors have anonymized the escort forum, accompanying website and all forum posts references in order to reduce the risk of any escort being identified from the posts and potentially further stigmatized.
- ² The authors are circumspect about the use of the terminology sex worker in reference to the most vulnerable women involved in the general industry, such as street walkers, pimped or trafficked women and intravenous drug users. The authors feel that whilst it is fair to want to legitimize women who are working of their own volition, it is dangerous territory to use the same language in reference to these vulnerable women as it potentially whitewashes the abuses they suffer and the lack of real measurable choice in their lives.
- ³ During the author's ten years in the industry, she regularly encountered women working as escorts or in brothels who were unhappy about their situation, not just because of the social stigma surrounding the sex industry but because of the great discomfort experienced when being with men they were not attracted to, even repulsed by, due to economic need. Though there are other escorts who don't experience such discomfort, and are happy with the work they are doing, the client himself is not always able to make this differentiation when purchasing sexual services. Even if he adopts what he may view as a form of motive utilitarianism (by selecting the escort whose advertisement most suggests volition) he is still in the moral quandary of opting to purchase sexual services from, potentially, a woman who experiences great discomfort at the activity. The authors further note, that this discomfort is amplified by the fact that the service is a physically intimate one. The author recalls many conversations with varying women who expressed particular unease, even sickness, at engaging in particularly 'intimate' activities, such as kissing and cunnilingus, but feeling the pressure to do so as a result of fierce industry competition. Therefore, the authors defend the assertion that paying for sex, though it ought not be a criminal activity, is certainly a morally dubious one.

- ⁴ Cultural neoliberalism is a concept that holds individuals as responsible for their lives including their success, health and longevity at the expense of any acknowledgement of the influence of wider macro-structures (e.g., racism, sexism; Martinez and Garcia 1996).

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Direct sex work in Great Britain: reflecting diversity

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ABSTRACT: Recent policy debates in the UK and Europe have tended to frame sex work as consonant with trafficking and sexual exploitation, often drawing on the most extreme cases to exemplify the position of sex workers. These examples are frequently based on the experiences of specific groups such as street-based sex workers, who tend to encounter different working circumstances from their indoor-based counterparts and may present a broader range of social problems. Yet existing research evidence shows that street-based workers form a minority of sex workers in the UK. Policy reports and proposals often focus exclusively on female sex workers, rather than also considering the position of male and transgender sex workers. Many policy initiatives thus ignore the diversity amongst sex workers and are based on inadequate information, which can contribute to social exclusion of sex workers. Research has identified gaps in data and lack of up-to-date information about the numbers of sex workers of different genders in diverse sectors of the sex industry. Drawing on two recent pieces of original research exploring the relative proportions of female, male and transgender sex workers in different sectors of the sex industry in Great Britain, and the working experiences of adult sex workers in indoor-based settings, this article considers how inaccurate or partial information has been used to present a misleading picture of the sex worker population in the UK. It considers the methodological challenges in calculating the size and composition of the British sex worker population, presents new estimates of the numbers and comparative proportions of female, male and transgender sex workers in street-based and indoor sectors in Britain and demonstrates ways in which the working experiences and perspectives of indoor-based sex workers challenge the messages perpetuated in policy and media discourses. It suggests that changes to the law to protect sex workers'



rights and safety need to move away from criminalisation, towards recognition of sex work as a legitimate occupation.

KEYWORDS: Prostitution; Sex work; Policy; Service provision; Gender

The regulation of commercial sex in the UK and Europe continues to provoke significant controversy, with campaigns repeatedly calling for changes to the policy and legal framework. The sex industry in the UK is diverse, encompassing a range of sexual services. It includes direct sexual services typically associated with prostitution, in both street and indoor markets, as well as indirect sexual services such as lap dancing, stripping and erotic phone lines (Sanders et al., 2009). The term “sex work” may also include sectors such as the pornographic industry (Leigh, 1997). Despite an increasing body of academic research demonstrating the changing and diverse nature of the sex industry, policy and media portrayals of sex work often draw on a narrow evidence base which focuses exclusively on female sex workers, presenting them as vulnerable and exploited (Weitzer, 2010). As Sanders (2009) has noted, policy documents such as *Paying the Price* (Home Office, 2004) have drawn primarily on studies of street-based sex workers, or extreme examples of sexual exploitation, and fail to acknowledge the diversity within indoor sex markets or the experiences of many working in the industry. Furthermore, there is little consideration in policy debates of male or transgender sex workers or their service needs (Whowell and Gaffney, 2009). More recently, the report of the England and Wales All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Prostitution and the Global Sex Trade (APPG, 2014) perpetuates a similarly partial perspective which associates prostitution intrinsically with harm, drawing on limited evidence, including sources which appear to have a specific ideological perspective. When considering the “Swedish” model which criminalises clients of sex workers, for example, the report fails to review the range of research evidence, some of which has pointed to the detrimental impact of the legislation on sex workers (see Levy and Jakobsson, 2014). Instead it draws heavily on one study which, as Jeal and Salisbury (2013) have noted, openly supports

the Swedish approach. The policy emphasis in the UK has tended to be on sexual exploitation and, more recently, the relationship between prostitution and sex trafficking, with no recognition given to the possibility that commercial sex may be regarded as work, with differential working practices as in other industries. While state recognition and regulation of sexual labour as work would not alone address inequalities in the sex industry, the current legal and policy framework prohibits development of measures to improve sex workers' labour rights and working conditions (O'Connell Davidson, 2006; Pitcher and Wijers, 2014).

It is important to have up-to-date information about the composition of the sex industry, in order to consider policy measures and service provision which reflect different needs according to circumstances. Nonetheless, as Cusick et al. (2009) have observed, there continues to be a lack of reliable statistical evidence relating not only to the number of sex workers in the UK, but also their characteristics and distribution across different sectors. Moreover, as this current article illustrates, there are regional differences in sex markets and the characteristics of the sex industry in London do not necessarily reflect those in locations outside the capital. There are methodological problems with obtaining accurate data about the sex industry, particularly as sex workers are often a hidden population because of the effects of stigma and the criminalisation of activities related to sex work in many jurisdictions (Shaver, 2005). The lack of reliable evidence is further complicated by the existence of studies with questionable research methods, presenting claims backed by flawed or misleading statistics, which may then be perpetuated in media and policy reporting (Weitzer, 2010). It is therefore important not only to question these data and their provenance, but also to build a more robust quantitative as well as qualitative evidence base to reflect the heterogeneity of the sex industry and those working within it.

There are currently no comprehensive statistics on the numbers working in the sex industry in the UK. A much-cited figure of 80,000 sex workers relates to a survey of 16 organisations providing services to sex workers in England and Scotland (Kinnell, 1999). These included specialist services for sex workers and generic services, such as health promotion and drug services, which included sex workers among their varied clientele. The study by Kinnell (1999) was based on estimates by project staff of the number of sex workers thought to be operating within their geographical area, which in many cases was similar to the number of service users in these projects. A subsequent study by Cusick et al. (2009) up-

dated this estimate, drawing on the numbers of male and female sex workers in Scotland and England in contact with specialist sex work services. This study drew on recorded data from projects of the numbers of self-reporting sex workers using their services over a one-year period. Cusick et al. (2009) arrived at an estimate of 17,081 sex workers in contact with 54 specialist services in the UK and, using a multiplier derived from the earlier study by Kinnell, estimated that there were up to 101,625 sex workers working in the UK. While the two studies provided data on street-based and indoor sex workers using services, and female and male service users, they did not present estimates of numbers of sex workers by sub-sectors of the sex industry.

This article takes into account the issues raised in previous papers on this topic, and builds on methods to estimate the sex worker population in the studies by Kinnell (1999) and Cusick et al. (2009). It draws on research evidence from two recent studies: a survey of services to sex workers and a qualitative study of indoor-based sex workers in Great Britain. It explores diversity within the sex industry and the use of different methods of calculation to estimate the proportions of female, male and transgender sex workers in street and indoor sectors. It also considers the experiences of sex workers in different indoor settings, including managed commercial premises, independent, agency and collective working. It illustrates how current policy proposals fail to acknowledge the working experiences and service needs of sex workers in different settings. I set these findings in the context of recent policy reports, which I argue draw on assumptions which are both limited and misleading. I also discuss methodological challenges in attempting to map the sex worker population. I emphasise the importance of policy initiatives to meet sex workers' service needs and facilitate their human and labour rights, to enable them to maximise their safety and wellbeing. To do this effectively, policy-makers need to know more about the industry and the way in which current policy/legal directions affect sex workers. First I consider the way in which policy reports and debates often draw upon limited information to portray sex workers, in ways which do not represent their diverse experiences.

Representations of sex workers in policy debates

Various academic commentators (e.g. Phoenix, 2009; Weitzer, 2010; Wagenaar

and Altink, 2012) have argued that prostitution policy in the UK, USA and parts of Europe has been influenced by an abolitionist moral discourse, which conflates prostitution with trafficking and sexual exploitation. Limited representations of sex workers have featured in UK Government reports such as *Paying the Price* (Home Office, 2004: 11) which, while initially stating that sex workers are ‘far from a homogenous group’, then describes common characteristics as being: abuse, difficult lives, homelessness and problematic drug abuse. Although there is an acknowledgement that drug use relates particularly to street-based workers, as Sanders (2009) notes, the report contains limited counter-examples relating to indoor sex workers, whose working circumstances tend to be markedly different from those of street workers. While it is important for policy initiatives to take into account the service needs of street-based sex workers, it should be noted that studies in the UK, the USA and many other countries have estimated that female street-based sex workers represent no more than 10–30 per cent of all female sex workers (Weitzer, 2005; Sanders et al., 2009). A report by Scot-Pep (TAMPEP, 2007), which drew on a questionnaire and telephone mapping exercise with a sample of organisations providing services to sex workers, estimated that indoor workers formed 72 per cent of the UK sex working population. As I discuss below, there are methodological problems in estimating the sex worker population, but it appears that most studies which have undertaken this exercise have concluded that indoor workers are in the majority.

There is a tendency in much policy debate to position all sex work within a “Violence against Women and Girls” framework, which both excludes male and transgender sex workers and does not necessarily reflect the diverse experiences of female sex workers, particularly those in indoor markets. For example, the London Mayor’s report on violence against women and girls (Mayor of London, 2010: 27) states that ‘the vast majority of women and girls involved in prostitution are violated and sexually exploited. Though there may be different degrees of coercion, control and violence perpetrated against the women and girls involved, violence is intrinsic to prostitution’. The recent APPG on Prostitution and the Global Sex Trade perpetuates a similar discourse, for instance, describing the ‘near pandemic levels of violence experienced by women in prostitution’ (APPG, 2014: 5). The report questions the capacity of people to make an informed decision to enter sex work: ‘More often the decision to enter prostitution is led by

poverty, drug or alcohol dependency, or patterns of abusive behaviour' (APPG, 2014: 7).

Contrary to the representations of sex workers described above, however, there is a substantial body of academic evidence demonstrating diversity within sex markets (e.g. Sanders, 2005, 2009; Day, 2007; Pitcher, 2014). This diversity is also reflected in sex workers' accounts of their experiences and their attitudes to policy, although from some recent research with sex workers, it appears that few are in favour of further criminalisation of their work (Jenkins, 2009; Huschke et al, 2014). This raises the question as to why this evidence appears to have been largely disregarded or played down in policy reports. The APPG report, for example, presents some individual responses from sex workers which argue that engagement in sex work can sometimes be a matter of "choice", or that sex work can represent a practical solution to immediate financial problems (APPG, 2014: 30). Nonetheless, the report subsequently appears to privilege the views of agencies over those of sex workers themselves, through drawing primarily on submissions from agencies which tend to present all prostitution as harmful and related to "vulnerability". It then makes the conceptual leap that the solution is to criminalise the purchase of sexual services, along the lines of the "Swedish" model. While the notion of "choice" itself needs to be set in the context of economic constraints, much recent research evidence, including the studies discussed here, points to a spectrum of reasons for engaging in commercial sex rather than a simple dichotomy between choice and coercion.

Methods

This article draws on two research studies undertaken between 2009 and 2014, referred to here as Study A and Study B.² Study A investigated the approximate distribution of female, male and transgender sex workers in street and indoor sectors in the sex industry in England, Scotland and Wales. It also explored the characteristics of sex workers and their different service needs, from the viewpoint of staff in services to sex workers. Study B drew on qualitative research with female, male and transgender sex workers in a range of indoor settings. Both studies focused on direct sex work, which tends to be regulated by different laws from indirect sexual services such as erotic dancing (Cruz, 2013). The two stud-

ies together highlight the diverse experiences of sex workers in different settings, and the way in which these often contrast with dominant depictions of prostitution and sex work in policy and media discourses.

Study A concentrated on street-based and indoor-based sex workers providing direct sexual services, including workers in massage parlours/saunas³ and independent/agency workers, which was also the focus of the studies by Kinnell (1999) and Cusick et al. (2009). The majority of specialist service provision tends to be aimed at direct sex workers, particularly those working on the street and some in commercial premises (Sanders et al., 2009). The principal research method for Study A was a structured online survey of projects working with sex workers in Britain, to obtain data on their sex worker service users over a one-year period, estimates of the numbers of male, female and transgender sex workers in their geographical area, their occupational distribution and service needs. The sample was drawn from the UK Network of Sex Work Projects (UKNSWP)⁴ membership, and non-member projects listed in the UKNSWP's Directory of Services for Sex Workers (2007). An invitation to participate was sent to 91 specialist and non-specialist services working with sex workers⁵. The survey was undertaken during May-August 2010, with responses received from 57 projects (47 providing numbers of service users). The response rate for fully-completed questionnaires was 52 per cent. Respondents were distributed across all standard regions in Great Britain, with the largest proportions in London and the West Midlands, broadly reflecting the division of services across Great Britain (UKNSWP, 2007). Sixty-eight per cent of respondents were from specialist services for young people and/or adults involved in prostitution/sex work. All but three services responding (95 per cent) worked with female sex workers; 47 per cent of projects worked with male sex workers and 36 per cent with transgender sex workers. Projects tended to provide a range of services to sex workers, including one-to-one work and condom distribution (86 per cent), outreach work (78 per cent), drugs/alcohol advice and information (76 per cent) and exiting support (64 per cent).

While Study A drew on the knowledge of services working with direct sex workers, thus replicating the focus of the studies by Kinnell (1999) and Cusick et al. (2009), it also combined the two methods used separately in each of these studies. It therefore asked staff in specialist sex work projects and generic services both to provide actual numbers of sex working service users and to estimate the

number they believed to be in their geographical area over the same time period, based on their knowledge of local sex markets and intelligence received from service users and other agencies. Including non-specialist as well as specialist services creates a higher risk of double-counting due to potential duplication of numbers in areas where more than one organisation provides similar services (Cusick et al., 2009). Excluding these services, however, may lead to less comprehensive geographical coverage, as not all areas have specialist provision. Study A considered the potential overlap between services, through asking respondents to estimate the proportion of their service users in contact with other services in their area. The study broadened the research focus, through including Wales as well as England and Scotland. It also provided a more detailed breakdown of estimated numbers of sex workers in different industry sectors, and obtained project estimates of the number of transgender as well as male and female sex workers within each sector.

Study B was a qualitative study of female, male and transgender adult sex workers in direct indoor sex work in Great Britain and complemented the data from Study A through providing evidence of the diverse experiences of indoor workers in different settings, including sex workers who may not necessarily be in contact with specialist services. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken in 2011–13 with 36 current sex workers (24 female, nine male and three transgender), two receptionists and two managers of parlours (all female and former sex workers). Fifteen female participants worked independently or for agencies and nine in commercial premises, including parlours and managed flats, whereas all male and transgender participants worked independently. Interviews explored participants' background, their experiences in sex work and the broader labour market, and their views on their working conditions. Recruitment was through online networks, escort websites, sex work projects and snowballing. The study used a grounded theory method, including simultaneous data collection, coding and analysis⁶ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Initial purposeful sampling was used to engage female, male and transgender sex workers and ensure participation from different settings, with theoretical sampling based on conceptual categories emerging from the data also shaping data collection. While comparisons could be drawn between the work experiences of female and male participants, the number of transgender participants was too small for comparative analysis.

Estimating the sex worker population in Great Britain

Numbers and profile of sex workers using services

Numbers of service users from April 2009 to March 2010 were provided by 47 projects in Study A, 32 of which worked only with people involved in prostitution/sex work. In some cases non-specialist services had higher numbers of indoor-based service users than specialist services and thus the inclusion of non-specialist services is important, particularly in areas with no other service provision. Respondents were asked to estimate the proportion of their service users in contact with other agencies in the same area, as people with multiple service needs may visit different agencies for specific advice and support, in relation to issues such as sexual health, drug use or safety. In areas where responses were received from more than one project, numbers of sex working service users were then adjusted down to take into account estimates of the extent of duplication, to minimise double-counting. This gave an adjusted total of 9,940 sex working service users, compared with an unadjusted total of 10,584. The main areas of overlap related to female street-based workers and to a lesser extent those working from commercial premises such as parlours or saunas. This suggests that drawing on numbers of service users without taking into account service duplication may give an inflated figure for female street-based workers.

The proportions of street-based and indoor project service users were 34 per cent and 66 per cent respectively, which is similar to the findings in Cusick et al. (2009). The overall proportions were 92 per cent female, seven per cent male and one per cent transgender sex workers. This corresponds with the findings from other studies of services for sex workers (e.g. Kinnell, 1999; Cusick et al., 2009). Nonetheless, this also reflects the focus of provision, as discussed earlier. As Kinnell (1999) notes, calculations of the number of sex workers which draw on data provided by projects working mainly with female sex workers may underestimate the number of male and transgender sex workers in the population. The majority of male and transgender service users in Study A worked indoors (Table 1). While the overwhelming majority of street-based sex workers were female, the proportions of indoor-based service users were 89 per cent female, 10 per cent male and one per cent transgender.

Table 1: Distribution of service users by sub-sector of the sex industry*

Sub-sector:	Female		Male		Transgender		Total
	Service users	Projects	Service users	Projects	Service users	Projects	Service users
Street-based workers	3,274	38	44	14	14	9	3,332
Sex workers in commercial premises (e.g. parlours/ saunas)	2,283	23	123	10	6	5	2,412
Private/ independent/ agency workers	2,258	33	534	16	59	13	2,851
Other indoor workers/ sector unknown	1,338	3	7	3	0	0	1,345
Total	9,153		708		79		9,940

* Adjusted according to potential duplication in areas with more than one project. N.B. projects may offer services to sex workers in more than one sub-sector. (N=47).

Many project services focus on street-based workers, whereas independent sex workers are less likely to use these services, as discussed later in this article. The number of indoor workers reported in the survey could therefore underestimate those working independently. Although the research studies considered here did not undertake any systematic exploration of alternative sources of data, as Sanders (2005) has noted, independent sex workers are increasingly using online advertising. From the interviews with indoor-based sex workers in Study B, independent female participants tended to advertise on a marketing website where female and male sex workers advertise services for members of the opposite sex and/or couples, and/or had their own websites. Looking at one online site alone, the number of profiles of individual female escorts in 2010⁷ was nearly five times the number of independent or agency female service users reported by projects in the same year. Although individual escorts registered on the website are not permitted to have more than one profile offering solo services on this site, it is possible some members may provide an alias under a different email address. Nonetheless, even taking into account some potential aliases, this indicates a significant under-estimation when basing statistics only on data collected from projects supporting sex workers.

In order to compare the findings in Study A with those in the earlier studies discussed here, the average (mean) unadjusted numbers of service users in each category were used to derive estimates. The combined arithmetic mean for female, male and transgender street-based workers was 105.2 compared with

a combined mean of 211.⁸ for indoor workers, giving a total average of 317 per project for all sex workers⁸. Basing calculations on the means rather than actual numbers does not make a substantial change to the proportions of street-based to indoor workers. Drawing separately on the individual means for female, male and transgender service users to take into account the varied numbers of projects reporting data in each category, however, changes the proportions of indoor workers by gender.⁹ Using this method, while female sex workers represented a significant majority (95 per cent) of street-based workers, the revised proportions for indoor-based workers were 80.4 per cent female, 17.3 per cent male and 2.3 per cent transgender sex workers. This also reflects the fact that, as shown in Table 1, while female sex workers who use services tend to be distributed across street-based and diverse indoor settings, male and transgender sex workers are more likely to work independently or through agencies than in any other setting. Nonetheless, caution needs to be exercised with these calculations, given that the number of projects providing services to male and transgender sex workers was comparatively low.

The greatest concentration of reported service users was in London, which corresponds with findings from other studies (e.g. see Day, 2007). The highest percentages of reported street-based workers were in the Midlands, Yorkshire/the Humber and London, with the highest proportions of indoor workers in London, the South-East, and the Midlands. The majority of male and transgender sex workers (more than two-thirds of these groups) were reported in London and the South-East. This is consistent with the research by Kinnell (1999), which also found much higher proportions of male sex workers in the same areas and higher numbers of street-based workers in the Midlands and North of England.

The majority of reported service users were of white ethnic background. This corresponds with the study by Jeal and Salisbury (2007), which found that the majority of female sex workers were white European, although parlour sex workers originated from a range of countries. Some survey respondents commented that black and minority ethnic women were less likely to work on the street: for example, one project worker stated that 'there is a much higher percentage of black [or] mixed ethnicity women in massage parlours compared to the streets'. While some survey respondents could not estimate the proportion of migrant workers amongst their service users, the responses to Study A indicated that higher

proportions of migrant workers tended to be based in London or the South-East, with some projects estimating that up to half, or in a few cases more than half of their service users were migrant workers. The report by TAMPEP (2007) estimated a UK average of 36 per cent migrant workers in the sex industry, with more than half being from the former Eastern Bloc and Balkan countries. In London, however, the proportion of migrant workers in this study was 76 per cent. This report noted an absence of migrant workers involved in street-based sex work. Project data suggest that the proportion of male migrant sex workers in London is similar to that for female workers (Agustín, 2006). There has been a tendency in policy debates to conflate all migrant workers with “victims” of trafficking, although the research evidence suggests that many migrant workers may opt to work in the UK sex industry in preference to other forms of labour which are lower paid or offer poorer working conditions (Agustín, 2006; Mai, 2009).

While some survey respondents noted that indoor workers tended to be slightly older on average than street-based workers, others reported that the female street-working population in their area was becoming slightly older, in some cases in their mid-twenties and above, and thus there are variations in age according to the local area context. Nonetheless, as comparative studies have shown (e.g. Jeal and Salisbury, 2007), the average age of entry into sex work for parlour-based sex workers tends to be higher than that for street-based workers. This may in part be due to the strict rules of some indoor commercial premises, which include not allowing underage workers on the premises (Sanders, 2009).

Producing estimates of the sex worker population by sector

The study by Cusick et al (2009) obtained actual numbers of service users in the year 2007–08, which they compared with estimates obtained some ten years earlier by Kinnell (1999). They arrived at an overall multiplier of 2.1, based on the mean number of estimated sex workers in the Kinnell study, which they applied to the mean number of actual service users in their study, multiplied by the 153 projects providing services to sex workers listed in the 2007 UKNSWP Directory. As discussed earlier, Study A in this article took into account the methodological difficulties identified by Cusick et al. (2009) and aimed to build on the methods they used, to obtain estimates across street and indoor sectors separately, as well

as estimates of the overall sex worker population that could be compared with the previous two studies. Study A arrived at a new set of multipliers based on comparative data. This was achieved through: drawing on both actual numbers of service users and estimated numbers of sex workers in different sectors; obtaining both sets of data from the same project respondents; and collecting these data over the same time period. Twenty-nine project staff in Study A provided estimates of the total numbers of sex workers thought to be in their geographical area. More respondents produced estimates for street-based female sex workers than for other groups. The estimated numbers for street-based workers in each area tended to be closer to the actual number of service users than estimates for indoor workers. Although the estimates provided by project respondents for indoor workers in their area, particularly those working independently or through agencies, were sometimes substantially higher than the number of service users, the proportionately lower estimate for street-based workers suggests that the same multiplier applied to both groups may produce an inflated figure for street-based workers.

Given the differences between the proportions of street-based and indoor workers, therefore, a more accurate estimate may be obtained through using two aggregate multipliers, one for street-based and another for indoor workers. The combined means for actual compared with estimated street-based workers from the 29 respondents gave a multiplier of 1.5 (through calculating the ratio of the arithmetic mean of 93.0 actual service users to the mean of 139.3 estimated numbers of street-based workers), and a multiplier of 1.9 for indoor workers (the ratio of the means of 171.8 actual and 325.4 estimated numbers). When the individual multipliers for street-based and indoor workers are applied to the separate mean numbers for each of these two categories and multiplied by the number of overall projects providing services¹⁰, they give a total number of estimated sex workers in the UK of 85,714, of which 28 per cent would be street-based workers. The relative proportions of street-based and indoor workers then become closer to those in studies such as that by TAMPEP (2007) and appear to be a more accurate reflection of what is generally known about the composition of the sex industry. This is important for informing policy, given the different service needs of each group. Workers in commercial premises have different working practices from independent or agency sex workers and their service needs may differ, as

will be discussed later in this article. Ideally, therefore, different multipliers would be used not only for street compared with indoor-based workers, but also for female, male and transgender sex workers in different sub-sectors of the indoor sex industry. The comparatively small numbers in some categories, particularly for transgender sex workers, did not allow for a comprehensive set of multipliers. Nonetheless, the data suggest that the differences between the mean numbers of independent service users and estimated independent sex workers are much greater than those for sex workers in commercial premises. While the mean number of estimated sex workers in commercial premises was just over 20 per cent higher than the actual number of service users in this category, the mean number of estimated independent/agency sex workers was nearly three times that for actual service users. This suggests that sex workers in this category are less likely to be in contact with services.

The findings from Study A indicate the limitations to basing estimates on project data alone, particularly in relation to independent or agency sex workers. Furthermore, the multipliers here, while based on estimates from 29 projects, only represent the extent of project workers' knowledge. As discussed below, there may be more "hidden" workers who do not use specialist services, or do not disclose their occupation, who would not be included in these calculations. Nonetheless, even when taking into account the different proportions of street-based and indoor workers through using separate multipliers, the overall figure here, when compared with the original estimate of 79,800 in the study by Kinnell (1999), indicates that the number of sex workers in Britain has not changed substantially over time, although the populations may be mobile and the comparative proportions varying in each sector. This also corresponds with the findings of Cusick et al. (2009).

Estimating the sex worker population: methodological challenges

While relying on project data and local intelligence may produce a relatively reliable estimate of the numbers of female street-based sex workers across Great Britain, a number of factors make this source of data more problematic for indoor-based female, male and transgender sex workers. Many survey respondents in

Study A were unable to estimate the number of indoor sex workers in their area, particularly those working independently or through agencies. Relying entirely on project data is likely to produce a deficient sample of off-street workers, because much provision is determined by funding, with an emphasis on sexual health and sometimes drug use, which is less relevant to indoor workers (Pitcher, 2006). As Cusick et al. (2009) note, fewer projects offer support to escorts, or to male sex workers, thus these groups are likely to be under-represented in any study using project data alone. While some geographical areas do not have projects working with male sex workers, certain websites marketing sexual services confirm that male sex workers are distributed across all geographical regions in Great Britain. For instance, one site¹¹ has profiles for male escorts providing services to women or couples throughout all regions, with the greatest concentration in London/the South-East. Relying on this one site, however, would give limited information on male sex workers, as the majority of male indoor workers provide services for men (Whowell and Gaffney, 2009). As Ashford (2008) has noted, many male sex workers tend to use social networking or gay escort websites. Examination of one site used by gay male escorts also shows a distribution across all major UK cities¹². A lack of projects working with male sex workers in any area, therefore, does not necessarily denote an absence of male sex workers in the area, particularly in indoor markets.

Some survey respondents in Study A commented that geographical and sectoral mobility within the industry could sometimes make calculating numbers problematic, as it could result in some double-counting. For example, one stated that:

Most of the women in the figures for independent workers also worked for escort agencies and for massage parlours for short periods of time during the year. All the street workers also worked from domestic premises during that time ... Many of the women periodically go to work in other towns. (Survey respondent, Study A)

Nonetheless, most independent respondents in Study B did not work concurrently in other sectors of the sex industry, although some also worked in the mainstream economy. Most sex workers in commercial premises were in touch

with local sex work projects, often because the managers in these premises encouraged contact with projects offering sexual health and safety advice and support. Independent sex workers/escorts, however, were more likely to rely on peer networking than on sex work projects for work-related advice. Their sexual health needs were usually met by sexual health clinics, although sometimes these might be run by sex worker support projects. Jodie, an independent escort, commented that escorts were less likely to need specialist services for sex workers:

... the people who would be likely to use those sorts of resources would be people who would probably not be escorts, because independent escorts should be getting themselves down to the local GUM clinic and they don't really need anything much else other than a mobile phone, the number of a local newspaper and somewhere to work from.

Participants in Study B attending mainstream health services, such as GPs' surgeries or sexual health clinics, were sometimes reluctant to disclose their occupation to these services, because of potential stigma, and several independent interviewees, particularly female sex workers, spoke of feeling 'judged' by certain staff in these services. If independent sex workers or escorts are less likely to be service users of specialist sex work projects, or do not disclose their sex working status to mainstream services, it is likely that the number of independent or agency sex workers in Britain will be substantially higher than the number known to agencies.

Diverse policy needs of sex workers

As the earlier discussion indicated, the British sex industry is complex and service needs may vary according to different work settings. Having more robust information about the distribution of the sex worker population may help to shape policy directions, but it is important for policy to be guided not only by projects providing services, but also sex workers themselves in different sectors of the industry. The findings from Study A, combined with the perspectives of participants in Study B, demonstrate the diverse experiences and policy needs of sex workers in various settings.

Thirty-eight respondents in Study A provided comments on needs presented by sex workers using their service, nearly all working with street-based workers. The comments suggest, as found by other studies (e.g. Church et al., 2001; Jeal and Salisbury, 2007) that street-based sex workers experience a range of problems, and are more vulnerable to violence than indoor workers. The main service needs for street-based workers identified by support projects related to areas such as drug and alcohol use, housing, mental, sexual and physical health, criminal justice issues and safety. In contrast, the small number of projects working solely with indoor workers tended to emphasise sexual health and legal advice, for example, where indoor workers faced prosecution, or business-related advice, such as how to register as self-employed. Similar to the studies discussed earlier, Study B found that relatively few indoor-based participants had experienced violent incidents in their work. In part they attributed this to their safety precautions. Although projects were more likely to associate the risk of violence with street-based workers, however, one survey respondent in Study A commented that services for indoor workers concerning safety and violence are less developed than for street workers:

One of my concerns is about getting information about Ugly Mugs ... around the indoor market. We're very good at doing it with the street working girls but clients attack people indoors as well and how can we get that information shared? (Project worker, Study A)

This survey was undertaken prior to the establishment of the National Ugly Mugs scheme (NUM). This scheme has increased national information-sharing about violent crimes and perpetrators, amongst individual sex workers in different sectors as well as projects (Laing and Pitcher, 2013). Sex workers may sometimes encounter barriers to reporting violent incidents, because of the stigma attached to their occupation, which may be exacerbated by punitive laws. For workers in managed or collective settings, their uncertain legal status compounds their precarious situation, because they may fear prosecution if they report crimes against them (Pitcher and Wijers, 2014). The NUM scheme enables sex workers to report violent incidents anonymously to NUM or via projects, rather than approaching the police directly. As Jake, an independent sex worker in Study B noted, schemes such

as this provide an important source of support often lacking elsewhere: ‘I think it’s schemes like Ugly Mugs and stuff like that ... those are the people that we need’.

While some survey respondents in Study A commented that their service users may want assistance to move out of the sex industry, others noted there was also a need for support for sex workers to move into different sectors of the industry if that was their expressed wish. For example, one project worker stated that ‘the option of continuing in sex work without the control of others is sometimes a subject of interest’, which suggests that independent work may be a preference for some workers. While the primary focus of some projects and of policy discourses may be on “exiting”, therefore, it is also important for services to recognise that not all sex workers may want to move out of sex work. For those who wish to continue, possibly moving into other sectors, the provision of guidance on how to pursue this option safely and to minimise risk is a consideration for services (Pitcher, 2006; Harding and Hamilton, 2008).

All Study B participants currently working in parlours noted that their workplace had rules about occupational health and safety and operated according to principles of “good” practice such as those noted by Sanders (2009). For example, condom use for penetrative sex was a requirement in these establishments, drug or alcohol use was not allowed on the premises and an emphasis was placed on the physical safety of workers. Susanna, a receptionist, commented of the premises where she worked: ‘here it’s really good, well-run, the girls’re looked after ...they don’t ‘ave to do anything they don’t want to, they don’t ‘ave to see anybody they don’t want to’. In areas with dedicated sex work services, these projects also provided support and guidance to establishments, including in one area participating with the police and some brothel owners in a local forum promoting good management practice. Nonetheless, it is likely that establishments which are less supportive of their workers will also be less receptive to visits from outside agencies.

Participants noted that workplace practices in establishments could be variable and some were more exploitative or poorly-managed. For example, Louisa, an independent worker, observed that in the past some parlour managers had told her she needed to find somewhere else to work when she wanted to limit the services she provided. Rebecca compared the supportive management practices in her current working flat with a previous workplace where there was an ‘expectation that you would do drugs, you would ... do everything to make money’.

Nearly all participants working in commercial premises had changed their place of work on more than one occasion to seek a more favourable working environment. Although the data from both Studies A and B indicated that brothel work is less prevalent for male than for female sex workers in the UK, the interviews with two male independent participants who had previously worked in brothels confirmed that there is a similar spectrum of practice within male brothels. There are thus support needs not only for female, but also male sex workers based in commercial establishments, as Whowell and Gaffney (2009) have also noted.

Independent sex workers tended to have more autonomy over their working practices than those in managed settings. Similar to self-employed operators in other industries, independent participants in Study B managed all aspects of their business, although they might sometimes delegate certain tasks, such as web design or accounting, to a third party. Managing an independent business required a number of skills, including financial planning, marketing, technical skills and customer relations. There were also safety implications of lone working. While managed establishments had safety systems to monitor visitors before they were admitted and the security not only of having other workers present, but also a receptionist and sometimes a security guard, independent participants supervised all their own safety procedures and risk assessments. These included, as participants emphasised, not accepting clients who were under the influence of drink or drugs, or drinking alcohol themselves while working, to reduce potential risks. Many set out their terms and conditions for clients on their websites. As Jessica observed, clients 'can read them and decide whether they want to accept my terms and conditions or not. If they don't, then ... they go to somebody else'. Participants were also aware that some prospective clients might not read the information on the website and thus they needed to reiterate their terms when meeting clients or, in some instances, turn away business if these terms were not respected.

One of the main problems reported by female, male and transgender indoor sex workers in Study B was the impact of social stigma, which caused many to keep their working life secret from others. As indicated earlier, finding non-judgemental services was important to participants and could determine the amount they would disclose about their status. For independent workers who kept their occupation secret from others outside the sex industry, there were few places to turn to for support, which could exacerbate their social isolation. Sharing experi-

ences with colleagues on Internet networks was therefore important. Ruby commented that the online peer network she used was ‘a key resource’. Despite having safety precautions in place, independent workers were aware of the potential risks in lone working and for this reason many commented that ideally they would like to work with others for increased safety, as well as companionship. Because co-operative working arrangements may be interpreted as a “brothel”, however, this may act as a deterrent to collective working because of the legal implications (Pitcher, 2014). Many participants felt the current criminal laws were detrimental to their safety and wellbeing, particularly in relation to the prohibitions to working together which, as Ruby commented, ‘isolates women ... it puts their safety at risk’. This was noted as an issue for male and transgender, as well as female participants. Christopher observed that ‘it’s the law that makes you vulnerable’.

Conclusions

The studies discussed here confirm the need for more accurate and current data which reflect the composition and diverse experiences of the sex worker population. While Study A has provided a more comprehensive estimate of numbers of sex workers in different sectors, it has also further highlighted the limitations of using project data alone, particularly as independent workers are less likely than workers in other sectors to use specialist projects. This indicates the need for further research drawing on online sources for independent workers, including not only advertising sites for female, male and transgender workers, but also individual websites, as some independent workers with established businesses may not use traditional advertising sources.

The experiences reported by indoor-based sex workers in Study B challenge the portrayals of sex workers in policy documents such as the recent APPG report (2014). They suggest the need for a more nuanced debate which moves beyond binaries of “choice” versus “exploitation”, to consider the diverse circumstances and service needs of sex workers in different contexts. Furthermore, the language of many policy reports negates sex workers’ agency and there appears to be a dismissal of their views if they contradict the dominant discourse of victimhood. If indoor-based sex workers represent the majority of sex workers, then it is important for policy considerations to reflect their circumstances and experiences.

This is not to suggest that initiatives should be directed only at the majority – too often the needs of male and transgender sex workers have been disregarded on this basis. It is important, however, to be aware that current policies are often formed on outdated assumptions, or selective data, which relate to a comparatively small proportion of sex workers. Until policy-makers pay heed to the experiences and voices of sex workers in all sectors, policy measures will continue to fail the vast majority of sex workers. The studies discussed here illustrate the need for interventions directed towards specific settings, not only street and indoor markets, but also considering the diverse needs of workers in sub-sectors such as managed and independent sex work. While there were some examples of good practice in managed establishments in Study B, there appeared to be no consistency in practice across Great Britain. Furthermore, because under current British legislation brothel management is illegal and sex work is not considered a form of labour, there are no formal national mechanisms for establishing good practice or regulating establishments, which allows for exploitative practices to go unchallenged (Sanders, 2009).

The issues raised by participants working in commercial establishments such as parlours related more to management practices and occupational health and safety, whereas one of the key issues discussed by independent participants was social isolation. A clear message emerging from the research was that criminalisation inhibits sex workers' ability to work safely and their capacity to exercise agency. Treating commercial sex as work would in principle enable the infringement of sex workers' rights to be addressed through labour laws (Strathdee et al., 2014). As Pitcher and Wijers (2014) have argued, while decriminalisation is necessary for recognition of sex workers' labour rights, it is important also to consider further mechanisms to improve working conditions, as well as facilitating different forms of workplace organisation such as collective enterprises. The research discussed here confirms that sex workers already have a considerable body of knowledge about effective practice in business management and measures to improve their safety, which can inform debates. While not a panacea for all the issues raised here, removal of the criminal laws surrounding adult prostitution would be a first step towards recognition of sex workers' human and labour rights and consideration of policies which promote, rather than prohibit, their safety and wellbeing.

Endnotes

- ¹ 'I am very grateful to the sex workers and project staff who participated in the two studies discussed here. I would also like to thank the two anonymous peer reviewers for their comments on earlier drafts of this article. The research on which this article draws was funded by the ESRC (grant no. ES/H012192/1). Access to interview data is restricted for reasons of confidentiality.'
- ² The studies received ethical approval from the University of Loughborough's Research Ethics Committee.
- ³ Terms often used to describe brothels in the UK.
- ⁴ A non-profit voluntary association of organisations working with sex workers.
- ⁵ Specialist projects worked only with sex workers, whereas non-specialist services included health and other generic services which included sex workers amongst their clientele. NHS ethical approval was obtained for NHS-based UKNSWP member projects. Given the relatively short timescale for the research, only non-NHS projects were approached outside the UKNSWP membership.
- ⁶ Using NVivo 9, a computer-assisted qualitative analysis program.
- ⁷ With the search parameter being those who had logged in during the past two weeks, giving a total of 11,056 individual female escort profiles, and 5,246 male profiles. [Site accessed 12/07/10].
- ⁸ The individual means for female, male and transgender workers were respectively: 100.21, 3.21 and 1.78 for street-based; and 170.43, 36.56 and 4.86 for indoor workers. The means were obtained through dividing the number of (unadjusted) service users by the number of projects providing data in each category.
- ⁹ That is, calculating the individual means by gender as a proportion of the separate combined means for street-based and indoor workers.
- ¹⁰ That is, multiplying the mean of 105.2 by 1.5 and 153 for street-based workers; and the mean of 211.8 by 1.9 and 153 for indoor workers, and combining the resulting two estimates.
- ¹¹ [Accessed 12/07/10]
- ¹² [Accessed 24/07/14]

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The changing landscape of Scottish responses to sex work: addressing violence against sex workers

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ABSTRACT: Sex work is currently a topical issue in Scotland, having being subject to various legislative and policy developments in recent times. These have included attempts to criminalise the purchase of sex and sauna raids, purported to reduce harm and provide protection to sex workers and communities. Within this paper, I draw upon findings from my Ph.D research that explores responses to violence associated with sex work in Scotland, using qualitative interviewing methods. These are used as a basis for examining the nature and extent to which Scottish legislative and policy responses to sex work have changed, with a particular focus on how this involves and relates to violence. Specifically, the paper considers the role relationship violence has within current Scottish legislative and policy responses to sex work: how violence is defined in law and policy and by individuals; understood and experienced by both sex workers and service providers; how they conceptualise violence as it applies to law and policy development, and perceive the implications of such developments. It is concluded that more continuities (related to ongoing stigmatisation and marginalisation of sex workers, and service provision issues in engaging with sex workers) than changes can be attributed to recent law and policymaking surrounding sex work in Scotland, resulting in a climate of violence-involving further stigma, exclusion and marginalisation for sex workers, as well as access challenges for service providers, which may contribute towards increased violence and issues of safety for sex workers. An approach, which takes account of a variety of sex worker perceptions and experiences of violence, is recommended, in order to sustain positive social and political change relating to sex work and sex workers.



KEYWORDS: Policy; Violence; Sex work; Scotland

With recent attempts to criminalise the purchase of sex (see *Criminalisation of the Purchase of Sex Scotland Bill 2*, Scottish Parliament, 2012), sauna raids amidst changes in entertainment licensing (McGowan, 2014)¹, and the dissolution of tolerance policies (Holmes, 2005, Matthews, 2005), sex work in Scotland has featured as an extremely topical and contested issue. In consideration of these factors, this paper aims to explore the issues of change and continuity. This is applied to law and policy responses to sex work in Scotland, with a particular focus on the role and relevance of violence within these responses. Sex work is the preferred terminology used within this paper. Prostitution and other terms related to sex work and violence however are also referred to, owing to their use and significance within law and policy documentation.

Violence may be considered a multi-faceted term, that involves various definitions, understandings and experiences for individuals. Applied to this research, violence may be understood in a physical, and/or emotional or other context (s). Similarly, individuals may vary in the extent to which, if any, they consider their own or others' experiences in or associated with sex work as violence, and as a result, respond differently to these experiences (for example, in choosing whether or not to access support services). These issues are considered within this paper, where differences in understandings and experiences of violence amongst sex workers and service providers, and the implications of such are highlighted.

When applied to sex work, such variations are particularly clear, with sex work dividing opinion, as to whether it constitutes violence against women (see MacKinnon, 1982; Jeffreys, 1997; Barry, 1995) or a freely chosen occupation (see Chapkis 1997; Nagle, 1997). While violence and other harms associated with sex work are largely subject to analyses, there tends to be limited focus on the realities of this. This may disregard or undermine different perspectives, particularly sex workers', leading to a lack of understanding in how they define violence, whether and how these definitions apply to their experiences of sex working, and how they respond to their experiences of violence, if any. More widely, this may impact by reducing

or limiting the voices of sex workers in policy debates that directly concern their working lives. This also applies to service providers who may provide support to sex workers for violence or other issues, and who are similarly not always widely represented in research. Further, in the case of Scotland, there is limited research output relating to this area, resulting in a gap in knowledge and understanding surrounding responses to violence and sex work. This would suggest a need for closer analysis of and research into this area.

This identified gap in knowledge surrounding Scottish responses to sex work (and violence within or associated with sex work), also provides the focus of this paper. Drawing upon findings from my Ph.D research into sex worker and service provider responses to violence associated with sex work in Scotland, this paper will explore some of the recent law and policy changes that have affected the sex industry and sex workers in Scotland, and in the wider UK context (note, that in places, UK prostitution policy is discussed in greater depth, owing to the wider range of and commentary related to English/Welsh prostitution laws and policies). These developments are critically examined in order to assess the ways and extent to which Scottish responses to sex work-in particular, sex work involving female sex workers and male clients, have changed. By way of contrast, other evidence is presented, highlighting continuities in responses to sex work in terms of prevailing social stereotyping and stigmatisation of sex workers, and support for legislation and policies that may be of detriment to sex workers.

In exploring how responses to sex work have both changed and/or remained similar, violence features as a key theme, taking into account the various definitions and experiences provided by participants. This includes understandings of physical forms of violence, as committed by clients or others, but more typically, refers to symbolic violence, i.e. non-visible forms of violence, or power forms that underpin and are reproduced by social structures or interactions (Bourdieu, 1992). This was largely represented by the resulting stigma, exclusion and displacement created by law and policy developments, which sex workers spoke of as potentially more violent and negative than actual physical acts of violence, as is later discussed. Violence is explored as an aspect and implication of recent changes in responses to the sex industry, by examining to what extent and how sex workers and service providers have defined and experienced violence, how these definitions and experiences relate to law and policy developments and how

the implications of these developments have been perceived by sex workers and service providers.

Current UK/Scottish sex work legislation and policy

It has been widely observed that prostitution in the UK (England and Wales) is not in itself illegal (Sanders et al. 2009; Phoenix, 1999; Hubbard, 2006; Kelly et al. undated). This also applies to Scotland. While related activities, including soliciting and brothel keeping associated can be criminalised in Scotland, exchanging sex for money is not illegal (The Law Society of Scotland, 2011; Scot-Pep, undated a; McMillan, 2010; Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2009). The development of law and policy responses has reflected this sense of ambiguity. On one hand, there has been apparent support for crime control through the implementation of laws, and related enforcement and sanctions, involving and focusing on the criminalisation of sex workers. This has been based on attempts to eliminate or reduce some of the problems thought to be associated with prostitution (largely outdoors). Moves have included anti-social behaviour orders-ASBOs, designed to curb nuisance, linked to street prostitution (Sager and Jones, 2001), and fining individuals for loitering or soliciting publicly for the purpose of prostitution (under the Civic Government Scotland Act, 1982). In another vein, there have been attempts to create informal and more tolerant provisions that enable outdoor sex workers to work without much police intervention, where sex workers are seen not to cause public complaint (Matthews, 2005). These include some formal and informal zones in non-residential locations that often run conjointly with support agencies, enabling minimal disruption to residents, and facilitating agencies' access to sex workers (Matthews, 2005).

These and other laws surrounding prostitution² have over time, served to represent state and public interests and preoccupations. These have ranged from concerns during the Victorian era over the medical and moral implications of prostitution, in light of increased venereal disease within the military and attempts to develop the state, as represented by the introduction of the Contagious Diseases Act in the 1860s (Weeks, 1981). More recently, concerns including increased trafficking of women (McKeganey, 2006, Kantola and Squires, 2004), public and political pressures over community disorder and safety (Sager and Jones, 2001,

Hubbard, 2006), and recognition of the vulnerabilities of some sex workers, such as early entry to sex work, drug use and violence and abuse within and out with sex work (see Matthews, 2005; Cusick et al. 2003; McKeganey and Barnard, 1996; Church et al. 2001; Bindel et al. 2012, Shannon et al. 2009), have signalled a new direction in the regulation of prostitution.

The perceived vulnerability of sex workers in particular can be seen to have informed current UK law and policy on prostitution, which now takes the position that prostitution is a form of commercial sexual exploitation that constitutes violence against women (Scottish Government, 2009, 2014). For the purposes of this paper, it is significant to note the use of such terms. This indicates an increasing focus on applying discourses of violence and victimology to sex work, and to the experiences of female and largely outdoor sex workers in particular. This would suggest the importance of violence in framing and defining current policymaking on prostitution. Similarly, it may also indicate the perceived associations of some sex worker populations with violence, and thus their inclusion within related policymaking, potentially serving to exclude the voices of other sex workers affected by violence.

Both the Home Office – *Paying the Price* (2004), *A Coordinated Prostitution Strategy* (2006) and Scottish Executive (Government) – *Being Outside: Constructing a response to Street Prostitution* (2004) documentation reflect this, sharing similarities including, curbing entry to prostitution, encouraging exiting options, the protection of communities, and the criminalisation of individuals (shifting the focus from sex workers) who abuse and exploit women through prostitution. Policy for England and Wales, as with Scotland has also increasingly emphasised the need for multi-agency working as part of their approach (Home Office, 2004/2006, Scottish Executive, 2004, ACPO, 2011), with a view to involving the combined efforts of several agencies in addressing the perceived needs of and issues affecting sex workers. This has been noted to be successful in some cases, such as the inter-agency working between the police and outreach agencies in Merseyside in tackling client violence against sex workers (Penfold et al. 2004).

While some aspects of this newer approach may suggest some positive change related to safety, for example, seeking to protect individuals abused through prostitution, particularly young people, and preventing entry and multi-agency support for individuals who wish to exit prostitution (Soothill and Sanders, 2004), it

has also been widely criticised. In relation to *Paying the Price* (Home Office, 2004), Cusick and Berney (2005) have highlighted shortcomings in its understanding of the safety needs of sex workers, which instead, appears to prioritise the interests of communities. Plans including sexual health checks, enhanced policing and the introduction of ASBOs were highlighted as ways in which sex workers could be displaced and potentially faced with dangerous and risky situations (Cusick and Berney, 2005). Brooks-Gordon (2006) has similarly addressed the proposed safety aspects of the related *A Coordinated Prostitution Strategy* (Home Office, 2006), noting the potential for sex workers to be exposed to greater risks due to the focus on curtailing 'kerb-crawling', providing sex workers with limited time in which to screen or assess safety with clients, and similarly, to ending managed, tolerance or safety zones, which if allowed to remain, could increase sex workers' safety (Brooks-Gordon, 2006).

Sanders (2009a) meanwhile has highlighted the fact that *A Coordinated Prostitution Strategy* (Home Office, 2006) demonstrates limited awareness and understanding of the diversity and choice that may be involved in sex work. Sanders (2009a) draws our attention to the matter of disruption to sex markets that would potentially be created by the *Strategy*, affecting both indoor and outdoor sex work. In failing to recognise individuals' choice to be involved in sex work, and existing positive, non-exploitative relations between indoor sex workers and managers, Sanders (2009a) suggests that there could be several negative implications. These include a lack of commitment amongst managers to operating safe, presentable, fair and legitimate venues, and reduced safety for sex workers through displacement, and reduced access to and engagement with the police or support services.

Violence against sex workers in Scotland

As indicated by the current and ongoing development of UK law and policy on the matter³, prostitution continues to be a matter of policy interest and focus. Although Scotland differs to some extent in its output of laws and policies relating to prostitution, for example, Scotland introduced measures to address 'kerb-crawling', or soliciting/loitering in order to buy sex, later than England and Wales⁴, it shares similarities with the rest of the UK. These include an increased focus on and approach towards prostitution, and related moves to target particular aspects of

prostitution, for example, the purchase of sex. This may be related to the growing influence of the Swedish approach to the regulation of prostitution. The purchase of sex here has been banned, but widely criticised for this, due to its inability to reduce prostitution as proposed and heightened danger for sex workers (see Levy, 2011/ 2013; Levy and Jakobsson, 2014; Jordan, 2012; Danna, 2012).

Similarly, as with other geographical contexts, violence against sex workers continues to exist in Scotland, which may to some degree, account for the focus within current policymaking on the protection of individuals involved in prostitution. Based on a three-city study covering Glasgow, Edinburgh and Leeds, Barnard (2005) found that both outdoor and indoor sex workers experienced violence by clients. Compared to indoor sex workers however, outdoor sex workers were found to experience higher rates of violence. Violence experienced by outdoor sex workers was also more likely to result in injury, involve different forms of assault, last longer and be subject to less intervention by others. Other Scottish research has similarly reported on the extent and varied nature of violence against sex workers (see McKeganey and Barnard, 1996; Church et al. 2001; Connell and Hart, 2003), finding it to occur in both indoor and outdoor sex work settings, and involving different sex worker populations and forms of violence. Aside from the physical violence documented within such research, it is important to recognise the existence of stigma, exclusion and marginalisation as forms of violence, that can create, reproduce and result in violence against sex workers. Morgan-Thomas (2009) makes the important assertion that zero tolerance policy approaches to sex work, far from increasing safety and reducing victimisation, serve to heighten the potential for violence, exploitation, and exclusion of both sex workers and clients, points that I explore later in relation to my own research.

The Criminalisation of the Purchase of Sex

As discussed, prostitution law and policy in Scotland shares some similar points of focus with comparable UK prostitution approaches. These include how prostitution has been framed, notably, associated with or involving harm and victimisation, which has been increasingly focused on the individual selling sex. This has resulted in growing Scottish policy interest and output, designed to redress the harms of prostitution, through various moves to criminalise and/or curb aspects of

sex work. The criminalisation of the purchase of sex provides one such example of this. Following approaches elsewhere, Scotland has recently attempted to amend its regulation of prostitution, with a focus on the criminalisation of the purchase of sex. In 2012, MSP Rhoda Grant, following an earlier proposal by MSP Trish Godman, where it was proposed that the purchase of sex be criminalised, initiated a consultation process.⁵ Positioned from the perspective that prostitution constitutes violence against women and is a form of sexual exploitation (currently the Scottish Government's position on the matter), Grant advanced that the proposed bill would:

[strengthen the work to] ... prevent and address commercial sexual exploitation in Scotland through criminalising those who engage in paid-for sex and those who pay for sex on behalf of someone else, with or without the knowledge of the person engaging in a paid-for sexual activity (Criminalisation of the Purchase of Sex (Scotland) Bill (2), Scottish Parliament, 2012:7)

Based on this, the bill set out aims around reducing the demand for prostitution by making it illegal to purchase sex, protecting the women involved, and addressing trafficking, where applicable (see Scottish Parliament, 2012). The overall aim of the bill was supported by a number of respondents to the consultation-758 'yes' responses that included faith and violence against women organisations. Amongst other issues, respondents in favour of the bill supported and highlighted the potential reduction in the continuity of prostitution (for example, Leith Links Community Council), changes in attitudes towards buying sex (for example, Amnesty International) and supporting individuals to exit prostitution (see Criminalisation of the Purchase of Sex Scotland Bill summary of consultation responses, undated: 17–18). Despite the support for the bill, results of the consultation also indicated some concerns, related to its aim and implications. As one example, sex workers' rights groups, including the English Collective of Prostitutes, challenged claims that the bill would lead to a reduction in the demand for/existence of prostitution. In addition the bill was criticised for not taking account of different perspectives on prostitution, notably, the view that prostitution can represent a legitimate form of work for some individuals, and related to this, the apparent lack of evidence (as to the harms and lack of choice linked to and within prostitution) that would

warrant a development in the law (see comments by the International Union of Sex workers in the Criminalisation of the Purchase of Sex Scotland Bill summary of consultation responses, undated). Relating to the theme of this paper, violence was also implicated or mentioned directly throughout the consultation paper, with several commentators expressing the view that the bill could compound or add to some of the existing issues and conditions faced by sex workers including: displacement, stigma and increased risk taking behaviours, that could result in, or link to violence (see Criminalisation of the Purchase of Sex Scotland Bill summary of consultation responses, undated: 19–20). While the bill was not eventually taken forward, the move towards criminalising the purchase of sex in Scotland could be viewed as an increasingly abolitionist approach, as with the approach in England and Wales (see Scoular and Carline, 2014). This seems to highlight the growing significance of abolitionary approaches in regulating prostitution, that while designed to protect sex workers, can actually serve to increase harms to sex workers, as indicated by the level and nature of criticism directed towards the proposed criminalisation of the purchase of sex.

Sauna raids

Recent raids of saunas in Edinburgh provide another example of an arguably, more punitive approach to prostitution. The raids were set against a background of both national policing changes⁶, and increasing moves towards a zero tolerance approach to prostitution in Edinburgh, as with the position of Glasgow. Unlike Glasgow's approach⁷, Edinburgh (as with Aberdeen) previously maintained a tolerance, or regulatory policy (Holmes, 2005). Up until 2001, when regeneration and demographic shifts were prompting change, Edinburgh operated a tolerance zone, or 'the Non-Harassment Zone, essentially a designated zone of discretionary prosecution by the Police' (Edinburgh City Council, 2003). Licensed saunas meanwhile appeared to be tolerated and operated with minimal intervention, an approach criticised for its leniency, but also welcomed for its management, which took into account the health needs of sex workers (Peterkin, 2013, see also Scot-Pep, undated c). With the formation of a single police force in Scotland – Police Scotland⁸, however, the situation has changed, with increasing calls for Edinburgh's City Council to withdraw from the existing system of licensing saunas. This

would effectively enable premises to run without a license, and curtail police freedoms to enter premises, in order to ensure compliance with licensing conditions (in future, warrants may be required for this purpose), instead, transferring powers to council trading standards. In response, a series of police raids ensued across the city's saunas, which were heralded as a sign of commitment to harm reduction and the protection of vulnerable individuals (Reynolds, 2013b, Miller, 2013).

As well as the immediate effects of the raids, the impact of these events, and moves towards further criminalisation of sex work, may be more far-reaching and negative than anticipated, particularly for the sex workers involved, as reflected upon in my own research. Media accounts have reported of the humiliation, confusion and shock experienced by sex workers, who encountered negative interactions with police entering the saunas during raids (BBC, 2013, Lazarus, 2013). Advocates of sex worker rights, including politicians and support and advocacy groups (see Urquhart, 2014, Scot-Pep, undated d) meanwhile, have stressed the harm of the raids, and de-licensing in general (Urquhart, 2014), as well as its links to the criminalisation of sex work.⁹ These related to the potential for raids to disperse and force workers to work under less safe conditions-on the street, and within an 'underground' context (Scot-Pep, undated c, Hutcheon, 2014). Sauna raids and related attempts at criminalisation of aspects of sex work have not however been confined to Scotland, with similar events and debate as to their harms occurring elsewhere in the UK and Europe. There have been recent raids on saunas and other sex work premises, notably in Soho, London, which involved a very public disruption of sex work environments, confiscation of items and money and consequently, the exposure of sex workers. These events were criticised again for their potential ability to force sex workers onto the streets and be placed in danger (Sex Worker Open University, 2013).

Outside of the UK, in Norway, under a model of criminalisation, it is argued that sex workers may be further exposed to exploitation. This is linked to sex workers having to work more under the management of pimps, and in less visible settings, as a result of increased dispersal of street prostitution (Fouche, 2007). Events, it is argued, may also strain existing relations with law enforcement. Sex workers may be less inclined to trust police or the justice system (Scot-Pep, undated d), report incidences of violence and abuse for fear of prosecution (see Sanders, 2009b), or access relevant support services (Scot-Pep, undated d). Where criminalisation or

other penalties are linked to reporting crimes or accessing support, this may lead to the increased exclusion of and heightened violence against sex workers. This has prompted suggestions that sex work should be decriminalised, and support services improved, in order to avoid such outcomes (see Scot-Pep, undated d).

In consideration of the existing legislation and policy, it appears that Scotland has been subject to a variety of changes in relation to responses to sex work, notably in attempts to criminalise clients and raids on saunas. Such changes have been discussed in largely positive terms, as ways of challenging the demand for prostitution, protecting vulnerable individuals and communities, and encouraging prevention and support for exiting strategies. Less consideration however, appears to have been directed towards the actual implications of these developments in law and policy, particularly the extent to which they represent actual, positive change for sex workers, or reproduce and add to violence and related harms, for example, stigma. More discussion, it would seem, is needed as to the lived impact and perceptions of sex work law and policy developments, with sex workers being a focus in such discussions.

Research methods and approach

My Ph.D has involved research with sex workers and service providers (comprising statutory and voluntary agencies) in exploring responses to violence associated with sex work in Scotland. It developed out of an observation that some aspects of sex work are more prominent and widely researched than others. Notably, it appeared that there was limited knowledge around Scottish responses to violence against sex workers, focusing on both the lived experiences of sex workers and agencies involved in the provision of support, particularly significant given the recent, contested developments in sex work law and policy. This related to the various experiences, interactions, challenges and misconceptions that may underpin and shape these responses. In terms of wider impact, I considered it significant to study this area to: widen the scope of knowledge and understanding on the topic, promote the concepts of social justice and empowerment, and enact positive social and/or political change for sex workers, including reduced stigma and discrimination surrounding sex work and acknowledgment of sex workers' rights.

During a nine-month fieldwork process, qualitative individual and focus group interviews were conducted, in person and via email, involving twenty-four participants – ten sex workers and fourteen service providers. All sex workers interviewed worked indoors, while the majority of service providers consulted, worked for voluntary and charitable agencies. Interviews were conducted in five Scottish cities: Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Inverness. Research access was negotiated via the different agencies working with/for sex workers. This helped to initially facilitate interviews with sex workers. A snowball sampling strategy also provided a means of access to participants, enabling me to interview more participants via an initial contact. Access to participants was however a particular challenge of this research, in terms of participant availability and/or willingness to take part, resulting in fewer responses than anticipated. Given the nature of the research, ethical considerations were of paramount importance throughout. Due attention and appropriate solutions were thus focused around issues including, participant harm, informed consent, power relations and researcher safety.

Throughout the research, participants were invited to share, amongst other points, how they would define violence against sex workers, and their views on the availability of support service provision. Participants' discussions, from both sex worker and some support provider perspectives, have indicated the diversity of opinion, amidst a changing social and political landscape on the issue of sex work, particularly, when it comes to the perceived positive impact of recent law and policy developments on sex workers' lives. Some responses, while acknowledging, or dismissing the good and/or bad intentions behind such moves, have indicated the lack of, or limits of change that recent developments have represented.

Although the research focused on various responses to sex worker violence, other than law and policy, this featured as an important and insightful part of discussions with participants. Most participants to some degree were aware of and commented on the main changes in responses to sex work, mostly criminalisation of the purchase of sex, and its potentially negative repercussions, represented by increased focus on sex work, and attempts to amend or update existing sex work laws and policies, for example:

'the only impact has been causing a lot of stress and anxiety over the possibility that it might actually pass ... I don't think it would do anything to reduce vio-

lence against sex workers' [in reference to the Criminalisation of the Purchase of Sex Scotland Bill].

'it would be hugely detrimental to the welfare of sex workers ... because it would drive the most needy, em further away from the support agencies that can help them'

Where changes were discussed, these were often discussed in negative terms, participants noting how law and policy developments had been or could potentially prove detrimental to their own and/or other sex workers' interests. From a sex worker perspective in particular, such changes were largely discredited, as demonstrated by the following comments:

'I don't feel protected in the saunas anyway. They do for now I suppose.'

'I feel like they [current laws and policies] do the complete opposite ... it's so unjust.'

This was related to a perception that these laws and policies, including criminalising clients and third parties, and not allowing sex workers to work together, could have very negative repercussions for sex workers, in addition to their managers, clients and families. Sex workers discussed that laws and policies, that often excluded their and/or clients' opinions could displace them, disrupt working schedules and environments, and make working conditions less safe. As a result, existing practices of stigmatisation and marginalisation could continue, as well as add to and compound the conditions in which sex workers face violence and other harms, consistent with other research (for example, Hubbard, 1997; Sanders, 2005; Pitcher and Wijers, 2014).

This may suggest that there are more continuities than changes in how sex work and sex workers are regarded, which has historically been tied to processes of medicalisation, stigma, criminalisation and social exclusion (see Walkowitz, 1980; Lombroso and Ferrero, 1895; Weeks, 1981; Sanders, 2006). In turn, this may have negative implications in terms of how much and what type of support is available for sex workers affected by violence. On this point, some sex workers

expressed that unless sex workers were prepared to engage with existing laws and support service provision, they could find themselves further excluded and denied the practical, emotional or other support they require. This point is similarly emphasised by Hubbard (2006, 2004), and Sanders (2005) in relation to increased policing and community enforcement procedures that have the potential to create, and contribute to the exclusion and/or displacement of sex workers, and reduce routines, support networks and access to services in the process (Sanders, 2005).

It was highlighted that sex workers who did not readily engage with a victim identity in relation to their involvement in sex work, often found the focus or treatment within service provision, centred around preventative or exiting measures inappropriate. Pitcher and Aris (2003) reported similar findings, from their research exploring an arrest referral scheme for outdoor sex workers, where sex workers were similarly found to be wary of engaging with service providers, due to their previous experiences of stigma or feeling judged. Contrary to a view that sex work is harmful, several sex workers discussed how they actively chose, and had positive experiences associated with their involvement in sex work. This diversity in experience, as one sex worker noted, was frequently not recognised by service providers, and thus accounted for why he may be deterred from approaching a formal support service:

‘not everybody is exploited, not everybody works through choice, not everybody loves to work, not everybody hates their work, it’s like there’s, there’s this huge spectrum em, and for me, any service that’s going to offer services to sex workers has to acknowledge that otherwise . . . it’s not a welcoming, welcoming space’

These and similar comments by other sex workers, many of whom did not engage with support services currently or previously, either because they did not require support, or did not favour the approach of services, suggested some stark differences in experiences between themselves as indoor sex workers, and outdoor sex workers. This raises important questions about the diversity of sex workers, frequently lacking within policymaking as Sanders (2007) has observed, and relatedly, the differing needs and issues they may or may not face. Experiences of violence and abuse within and out with the context of sex work have been widely linked to outdoor sex work (see Potterat et al. 1998, Pyett and Warr, 1999, Church et al. 2001), although experiences of violence in indoor sex work, often differentiated

from outdoor sex work according to the types and level of violence experienced, have been recorded (see Kinnell, 2008, Sanders, 2007).

The perhaps unintended consequence implicit from these commentaries is that sex workers are further harmed by measures designed to support them. Where sex workers, particularly indoor sex workers as with this research, do not appear to fit a victim narrative and do not wish to engage with services, that question or encourage that they cease their involvement in sex work, there is the potential for them to be excluded and not receive support when or if required:

‘I was like ... you guys are paid to ... you know support us when, you know, not trying to find the reason why we’re doing sex work ... so that’s the problem with like the whole victim thing, like you’re always trying to find the reason why ... for doing it’

Similar findings can be found in the work Levy and Jakobsson (2014) who have explored how Sweden’s abolitionist law and approach to sex work often impacts negatively on sex workers. Further, if sex workers are not seen to comply with certain laws, for example, on brothel keeping and working with other sex workers, they may face criminalisation, which may further add to the stigma surrounding sex work, and disrupt strategies and routines which make their working lives safer and easier, as some sex workers discussed:

‘being able to work with somebody else, that’s for me, that’s a huge ... weight off my mind that I’m not on my own with a client’

‘I really miss working with someone else ... of course for safety but also for socialising ... you are forced to work in isolation except from the customers you see’

Interestingly, when compared to other forms of violence and abuse, laws and policies were frequently cited more so and appeared to be considered harmful by participants (sex workers). The following interview excerpts are drawn from discussions in which sex workers reflect on the potential harms and dangers arising from current approaches to regulating and offering service provision around sex work in Scotland. These relate to for example, in the first case, as below, sex work-

ers being questioned and/or judged on their reasons for involvement in sex work within service provision, and the laws that make it illegal to work alongside other sex workers, creating issues of safety, lack of protection, and potential violence for sex workers as a result:

‘there is more some kind of like symbolical violence’

‘[the law] makes it ... not only difficult but dangerous.’

‘The current UK law and indeed local practices of law enforcement make me feel very unsafe working’

This was accompanied by many of the social attitudes surrounding sex work, for example, stigma which as some sex workers commented, were more damaging than sex work itself, corresponding with other research (see Gira-Grant, 2014, Pheterson, 1993), particularly where sex work is associated with or considered a form of violence. Participants referred to the influence of such attitudes in interactions with both service providers and family/friends:

‘I can go to my GP but I wouldn’t talk about sex work ... I like to feel comfortable and not judged’

‘Stigma makes it difficult for me to make friends outside my work environment’

To some, the fact that current legislation (and service provision) did not appear to protect, or support them, and could actually serve to further criminalise them (their clients, managers and families), was in itself seen as violence, and inherently more damaging to them than physical acts of violence:

‘I think these [laws relating to third parties] are actually, very, very harmful to sex workers, cause people don’t see them as directly criminalising sex workers, but ... they encourage you to have to take risks in your work’¹⁰

‘All organisations that describe my job as commercial sexual exploitation ob- justify me and exploit me to further their agenda ... they promote physical and emotional violence against me’

Therefore, participants seemed to identify little (positive) change in recent law and policy developments, and rather, associated these with increased state-endorsed, or legitimated violence – in the making of laws and policies and approaches in service provision that could ultimately serve to compound and add to existing stigma and exclusion. This was often discussed by participants more than their experiences of physical violence within sex work, several of whom cited no or little experience of this type of violence, suggesting the importance of wider, symbolic violence, as represented by laws and policies. One participant discusses this, as she understands violence, alongside other meanings:

‘kind of state-endorsed violence where you feel like you kind of need to work in ... a situation that could quite easily open up risks of violence, and for me, that is actually the state endorsing violence against sex workers’

Crucially, from the perspective of participants, working in the sex industry, it appeared important to include the voices of sex workers, in order to help develop and enact positive social and political change, in the form of legislation and policy making, that would directly respond to and be beneficial to the needs and interests of sex workers. This was linked to a perceived need to address sex workers’ rights – a movement which continues to develop (see Ditmore, 2010, Lopez-Embury and Sanders, 2009), both as it applied to working rights/choice to sex work, and to treating sex workers with the respect and fairness afforded to other victims of crime:

‘I would expect them to treat me with respect and dignity ... and in the same manner as they would treat any other victim of violence really’.

Sex workers’ rights moreover were viewed as often disregarded due to moral norms surrounding sex work, as one sex worker highlighted:

‘there’s a moral obligation there, or moral kind of judgement there, that people shouldn’t be selling sexual services, that sex workers aren’t entitled to those workers’ rights’

Service providers’ responses generally differed to some degree from the perspec-

tives of sex workers within the research, in terms of definitions and understandings related to risk and violence. Agencies interviewed were involved in providing a range of health, harm reduction and other services, predominantly to female and/or outdoor sex workers, with some providing drop-in facilities, appointments and/or outreach with service users. Where service providers had specific approaches to or understandings of violence against sex workers, or only provided some types of support this could be linked to several factors including, funding requirements (to engage with a particular policy approach), and experiences of working with particular sex worker populations, notably outdoor sex workers. As an example, while many sex workers discussed making an active decision in choosing to be involved in sex work, some service providers, who appeared to associate risk and/or disadvantage with sex work, perceived this differently:

‘it was a restricted choice [in service user choosing sex work]’

‘they’ve moved ... to escape the domestic abuse where they were forced into doing it [sex work] ... they go use substances and the only way that they can feed that habit is by doing sex work’

Service provider perspectives however, also reflected concerns related to changes, or potential changes in law and policy, although there was far less acknowledgement by service providers that law and policy could be a form of, or contribute towards violence against sex workers. This may reflect the contested nature of responses to sex worker violence; the divisions in opinion between sex workers and service providers, and the reasons for lack of sex worker engagement with service providers, particularly where it is perceived that some sex workers’ needs and interests, as a result of law and policy developments, are not adequately addressed or supported through current service provision.

On the matter of sex worker and agency relations, it was widely acknowledged by service providers that there were difficulties in engaging with sex workers. Some service providers noted that these challenges could be compounded by changes in law and policy, which could impact negatively by criminalising or further stigmatising sex workers, in turn, discouraging them to or removing them from access to service provision, and potentially increasing the risk (s) of experiencing violence and abuse:

‘it’ll be harder for us to reach them’

‘people would not access it as much, because they would be scared of being charged or criminalised’

This may suggest the significance of law and policy developments for some service providers as well as sex workers, in terms of the perceived negative implications arising from these, including violence.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the ways in which sex work in Scotland has increasingly become an area of focus within law and policymaking. Moves including the attempted criminalisation of the purchase of sex, sauna raids and increased rejection of prostitution tolerance policies have focused on amending the current regulation of sex work. As with the wider UK approach, the influence of issues such as trafficking and community safety may arguably have shaped Scotland’s position of late on sex work, with various related legislation having been enacted, of which there has been much focus on the perceived harms of sex work and need to protect and support vulnerable individuals. From this perspective, there may be considered to be some change in responses to sex work in Scotland, represented by attempts to more rigorously legislate and design policy making around sex work, that is increasingly centred on reducing the ‘harms’ and violence associated with sex work.

The extent to which these changes have been positive however, particularly in terms of representing positive changes in responses to sex work and the issues faced by sex workers are debatable. As findings drawn from my research suggest, there are perhaps more continuities than change in responses to sex work, particularly as it relates to the concept of violence. Examination of recent UK/Scottish laws and policies indicates the centrality of violence, implicated in some cases as a cause, feature and result of prostitution. Despite this little is known as to how violence is actually defined and experienced, if at all by sex workers and service providers, or whether other factors, including the law are in fact considered more impactful and damaging to sex workers than to any experiences of violence within sex work.

Based on sex workers' insights, recent developments in sex work law and policies seem more a reflection of attempts to further stigmatise and marginalise sex workers, rather than change. Sex workers have expressed that contrary to the intended outcomes of law and policy change, developments can be contradictory in form, and may not adequately represent the rights and diversity of opinions and experiences amongst sex workers, suggestive of limited change. While these may be designed around support and protection for sex workers, potentially, they can be detrimental in the long-term. This may create issues such as increased violence and lack of safety from displacement and exclusion, and reduced support where sex workers do not readily fit or accept a victim status, and are questioned or judged for their choice to be involved in sex work. Potential repercussions such as these were considered by some sex workers to be more violent and damaging than physical violence that could occur within the context of sex work. From a provider perspective, it was also clear that changes in law and policy could be detrimental. Where the risk of criminalisation and stigmatisation is posed, the challenge of accessing and engaging with potential service users may become even greater, compounding and/or adding to the conditions that perpetuate violence against sex workers.

It thus appears that continuities rather than changes represent recent developments in sex work law and policy in Scotland. These largely relate to continued stigma, marginalisation and exclusion of sex workers (particularly those that do not identify as a victim) through law and policymaking, but also pertain to prevailing challenges for services hoping to engage with and support sex workers, adding to a climate of violence in which sex workers are placed in further danger of violence, and away from relevant support if required. Based on this, my research findings would suggest that there is a need for greater consultation with and consideration of the voices and opinions of a variety of sex workers. This may present a necessary step in the right direction, in terms of acknowledging the diversity of sex workers, their experiences of violence, the implications of law and policy change, and the needs of different sex workers as a result. In turn this may help produce positive social and political change that serves to adequately represent and accommodate the rights and interests of a variety of sex workers.

Endnotes

- ¹ In Scotland, there have been recent plans to amend the Public Entertainment Licensing Resolution, ending the stipulation for health and fitness premises, including saunas and massage parlours to have a public entertainment license (Edinburgh City Council, 2014).
- ² Some of the prostitution legislation for England/Wales and Scotland include: Sexual Offences Act, 1956; Street Offences Act, 1959; Sexual Offences Act, 2003; Civic Government (Scotland) Act, 1982; Criminal Law Amendment (Scotland) Act, 1995; Prostitution Public Places (Scotland) Act, 2007; Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Act, 2010; Crime and Disorder Act, 1998, and Antisocial Behaviour (Scotland) Act, 2004, which cover amongst other activities, soliciting, loitering, kerb-crawling and serving of ASBOs. For more information see: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk>
- ³ There was a recent proposal to amend the Draft Modern Slavery Bill (2014) in order to criminalise clients. Northern Ireland has also recently passed a clause to criminalise the purchase of sex, under the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Bill (see Northern Ireland Assembly, 2014).
- ⁴ See The Prostitution (Public Places) (Scotland) Act (2007).
- ⁵ See Scot-Pep., (undated b).
- ⁶ The newly formed Police Scotland claimed to be adopting a predominantly 'Strathclyde' form of policing, involving more stop and searches, including raids on Edinburgh's saunas (Reynolds, 2013a, see also Gallagher, 2014).
- ⁷ Glasgow City Council's approach considers prostitution a form of sexual exploitation, and aims to eliminate or reduce harm to women involved, by advocating exiting strategies, challenging demand for prostitution and limiting the amount of women and girls entering prostitution (see Glasgow City Council, undated).
- ⁸ On 1 April 2013, Scotland's eight police forces merged to form one single force-Police Scotland. See The Economist (2013).
- ⁹ See Edinburgh University Student Association-EUSA (2014). In February 2014, the student council passed a motion in favour of supporting sex workers against the harms and implications created by criminalisation of sex work.
- ¹⁰ Levy (2011) examines the issue of how sex workers may still be subject to criminalisation, stigma and/or other disruptions to their lives in contexts where sex workers are apparently protected and safeguarded by the law (for example, under the sexköpslagen-law criminalising the purchase of sex in Sweden).

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Contested spaces: Exploring the intersections of migration, sex work and trafficking in South Africa

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ABSTRACT: This paper considers the discourses, practices and conditions that contribute to the multiple vulnerabilities faced by female migrants who sell sex in South Africa and, in turn questions the ways in which they negotiate and challenge these vulnerabilities. In Johannesburg, a city with the largest proportion of South Africa's migrants, female migrants who sell sex face a number of vulnerabilities due to the criminalised nature of their work and other factors such as irregular documentation status, fear of deportation and xenophobia, (Gould & Fick 2008; Richter 2012 *et al*). In addition, concerns around human trafficking in South Africa are seen to negatively impact upon attitudes towards sex work. Drawing from two research projects with migrants who sell sex in inner-city Johannesburg, this paper highlights the need for a more nuanced discussion around sex work and trafficking. While highlighting the distinctions between the two, we argue that it is necessary to recognise the multiple realities for women who sell sex; realities which seep out far beyond the popular discourses which label them as victims and which demonstrate that experiences of sex work can embody risk, hope, fear, enjoyment, violence and fulfilment.

KEYWORDS: Trafficking; Migrancy; Vulnerability

Sex work¹ deeply divides opinions in various social, political and academic spaces. In South Africa, under the Sexual Offences Act 23 of 1957 (last amended in 2007),



all aspects of sex work are criminalised² – including the buying and selling of sex, pimping and running of brothels. Research from South Africa indicates how criminalised responses to (‘foreign’) sex workers results in the intersection of increased multiple vulnerabilities, including gender-based and structural violence experienced in the form of police/client harassment and brutality; barriers to healthcare, HIV testing and treatment; anti-foreigner sentiments from service providers and, problematic access to documentation and socio-legal services (Vearey *et al.*, 2011; Richter *et al.*, 2012). In addition, pressure to address concerns on human trafficking in South Africa have led to the implementation of popular anti-trafficking efforts amongst Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and government institutions. This is despite the fact that what data does exist has been criticised by researchers and activists for methodological flaws. Moreover, their preoccupation with issues of immigration and sex work ignore less sensational aspects of labour exploitation that also fall under the anti-trafficking umbrella (Africa Check 2014).

Trafficking legislation also plays into wider global discourses around issues of migration and citizenship. Despite the increasing recognition of migration as a key driver for development (see UNDP 2009), globally, nation-states are tightening their management of cross-border migration, making it increasingly difficult for *some* non-nationals, especially for those engaged in informal, lower-skilled activities, to legally enter, reside and work within a country of which they do not hold citizenship. In South Africa, a progressive refugee act is undermined by increasingly restrictive and discriminatory immigration policies that prevent many migrants from gaining the necessary and appropriate documentation for legal residence in the country.

Pressure from the global anti-trafficking movement coupled with national immigration policies and anti-sex work legislation collectively places cross border migrants who sell sex at increased risk for exploitation and abuse. Therefore, while not disputing the seriousness of human trafficking as a crime, in this paper we argue that it is necessary to recognise the complexities and intersectionality that migrant women who sell sex in South Africa navigate in order to understand the impact on lived experiences. Furthermore, we argue that the field of migration studies has failed to explore the role of migrant women who sell sex as ‘transnational migrants, as members of diasporas, as entrepreneurial women, as flexible workers and as active agents participating in globalisation’ (Agustín 2006, 43). Thus, in line with a growing body of literature we suggest that in granting agency to

individuals who migrate and sell sex, migration for the sex industry can be viewed in terms of the expansion of life choices and livelihood strategies, travel experiences, as well as the vast structural pressures that push and pull women to become involved (see for example, Kempadoo & Doezema 1998; Busza 2004; Kapur 2005; Kempadoo 2005; Agustín 2006, 2007). Moreover, this kind of framework would not only be an important way of distinguishing women who are trafficked from those who have made the choice to enter the sex industry, but would also help in shifting the debate on sex work beyond the dichotomised and often moralised 'rescue or respect' discourses.

This paper draws from in-depth interviews and participatory research to the discourses, practices and conditions that contribute to the multiple vulnerabilities faced by female migrants who sell sex in South Africa. In turn, it considers the ways in which female migrants negotiate and challenge such vulnerabilities. The research for this paper was conducted in inner-city Johannesburg, specifically in Hillbrow and Yeoville³, two areas within the City with a well-known, long standing sex trade (Stadler & Delany 2006; Richter 2008). Throughout the paper we refer to 'female migrants who sell sex' rather than 'migrant sex workers' to reflect the multiple and intersectional spaces that exist for many women involved in the industry. As is explained in the next section, while some of the women in our research identified as sex workers, many did not. Rather, they described their entry into sex work as temporary and as a result of needing to meet immediate economic hardships. In this paper, we will thus explore the use (or not) of labels, and examine the ways participants' accept/reject socio-political terminology.

In the following section we present the methodologies that were used in the studies that informed and shaped this paper. Following the methods section, we briefly set out the context of migration, sex work, and trafficking in South Africa. Drawing on the narratives of female migrants who sell sex, we explore how their experiences of travelling to South Africa, of living in Johannesburg, and of selling sex challenge the common discourses used to discuss migrant women who sell sex. In particular, we argue how the absence of this group in academic and development literature not only ignores the complexities involved in understanding the intersections of migration, sex work, and trafficking but often pushes migrant sex workers into more marginalised spaces that further heightens their vulnerabilities. Thus we conclude by arguing that in order to tackle the problematic conflation of

sex work and trafficking, along with demands for the sensitisation of migration in South Africa, a more nuanced and textured understanding of migrant women who sell sex is necessary. This understanding looks less at the enactment of legislation and more at the lived experiences of female migrants who sell sex as a way to highlight the blurred boundaries and contested spaces that exist in their lives.

Methodology

The data presented in this paper is drawn from two research projects with migrants who sell sex.⁴ The first project focuses on the double vulnerabilities, including the impact of migration legislation, trafficking discourses and transnational networks on feelings of belonging amongst migrant sex workers in Johannesburg.⁵ In-depth interviews with ten female migrants who regularly sell sex were conducted with women from Zimbabwe and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Interviews were carried out monthly over a period of six months. They focused on exploring issues such as, home life and experiences of travelling to South Africa, negotiating life in Johannesburg, trajectories into selling sex, challenges and vulnerabilities faced, and opinions and personal thoughts around the sex work industry.

Recent studies on migrant sex workers in Johannesburg have mainly focused on inner-city Johannesburg, specifically in Hillbrow (Richter *et al* 2012; Stadler & Delany 2006; Wojcicki & Malala 2006) and have almost always included the help of Sisonke – South Africa's most prominent pro-sex worker advocacy organisation that is run by sex workers for sex workers.⁶ The main area of focus for this study was to explore sex work and migration broadly; however, the study also sought to explore the specific vulnerabilities faced by those who chose not to label themselves as sex workers and who do not align with the sex worker movement. Therefore, participants were recruited through a snowballing process. Whereby one contact connected the researcher with further contacts and so on. However, relying on a close circle of contacts revealed both limitations and challenges for this study. For example, while some participants arrived with hopes and expectations that the researcher might be able to offer support in finding work, with documentation and, addressing their financial difficulties etc. This meant that at times it was difficult for the researcher to maintain ethical boundaries, or to know where those boundaries lay. Such issues also reflect the specific context of South Africa where

there is little structural support available to women in marginal situations, and especially those who are selling sex.

In addition to the interviews with female migrants, the research also sought to unpack issues pertaining to trafficking with special attention paid to anti-trafficking efforts in South Africa. Interviews were conducted with government officials and agencies as well as NGOs focused on anti-trafficking as a way to understand how they conceptualise and understand migration and sex work, and to explore the types of data that they use to inform policy and practice.

The second project, entitled 'Volume 44' is a participatory photography project with migrant sex workers in South Africa⁷. The project focused on the under-represented voices of migrant men, women and transgender sex workers in South Africa. Building on previous participatory research conducted by the ACMS and Sisonke that has involved South African and foreign-born sex workers, the project aimed to explore the health, social, economic, security concerns, and experiences of individuals involved in the South African sex industry in order to inform research, legal reform and advocacy efforts surrounding sex work and migration in South Africa. Multimodal visual and narrative approaches, such as mapping, narrative writing, storytelling and group image review/critique were central to the workshop process. The project took place in two distinct Provinces in South Africa: Gauteng and Limpopo and a total of 19 participants (men, women and transgender persons) were involved.

Each project site (Johannesburg and Musina) consisted of three separate workshop phases. Each phase lasted an average of five days and took place over the course of six weeks. Upon completion of the participatory photo project, the researcher conducted two one-hour open-ended interviews with each of the participants. Interviews were guided by the stories that emerged from each individual during the workshops. Although participants appeared to share openly during the workshops, increased insights into representation and life stories surfaced more during the one on one interviews.

In contrast to the first project where snowballing was used as the primary technique for participant recruitment, Volume 44 participants were solicited by Sisonke staff and all of the participants were members of Sisonke. As members, they attend monthly meetings that focus on issues pertaining to the organisation and sex worker movement, receive human rights training and are offered a 'safe space' to

speak candidly about their experiences as sex workers. Although most members of Sisonke tend to identify as sex workers during Sisonke led initiatives, not all use the label of 'sex worker' when outside of this space of comfort. In fact, one of the central aims of Sisonke is to advocate for the decriminalisation of sex work in South Africa however, during one-on-one interviews some members appeared to be uneasy, concerned or unsupportive of the decriminalisation movement. Concerns ranging from increased visibility to distrust of the political system and internal dissonance relating to their own views of sex work as a legitimate form of work tended to be the main reasons for lack of support for decriminalisation. While all of the research participants in both of the studies acknowledge that they sell sex for money many, regardless of their affiliation (or not) with Sisonke state that it is a temporary strategy that supports immediate economic needs. These examples can be seen as a reflection of the internal stigma that mirror popular views on sex work and thus force many who are selling sex to hide the nature of their work. On the other hand, they can be seen as sentiments that reflect the complexity of being a migrant woman that sells sex in South Africa. Regardless of the specific reasons, what is nuanced here quite clearly is that the personal sentiments that surround the selling of sex do not fit neatly into global or local socio-political movements of pro/anti sex work policy. In fact, across both studies, participants voiced concerns of safety and well being for reasons that extended beyond the inherent risks of selling sex. Fears of deportation, gender-based violence, economic insecurity and xenophobia appeared to take precedence when participants spoke about issues of discrimination and abuse.

Given the criminalised nature of sex work and increased importance of anonymity, the participants in both research projects were given the option to remain anonymous. Participants were informed that they did not have to answer questions and could drop out of the research at any point.⁸ Informed consent was collected and participants were allowed to use a pseudonym. All of the participants were over the age of 18 and all had chosen to enter the sex industry. Interviews were conducted in private and held in a neutral space away from the participants home and work areas.⁹ Each participant was compensated for their time given in the research and any potential loss of earnings (with food vouchers ranging from R50–100 per session/day¹⁰). Interviews were held in English with translators available when necessary. Participants were also referred to local counselling, health and legal assistance organisations, if and when required.

The focus of this research has meant that we have encountered women who not only live in the 'hidden spaces' of the city (Vearey 2010), but as the paper will show, are also part of some of the most marginalised communities in Johannesburg. This meant that relationships of trust had to be built between the researchers, workshop facilitators and participants¹¹ Upon reflection, the use of multiple visual and narrative approaches in the Volume 44 project meant that it was easier to explore sensitive topics where participants are encouraged to reflect on individual and shared lived experiences in ways that traditional methodologies might not be able to offer. During the final phase of the participatory photo project participants were asked to share insights about the project. Countless stories revealing the benefits of storytelling as a tool for self-reflection were shared among the participants at both sites. However, one limitation of this study is that all of the participants were closely affiliated with the same organisation thereby, lacking diversity in experiences in relation to selling sex in South Africa

Migration and Sex Work in South Africa

The stories that emerged throughout the two research projects are generally not represented in discussions around sex work, migration and trafficking in South Africa. In fact, more often than not, the conflation of (migrant) sex work and trafficking means that the experiences of those who cross borders and sell sex are commonly misrepresented and turned into narratives of victimisation, exploitation, and as individuals who lack of autonomy. Increased stigma associated with being a non-national and labelled as a 'foreigner' also carries increased negative consequences for cross-border migrants in South Africa. High rates of gender-based violence and xenophobia¹² coupled with being engaged in sex work places female migrants in increased precarious positions.

In South Africa, popular misconceptions among some policy makers and the general South African populace is that the country, and Johannesburg (located in the Gauteng Province) in particular, is over-saturated with cross-border migrants. However, data shows that South Africa's cross border migrant population, which makes up 3.3 percent of the national population, aligns with global trends (Statistics South Africa, Census 2011). Johannesburg, hosts the largest percentage of South Africa's migrant population – yet still only 7.4 per cent of the population is comprised of non-nationals (ibid.). Alongside the misconceptions over the num-

bers of migrants in South Africa is the lack of understanding in regards to the term 'migrant'. From South African policy debates to civil society initiatives, 'migrant' is mainly used to describe non-nationals thus failing to recognise that many 'migrants' in the country have moved within the country, often from rural to urban centres (known as internal migrants). In a South African context the internal xenophobia used in language to describe 'others' perpetuates deeply rooted notions of belonging and simultaneous scapegoating of the 'unfamiliar'. In our research anti-foreigner sentiments have surfaced on a number of occasions. Sku, a middle-aged woman from Zimbabwe and member of Sisonke for example highlighted the complexity of being a non-national during an interview:

It's too hard to trust South Africans. Me, I am friends with so many ladies in the business. Some are South African and some are not. I can be in a meeting with South African sex workers and I think that they like me but in the business that woman can call me a foreigner if she thinks that I am making too much business. How is this? If we don't love one another who will love us? Like her, I am a sex worker and do this business for my family. Why do we hate one another? They [South African sex workers] say that we Zimbabweans come here to take their money. They say that we charge less than them and that it why we make money but this is not true. Some men prefer women from other countries because we do not steal. But I don't get involved. For me it's about my children. But, it is too hard to make friends here with the South Africans.

Christa, a young woman from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) living in Johannesburg also described her experience of giving birth to her son at a hospital where the nurses slapped her and referred to her as "*kwerekwere*"¹³ while she was in labor; '[T]hey told the staff not to give food to me and another lady who was from Nigeria and said that food was not for foreigners'. Christa also experienced having her rent doubled simply because she was a non-national and not receiving payment for work she had done at a café because the owner knew she was a foreigner thus had limited legal access to file a complaint.

International and local research indicates that many urban migrants – especially undocumented migrants – choose to engage in informal livelihood strategies, including sex work (For example, Busza 2004; Agustín 2005, 2007; Richter *et al.*, 2012; Vearey *et al.*, 2011). Migrants may enter a city, look for various ways to es-

establish a livelihood to support themselves and their dependents 'back home' and find that informal sector employment is more accessible than that in the formal sector (for example, see Richter *et al.*, 2012). Although sex work is considered an informal livelihood strategy, the criminalisation of sex work alongside the attention of trafficking means that migrants selling sex are not considered as contributors in the areas of work and livelihood; rather they are framed as deviants, criminals and/or victims.

While the exact number of sex workers in South Africa as a whole is unknown, the growing body of research on migrant sex workers in South Africa indicates that the largest percentages of sex workers are either internal or cross-border migrants. In a study conducted in 2010 across four sites in South Africa – Cape Town, Sandton (northern Johannesburg), Hillbrow (inner-city Johannesburg), and Rustenburg (outskirts of Johannesburg) – Hillbrow showed the highest percentage of migrants with 51.9 percent of sex workers surveyed as cross-border migrants (Richter *et al.*, 2012). This study further indicated that migrant sex workers report less frequent condom use and face increased difficulties in accessing healthcare services. Research also shows that cross-border migrant women selling sex are normally heads of households supporting an average of five persons.

The combination of being a migrant, a woman and sex worker also places migrant women selling sex at increased risks ranging from human rights violations, including police abuse, arrest, detainment, deportation, discrimination, access to health care and other support services, to xenophobic violence and death. These multiple risks are described in the account given by Chantel, a Zimbabwean sex worker who shared a story about her friend that was attacked by a South African man during her participation in the photo project:

My friend is from Zim and she was going home late at night when a man drove towards her to ask for business. She agreed even though she was tired. When she get into his car he ask her if she is Zimbabwean. Then she know that he is looking for trouble because he is saying that Zimbabwean women are giving bad messages to South African women. Then she try to jump out of the car and when she did he reversed the car and ran over her. Then he got out of the car and beat her up. He left her there thinking that she was dead. My friend is alive thank God but she suffered too many injuries and then could not work for her children for many months.

Such vulnerabilities may explain, in part why many of the women in our research were unwilling to label themselves as sex worker, preferring instead to highlight the selling of sex as something they do as a result of economic demands and pressure. Thus while sex work is broadly defined as the exchange of money for sexual acts, our research has revealed that sex is also sold as part of a transaction for food, accommodation, school fees for children, etc. According to Teresa, a participant in the photography project who works full time as a hairdresser and engages in sex work occasionally:

I sell sex when I need to. Sometimes I don't make enough money from when I work on hair so I need to sell sex. Sometimes I go to the streets and other times I call someone that I know. I call him to come over for a visit and when he is at my house I tell him that my child school fees or something else that I need but that I don't have the money. This person will pay the school fees or buy me food or whatever and I end up having sex with him because there is a cost to everything and this is how I can repay him.

While highlighting the diversity of experiences and interpretations of sex work, the comment by Teresa above also underlines the importance of seeing women in this context as migrants and entrepreneurs rather than 'sex workers'. A migration framework would thus allow consideration of all conceivable aspects of women's lives and travels – rather than categorising women who sell sex within a label that they may not identify with, and which does little to speak to the depth of their experiences as human beings.

Trafficking discourse and anti-trafficking measures in South Africa

As previously noted, the absence of women who migrate and sell sex from migration studies can also be attributed to the attention given to human trafficking both globally and within South Africa specifically. The perception that commercial sex is connected to organised crime and irregular migration not only means that the trafficking discourse fails to distinguish those who have been trafficked from those who chose to work in the sex industry (even when done so through lack of op-

tions), but equally does little to address the many levels of exploitation and abuse experienced by women who sell sex. Despite attempts by sex worker organisations and movements such as Sweat and Sisonke, as well as researchers and academics in South Africa to highlight the unhelpful and indeed dangerous conflation of sex work with trafficking, trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation has continued to capture the attention of the state, media and civil society (see Gould 2011). In this following section we offer a brief overview of some of the trafficking discourse and literature to consider how it has shaped policy and practice in South Africa and in particular how organisations focused on anti-trafficking have framed and (mis)represented the experiences of migrant women selling sex. At this point we acknowledge that there exists a diverse literature on trafficking that we are not engaging in; however, due to the scope of this paper we have summarised the main arguments that we feel are most pertinent to our discussion.

The definition of human trafficking contained in the Palermo Protocol¹⁴ refers to:

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation (United Nations 2001).

From 2005–2009 South Africa was placed on the US Department of State's Tier-2 watch list reflecting a belief that the country had a serious trafficking problem that was not being adequately tackled (see Gould 2011). These concerns were also shared by state institutions, inter-governmental organisations and some NGO's based in South Africa. At the time, and still today, there is no concrete explanation or proof that could substantiate the distress expressed by international and national bodies about the so called problem of trafficking in South Africa. However, as a result of global pressure, primarily from the USA, and South Africa's obligations as a signatory of the Palermo Protocol, legislation against trafficking was developed and encapsulated in the Prevention and Combating of Trafficking in Persons (TiP) Bill. The Bill was first published in 2010 and, at a speed far greater than

any other bills to be passed in South Africa and passed as law by the President in July 2013. The rapid development is seen by many as a signalling to the pressure placed on South Africa around the trafficking issue.¹⁵

The so-called 'moral panic' (see Bonthuys 2012) in the run up to the 2010 World Cup in South Africa is not only a good example of the power of trafficking hysteria based on unsubstantiated claims, but also illustrates how such discourse can lead to greater risks and vulnerabilities for sex workers. Prior to the event, claims that the mass trafficking of foreign women and children to satisfy the demand for cheap sex supposedly generated by large-scale sporting events, were peddled by the media and through large-scale anti-trafficking campaigns (Bonthuys 2012). Bonthuys points out that these claims (which were not unique to the 2010 World Cup) have never been substantiated. Moreover, while purporting to focus on the well-being of trafficked sex workers, they instead provided a justification for the harassment and punishment of sex workers in Cape Town (ibid). Bonthuys, for example, notes the tendency of law enforcement agencies to arrest and 'profile' sex workers in Cape Town, an observation consistent with other reports, which highlighted the increased harassment by police and reduction of clients during the world cup (Richter *et al.*, 2012).

Despite the numerous media reports and the involvement of many International and local NGOs with anti-trafficking programmes, research around issues of trafficking in South Africa is scarce and there is little reliable data to back up the claims of numbers being trafficked. The data that was used for the creation of the TiP Bill for example has been exposed as being acquired through methodologically unsound ways – often failing to differentiate between people who have been smuggled and those who have been trafficked (Gould & Fick 2008; Gould, Richter, & Palmary 2010; Richter & Luchters 2012). Gould and Fick's study *Selling Sex in Cape Town* (2008), which set out to identify victims of trafficking found very little evidence that trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation took place. In fact, by the end of the study they could only identify two people who 'may have been trafficked in the past' (ibid, 144). Their study revealed that most sex workers that they interviewed had entered the sex industry for reasons of financial opportunity and economic need; reasons we argue that appear similar to the explanations given by most people, perhaps with the exception of those whom are independently wealthy, to describe why they work. Although individuals in the informal sector

may experience increased desires for more formal work opportunities, we believe that most people, regardless of career choice, would explain the act of working as necessary to their survival. In the next section we look more closely at the notion of survival, in relation to our research participant's experiences, however, the point to be highlighted here is that amongst research with migrant women who sell sex, very little evidence of trafficking has been identified.

We argue that the debates and discussions taking place globally, and specifically in South Africa, are being largely influenced by popular anti-trafficking campaigns rather than by substantial robust methodologically sound data. However, these debates are shaping policies that not only ignore these multiple realities of why women migrate to sell sex. Rather, they appear to conveniently assume that a migrant woman involved in sex work has been trafficked. This position requires us to delve deeper and examine the wider context in which human trafficking can be viewed as a popular global project drawing on larger post colonialist discourses around the securitisation of nation-states, concerns around movement across borders, women's bodies, and a criminal underworld. Most importantly, it pulls directly on moral sentiments and the need to save female 'victims' not only from male perpetrators, but also from themselves, which can be seen clearly in the language of organisations focused on anti-trafficking and sex work in South Africa.

As many scholars have commented, current debates around the trafficking of women for sexual slavery cannot be divorced from the moral panic around the white slavery scene¹⁶ in nineteenth century and past colonial frameworks which allowed the Western elite to feel like they were 'saving' poor, oppressed and victimised 'others', particularly women (see for example; Kempadoo & Doezema 1998; Doezema 2000; Soderlund 2005; Saunders 2005; Kempadoo 2005; Agustín 2007; Bernstein 2010; Doezema 2010, Weitzer 2010). The present day 'rescue industry' is also in line with the abolitionist feminist approaches which maintains that 'prostitution' is an extreme form of gendered violence discrimination and that it is 'inherently violative of women's bodily integrity regardless of consent or choice' (Peach 2008, 237; see also Barry 1995). In opposition, 'reformists' and sex worker activists argue that sex work is work and thus a legitimate form of labour – shifting the debate towards one of questions of labour, migration and sexual freedom.¹⁷ However, as Bernstein (2010) has pointed out, by presenting their argument within a human rights discourse, abolitionist feminists have effectively 'neu-

tralised' this domain of political struggle with little attention paid to sex workers and migrants' rights (see also Kempadoo & Doezema 1998; Chapkis 2005, Agustín 2007). Instead we find the focus is brought back to ideas of women's 'purity' and normative ideas of women's role in the home and sexual relations. Palmary (2010) for example asserts that a migrant woman's distance from home has been considered 'the source of women's vulnerability' and thus often used to justify anti-sex work and trafficking measures (p.51). These notions about a woman's place in the home, argues Palmary, not only relate to migrant women as being 'othered' but also to moralistic ideas about sex work, which are especially prevalent in South Africa.

Our research for example has shown that the language used by anti-trafficking organisations clearly construct a picture of women as *victims, trapped* by circumstances, *forced* into *prostitution* and in doing so lack in self-respect and dignity. Organisations such as Embrace Dignity (Cape Town based), the Salvation Army and The New Life Centre in Yeoville (Johannesburg) draw on moralistic notions that sex work is 'immoral' and therefore their task is to rescue women involved in sex work in order to help them restore their dignity by finding alternative and moral work (see Schuler 2013). Embrace Dignity, one of the most prominent NGOs in South Africa notes, 'Prostitution is the oldest *oppression*. Not the oldest profession'. While claims around prostitution as being the 'oldest profession' seems unnecessary when seeking to explain the choice to work in the sex industry and/or to support the selling of sex as a viable work option this perspective is clearly in line with the aforementioned abolitionist stance and enables the collapse of any distinction between those who are forced into sex work and those who make a choice. As a social worker based at women's shelter also explained to us;

These women get fooled. They are young and told they can come to Johannesburg for work. When they get here there is prostitution and they have no other choices ... it is our job to get them away and help them see there is something else. It is not good that they do this.

While the use of the term 'these women' creates a level of distance in order to moralise and judge it also implies a subject that, in this case, is seen in need of rescuing and saving. The Salvation Army, who run a large anti-trafficking awareness programme reflect this view quite clearly in noting;

[O]f the hundreds we have related in recent years, all but a handful say they would prefer to exit if there were meaningful, attainable alternatives. Those we meet sell sex in order to survive—to eat, to live or to sustain an addiction.

While it is largely true of the women that we spoke with that selling sex is a means to survive, feed their families and support themselves, none of the women indicated that they were forced into sex work or that they had been trafficked into the country. Furthermore, the anti-trafficking programmes not only do little to recognise their experiences, but compound the vulnerabilities and risks that they face by increasing the stigmatisation of what they did.

More than just a sex worker

However, beyond the debate around choice and (mis)representation of migrant women who sell sex, are the experiences and feelings described by many of the women we spoke with that revealed a level of internal dissonance regarding the legitimacy of selling sex as work. These findings indicate a divergence away from anti or pro sex work ‘hardline’ stances. In this last section we draw more specifically on some of the experiences of travel and of selling sex for migrant women in Johannesburg to illustrate the extent of the reality of women’s multiple subjectivities and personal agency within the wider context of social, economic and personal factors (also see examples by Kempadoo 1998; Buzsa 2004 and Sandy 2006).

Miriam’s experiences of travelling to South Africa and becoming involved in sex work highlight some of the difficulties faced by those who cross borders, engage in sex work and yet do not fit with the dichotomised debates that shape their experiences and representation. Miriam first arrived in South Africa from the DRC in 2010. She had decided to leave after failing to find work to support her family of five younger brothers, her mother, and her two young children who were two and five years old at the time when she left. She notes,

I left DRC in 2010 ... I ran away at 16 years to find money. So then I started to get money for sex. I was 17 when I had my first child. Then when the child was 4 years – the same situation. Went out for work – another child. That child died – Muti¹⁸ made him sick. My father’s family gave some money but it was not much. I needed to travel so I left – no family there. I found one driver and he sent me

to Zambia. Then from there I came to South Africa. To get to Musina¹⁹ I gave the driver sex.

Miriam had already begun sex work in The DRC as a way of providing for her family; however, she hoped that she could find a modeling job to earn some money once she arrived in Johannesburg.

[I]n DRC people said Joburg is nice, there is money – they tell me they like slim bodies there so I will get money. But when I come here – it's not like that. I came no English – one friend from South Africa she told me English words. She taught me ... She helped me to learn English and I told her I wanted to model. She went with me to a modeling agency. They were keen but they wanted English speaking and R1000.00. Then I decided to do the work again as I needed money. I had to pay rent.

Miriam's story demonstrates how sex work became a viable option for her in the face of other very limited choices and the need to survive in the city. Like many of the migrant women we spoke with, Miriam made a choice about coming to Johannesburg. It was not an easy choice, nor was it made in light of many other options. However, it was still a choice based on what seemed like the best way out of a desperate situation. Amongst the majority of our research participants the selling of sex appeared to be the best option amongst limited options and similar to other professions, many women stated that if offered a better paying job they would not work in the sex industry full time.

One of the most prominent views expressed was that the sex industry allowed a level of independence and flexibility in terms of time, which is very important for women with young children to support and whom cannot afford childcare. It also did not require a work permit or documentation. Some of the participants could not read or write in English, which rendered the chances of finding formal employment very slim. Christa for example stated,

I started at 18 with my sister. It was my step-mum's sister who told me to stop asking for money and to earn my own. I went to [a] club and picked up a man and it started from there. My sister did the same thing – but she got HIV. I got

pregnant. I want to do something else like beauty or something but how to pay for training and who will look after my child?

The Salvation Army addresses their judgment of sex work as immoral by offering the women who stay at their shelters training in domestic work, sewing and childcare. While for some, these occupations may be preferable, for the majority of the women these options are not suitable for their economic demands. As Kholi stated,

I tried working as a domestic when I arrived in South Africa but the earnings were too little and I could not support my children or send them to private school. For me, it is important that my kids have more opportunities than I had and the only way that I can do this is if I make money to send them to school and pay for their basic needs.

While most of the research participants would not claim sex work as their dream profession, they certainly did not need 'rescuing'. Moreover, if sex work were positioned along the same axis as a socially 'acceptable' – and protected – viable employment option as other work, sex workers who were offered employment for higher paying opportunities would be seen as individuals moving up a socio-economic ladder rather than as people escaping an immoral occupation.

Overall, our research revealed that there is a huge diversity in the experiences of those who travel and sell sex and much of this is also related to experiences of belonging and exclusion in the city of Johannesburg. Most of the women we spoke with for example saw their time in Johannesburg as temporary, partly reflecting the difficulties they felt in making South Africa their home and being accepted. It has been noted that notions of temporality, liminality or transience are often closely associated with the experience of migrants in Johannesburg (see Madsen 2004; Landau 2006). In Kihato's acclaimed work with migrant women in Johannesburg, she highlights the transitional aspect of cross-border migrant's lives – most of whom she claims do not intend to stay in the city – by stating, 'migrants live on as if suspended in society, aspiring for life elsewhere' (2013, 8). While amongst our participants there was very little nostalgia for 'going back home' most planned to move 'somewhere else'. Miriam's plans were to go to France where she hoped to become a model and make more money for the children she left behind in DRC. Christa wanted to go 'somewhere else – maybe America' while Patricia stated that

she would find a country where she could feel safe and get a good job. Yet while most of the women shared feelings of temporariness in Johannesburg, they simultaneously talked in a way that suggested they had settled in Johannesburg. In this way, we see a link to Kihato's description of migrant women as 'aspiring to be elsewhere geographically, socially and economically, while remaining bound by their circumstances in Johannesburg' (ibid, 16).

The notion of temporariness also seemed to be a way for the women to say that what they were doing was OK. Having made it clear that their work was disapproved of by their families and those around them, the women fought to justify their work to themselves and to us 'It's just for the moment', Miriam stated, 'My family needs money and I have to send it. – how can I do without working?' She went on 'this is for my children so they don't have to be like me. My daughter will be a model like I wanted to do. This [sex work] is not a nice thing for her to do. She won't do it'.

Thus feelings of ambivalence regarding the legitimacy of their work revealed an internal dissonance that did not always align with anti or pro sex work 'hard-line' stances. While many of the women we spoke with were comfortable with being sex workers, the choice to use the label was often met with some resistance or was used in moments of convenience, such as during a Sisonke meeting. Perhaps participants internalised the stigma around selling sex or perhaps the term 'sex worker' felt static and limited rather than liberating and empowered as many self-identified 'sex workers' proclaim when using the label 'sex worker'. As Sbu stated,

'I am more than a sex worker. I am a mother, daughter, sister and friend. I use it sometimes, when it is necessary. Like, when I go with Sisonke to a court hearing about an abuse on sex workers but I don't see myself as a sex worker. I am a woman from Zimbabwe that sells sex for her family to eat'.

In a context where as we have already noted many migrant women who sell sex are categorised as victims of trafficking and as women who do not make choices, the voices of women like Sbu demonstrate their awareness, agency but also crucially, their ambivalence, are not heard. Such voices become silenced by the moral outrage that accompanies much of the discourse around sex work and trafficking; by beliefs around the idea of women who make journeys; bodies that travel, that cross borders and, bodies that are viewed as being out of place – of not belonging. However, more than this is the fact that the multiple identities as expressed by Sbu, and others such as Miriam and Christa – as a mother, daughter, sister, etc,

are eclipsed by the sex work, trafficking and migration debate which tend to allow categories and labels to frame the discussion, rather than allow for such diverse and layered experiences to set the agenda for how we might start to explore the lives of migrant women who sell sex.

Conclusion

The stories that have emerged over the course of our research reflect tragedy, hope, pain, loss as well as opportunity and independence. While the reality is that in South Africa selling sex remains extremely risky, this risk was not due to sex work *per se*, but because of the state of illegality for sex workers. Choice, alongside danger is often highlighted as a reason why sex work is an undesirable if not immoral profession; however, as illustrated by the experiences recounted in this paper, while danger is most often created by the marginalisation of those who sell sex rather than the work itself, the issue of choice is far more ambiguous than is often portrayed. Given that danger and lack of choice are not unique to sex work, and that lived experiences are far more complicated than simple narratives of victims and survivors, there is a need to ask a new set of questions. These questions demand a shift away from the binary debates that focus on whether sex work is right or wrong, moral or immoral, or whether sex workers must be rescued or respected. They need to be replaced – we argue – with a focus on the dynamic and multidimensional lived experiences of what it means to be a migrant woman seeking to support her family; what it means to negotiate space, opportunity, family, pride and dreams. Our research clearly indicates the complexity of socio-political, emotional and spiritual terrains that migrant women navigate in their daily lives. For many, remaining ‘hidden’ and even not-belonging is a conscious tactic that supports their temporal choices; whereas, others choose to live out more public representations of their identities. Regardless, what is evident through the stories shared with us is how preconceived notions of ‘others’ spill out beyond the tight boundaries set by the dichotomous debates, and furthermore heightens the many vulnerabilities that migrants and sex workers already face due to their work and status as non-nationals.

There is also a clear need for more awareness of both the intersections, and most importantly, the distinctiveness of migration, sex work and trafficking. As we

have shown, victims of trafficking in South Africa are rarely distinguished from migrants who have chosen to travel and to sell sex. Anti-trafficking measures push for the rescue of all those involved in the sex industry regardless of agency and choice. This not only violates the human rights of migrants who sell sex, but reduces the available space for them to speak their minds, to offer their opinions, and to challenge the misrepresentations of their lives and work. Finally, our research demonstrates that in order to tackle the problematic conflation of sex work and trafficking along with demands for the sensitisation of migration in South Africa, we should look less to the enactment of legislation as such and more to the everyday lived experiences of migrants and of sex workers to highlight the blurred boundaries and contested spaces that exist.

Endnotes

- ¹ In this paper we use the following definition of sex work as developed during a UNAIDS workshop in 2000: 'Sex work is any agreement between two or more persons in which the objective is exclusively limited to the sexual act and ends with that, and which involves preliminary negotiations for a price' (UNAIDS 2000 in Richter *et al.* 2011, 10). We also use the term sex worker rather than 'prostitute' to refer to those who identify as working in the sex industry in a non-stigmatising way conveying the professionalism of sex work.
- ² See: Sexual Offences Act 23 of 1957: <http://www.justice.gov.za/legislation/acts/1957-023.pdf>
- ³ Hillbrow and Yeoville, are two of the most densely populated inner-city Johannesburg suburbs in South Africa, and are home to a diverse migrant community including non-nationals from across the continent, and South Africans from other provinces.
- ⁴ The studies were based at the ACMS (African Center for Migration and Society) at the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. ACMS is an independent, interdisciplinary and internationally engaged Africa-based centre of excellence for research and teaching that shapes global discourse on human mobility, development, and social transformation (see: www.migration.org.za).
- ⁵ Funded by the WOTRO's 'Migration, Development and Conflict' programme the research is part of a larger project that draws on data from South Africa and the Netherlands.
- ⁶ Sisonke is funded by the Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT) see: www.sweat.org.za or www.africansexworkeralliance.org.
- ⁷ <http://www.migration.org.za/page/about-vol44/move>
- ⁸ Data is kept in a locked facility and on a password secured computer. A code system has been applied so as to minimize the risk of identity disclosure.
- ⁹ Ethics approval was ascertained for both research projects via the University of Witwa-

tersrand Human Research Ethics Committee (project 1: protocol no: H140212; project 2: H130644).

- ¹⁰ Approximately £3–6.
- ¹¹ While this paper focuses on the experiences of migrant women sex workers over the age of 18 years, it is also important to remain cognisant of the need to highlight the lives of those who remain almost entirely absent from research with sex workers – men, transgender persons and persons under the age of 18 that are involved in the sex industry.
- ¹² It is well documented that South Africa has one of the highest rates of gender-based violence (GBV) in the world. In 2009 the female homicide rate was five times the global rate (Abrahams *et al.*, 2013) and the national intimate partner violence homicide rate was more than twice that of the United States (Abrahams *et al.*, 2009).
- ¹³ A negative term commonly used to denote non-nationals in South Africa
- ¹⁴ Trafficking is defined in the United Nation's 2001 Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (also known as the Palermo Protocol).
- ¹⁵ Despite the fact that the bill is currently stalled, pending the finalisation of TiP directives and regulations by the various departments involved, anti-trafficking measures continue to be implemented widely in South Africa by NGOs and other organisations (see Hornberger & Yaso 2012).
- ¹⁶ Doezema (2000) describes the white slavery scene in terms of a so-called phenomenon first reported by the media in London in which 'innocent' white women and girls were forced, against their will, into prostitution. While the discourse itself was never monolithic, with some suggesting that white slavery involved all prostitution, and others focusing on the role of foreign men in kidnapping and selling white women and girls the key issue was the way in which ideas of white slavery became synonymous with white women and girls being 'forced' by 'evil' traffickers into prostitution (see also: Walkowitz 1980; Rosen 1982; Bristow 1982; Corbin 1990; Guy 1991).
- ¹⁷ Acknowledging that some women are forced into selling sex, reformists have also drawn a distinction between forced and voluntary sex work. However, critics of this approach have argued that this dichotomy creates a guilty/innocent division that reproduces the whore/Madonna division within the category of the prostitute (see Doezema 1998: 47).
- ¹⁸ Muti is a term used for traditional medicine in South Africa.
- ¹⁹ Musina is the northernmost town in the Limpopo province of South Africa. Bordering Zimbabwe it is the first arrival point of most migrants entering South Africa.

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The 'Rescue Industry': The blurred line between help and hindrance

Laura Connelly

Touted by some as '*the* human rights issue of the twenty-first century' (Lee and Lewis, 2003: 170) and 'the world's fastest growing global crime' (Stop the Traffik, 2015), human trafficking has climbed the political agenda at an unprecedented rate to become a global priority. Of all the types of human trafficking, none have quite commanded the same levels of moral outrage as sex trafficking. It is no longer confined to the concerns of a small number of feminist activists and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) but rather, an ever increasing miscellany of actors have taken it upon themselves to adopt an anti-trafficking role, sharing in common a desire to improve the lives of 'victims of trafficking'. These actors combine to form what Agustín (2007) terms a 'rescue industry', one in which 'social helpers' aspire to save womyn from 'sex slavery,' but in so doing, limit migrant womyn to the role of passive victim. Through the construction of the passive victim, the rescue industry's intervention into the lives of migrant womyn can be justified; the migrant female body can be controlled.

By examining the blurred line they tread between care and control, this short think-piece problematizes the complex functions of anti-trafficking NGOs in the UK. This piece is informed by research I undertook as part of my Ph.D exploring the governance of sex trafficking in the UK, and in which I conducted interviews with anti-trafficking NGOs and the police. Throughout this research, my interest lay in how the independent interests, priorities and politics of anti-trafficking actors are negotiated and coordinated through the support provided to womyn constructed as 'victims of trafficking'. In this paper, I argue that while NGOs have taken on the important – and at times, commendable – task of plugging gaps in support provisions exposed by the retreating welfare state, they may simultaneously act as



handmaidens to the neoliberal, neocolonial state apparatus. Through the provision of (oftentimes conditional) support for those labelled 'victims of trafficking', NGOs impose Western values about how non-Western womyn *ought* to live upon those they deem less 'civilised'. I pose the question then, are these self-appointed saviours acting entirely altruistically or rather, are their actions self-interested, geared towards maintaining the socio-political power of 'the West' over 'the Rest'?

At first glance, it appears that the work of anti-trafficking NGOs in the UK is characterised by benevolence – a well-meaning aspiration to improve the lives of 'victims of trafficking'. One CEO explained to me that her involvement in anti-trafficking work arose from having a '*heart for justice; a heart for people*'. Many are stimulated to act by the horror stories they have heard, the visceral images they have seen, and the astounding statistics that pervade the rescue industry ('27 million slaves alive today'¹ Bales et al., 2009: viii). This manifests, more often than not, in a desire to save womyn involved in the sex industry, rescuing them from the perceived terrors they endure at the hands of their 'trafficker(s)'. This saviour mentality appears, however, to be founded upon essentialist assumptions about the sex industry. It embodies the abolitionist ideological standpoint, extensively critiqued elsewhere (see for example, Kempadoo, 2005; O'Connell-Davidson, 2006; Sanders, 2005), that prostitution is morally wrong and that womyn involved in the sex industry are victims of 'sexual slavery'. Through this lens, it is assumed these womyn both require and desire rescue. Indeed, in my interviews, NGOs oftentimes emphasised the importance of 'welfare visits', some recounting experiences of working alongside the police to gain entry to known indoor sex venues in order to 'save' 'victims of trafficking'. While the purpose of these visits were masked in the language of welfare, my interviewees rarely described an act distinguishable from the traditional police brothel raids so heavily criticised by the English Collective of Prostitutes (2014) and others. Much like the traditional police brothel raid, these visits appear to result in the forced removal of migrant womyn from the sex venue and sometimes, from the UK. Thus, it seems that the rescue industry too-often fails to consider the possibility that these womyn may not see themselves as victims in need of saving.

Victimhood is not then, an objective experience. One does not simply *acquire* victim status by virtue of the interaction that takes place between them and the offender. Rather, victimhood is something that is conferred upon particular people

by others and as such, being labelled a 'victim of trafficking' involves a political judgement (Anderson, 2013). My research suggests that the application of the 'victim of trafficking' label is influenced by judgments about social class, nationality, and race, amongst other things. Indeed, NGOs appear to more readily apply victim status to those of lower socio-economic status, thus equating choice to engage in the sex industry with wealth. Similarly, while British sex workers (particularly those working indoors) are allowed to operate with less interference, migrant sex workers are confined to the identity of 'victim'. Thus the Western woman is more readily regarded as sexually liberated: The non-Western woman remains 'oppressed'. To this extent, the rescue industry is characterised by paternalistic attitudes, in which the non-Western 'Other' requires the righteous Western saviour to intervene for 'her own protection'. One of the consequences of this is that 'the Other' is amenable to Western imposed-intervention, their 'rescue', and potential deportation, justified. At the same time, taking it upon themselves to emancipate 'sex slaves' and in so doing following in the footsteps of 'celebrated' early abolitionists such as Wilberforce, NGOs in the UK – often led by male CEOs – can reaffirm and reassert white masculinity. The victim label thus becomes a tool through which to control subaltern women, that is, those that are socio-economically, politically and geographically marginal from, and oppressed by, the hegemonic neocolonial power structure.

The application of trafficking victim status, it would seem, has contradictory effects for the woman involved. On a positive note, it can act as a route to support that may not otherwise be available. One interviewee told me that her organisation employs a '*broad definition of trafficking*', one that essentially conflates trafficking and prostitution, in order to secure funding for vulnerable British sex workers. She explained that by applying the '*internal* victim of trafficking' label to vulnerable British-national sex workers, they could attract donor funding for a group that would otherwise, because of the pervasive stigma surrounding voluntary prostitution, have been overlooked. Officially labelled 'victims of trafficking' are entitled to 45 days of Ministry of Justice-funded support, provided by the Salvation Army and its sub-contractors. In order to acquire *official* victim status, the woman has first to be referred into the UK National Referral Mechanism (NRM)² and second, there has to be 'reasonable grounds' to believe that she is a 'potential victim of trafficking' in the eyes of either the *UK Human Trafficking Centre* or

the *Home Office Immigration and Visas*. Those who receive a negative 'reasonable grounds' decision or do not wish to enter the NRM at all, are still often granted victim status by the rescue industry and able to access support through the NGOs not bound by the Ministry of Justice contract. As such, it is incontrovertible that through the application of 'victim of trafficking' status, valuable support can be provided to disadvantaged womyn.

Simultaneously, the 'victim of trafficking' label brings with it some negative effects for womyn. First, the application of the victim label makes it not only easier for the state to exert social control but also, serves to justify that control. Indeed too few question, and fewer still challenge, the notion that 'victims of trafficking' ought to be returned to their country of origin. As such, with the victim label attached, voluntary migrant sex workers can be justifiably deported under the façade of noble action. In so doing, their agency is denied, their movement largely restricted to the non-Western world, and their bodies policed. While many anti-trafficking NGOs do in fact offer guidance to migrant womyn on their claims for asylum, this is provided within a political system that promotes xenophobic, anti-immigration sentiments. As such, it does little to challenge the presumed right held by Western states to restrict the movement of subaltern people. The guidance provided by NGOs does not demand radical changes to a system that is designed to maintain Western domination. It does not subvert the hegemonic social order. Second, in and of itself, the Ministry of Justice contract enables the state to extend its influence over the provision of victim support and steer the ideological politics and related goals of NGOs. To this extent, the Salvation Army and its sub-contracted NGOs have been, or are at least susceptible to being, co-opted by the state. Again, their work serves to maintain the neoliberal status-quo. Finally, by labelling migrant sex workers 'victims of trafficking', the state diverts attention away from the part it plays in maintaining the conditions under which migrant womyn are vulnerable to exploitation in the sex industry. The UK Government can thus obscure its role in the creation and the perpetuation of global inequalities between; men and womyn, white and non-white, rich and poor, and the state and the individual (Bravo, 2007). Instead, the victim label reinforces the perception that trafficking ought to be viewed through the lens of criminality and as such, the 'trafficker' offers a convenient scapegoat for blame. As Sharma (2015, unpag.) astutely observes, the womyn labelled 'victims of trafficking' are in many cases exploited

more by the 'border control practices and ideologies of racism, sexism and nationalism' legitimised by the UK Government than they are by their 'trafficker'.

Kamat's (2013: ix) claim that NGOs are in many ways 'handmaidens of imperialism' is apt, it would seem, since they inherently operate to disguise the limits of neoliberalism. Through their very existence, (anti-trafficking) NGOs in the UK serve to absolve the Government of providing services: they 'dole out as aid or benevolence what people ought to have by right' (Roy, 2004, unpag.) A complex dynamic is thus at play, whereby anti-trafficking NGOs provide important support to those labelled as 'victims of trafficking' – support they may not otherwise receive from the Government – yet simultaneously, they play a role in maintaining a repressive neoliberal system. There are of course some exceptions. Indeed, some of the NGOs I spoke to were indeed critical of the UK Government, nuanced in their understanding of the lived realities of the sex industry, and aware of the limits of neoliberalism. One of my interviewees, for example, made the observation that he feared many anti-trafficking NGOs are primarily concerned '*about the perpetuation of their entity*', compelled to find a steady stream of 'victims of trafficking' in order to justify their organisations' continued existence. Yet even the actions of these critically-minded NGOs, in effect, serve to undermine efforts for revolutionary social change. The incremental steps they make are made *within* the neoliberal system, promoting little more than an illusion of social change. Indeed, most anti-trafficking NGOs in the UK appear to be doing little to challenge the socio-structural causes of trafficking. Rather than mobilising a comprehensive and sustained campaign against restrictive border policies which function to push womyn into pursuing more 'risky' routes of migration, the practices of NGOs in fact serve to justify anti-immigration agendas. While it may be European states that first commissioned 'Fortress Europe', it seems that some anti-trafficking actors are helping to build it.

Few of the NGO actors I interviewed seemed to question the sense of entitlement they exhibit to intervene in the lives of migrant womyn. While their actions may be well intentioned, a fine line exists between help and hindrance. To this extent, Agustín's (2012) claim that the rescue industry engages in a soft form of imperialism is a persuasive one. The actions of the rescue industry may indeed be infinitely more palatable than military action, but are arguably, no less obtrusive in the affairs of other countries. Indeed, while offering valuable support to some

womyn, anti-trafficking NGOs in the UK are to varying degrees guilty of imposing the values of 'the West' upon 'the Rest'. Anti-trafficking NGOs are vectors for Western values. My intention here is not, however, to encourage defeatist attitudes that NGOs cannot help migrant womyn involved both voluntarily and involuntarily in the sex industry. Rather, I seek to encourage greater scrutiny of the rescue industry, both from outside and from within. Although the actions of anti-trafficking NGOs may be based upon (perceived) good intentions, they can cause harm to migrant womyn, denying their agency and further marginalising an already-marginalised group. Such is the extent of this harm that at present, one must question (as some of my critically-minded interviewees did) if their actions are fundamentally any less harmful than those they are seeking to 'save' womyn from.

Endnotes

- ¹ Trafficking statistics used by the rescue industry in anti-trafficking campaigns, the media, and in some academic writings are oftentimes greatly exaggerated and almost always unverifiable. Weitzer (2013) provides a detailed critique of the use of inflated statistics, arguing that they form part of the 'mythology of trafficking'.
- ² The National Referral Mechanism is a framework for the identification of victims of trafficking and allocation of support provisions through the Ministry of Justice contract with the Salvation Army. For more information see: National Crime Agency (2015).

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