

Policy-Relevant Report: Statistics on Sex Work in the UK

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Context

Calls to criminalise the purchase of sexual services appeal both directly and indirectly to gendered assumptions that the sex industry is fuelled by men purchasing sex from women.² These discourses perpetuate one-way heteronormative narratives that erase lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer/questioning (LGBT/Q) identities and practices (Laing, Pilcher and Smith 2015), as well women who pay for sex (Kingston et al 2015). Yet claims that the vast majority of sex workers are women selling to men appear to be based on ideology rather than substantive evidence (Smith 2012a). This study presents large-scale data on sex work in the UK in order to contribute to evidence-based policy at the national and local levels. It aims to support the development of political discourse and policy practice that move beyond simplistic ideological assertions and that instead recognise and respond to the complex reality of the sex industry today.

The data

The following descriptive statistics were compiled by the authors from a prominent online directory of people who advertise commercial sexual services.³ The sample comprised 27,408 registered members of the site who advertised as escorts and who had logged in within two months.⁴ The data were obtained by counting member profiles using the site's internal search engine.⁵

Gender

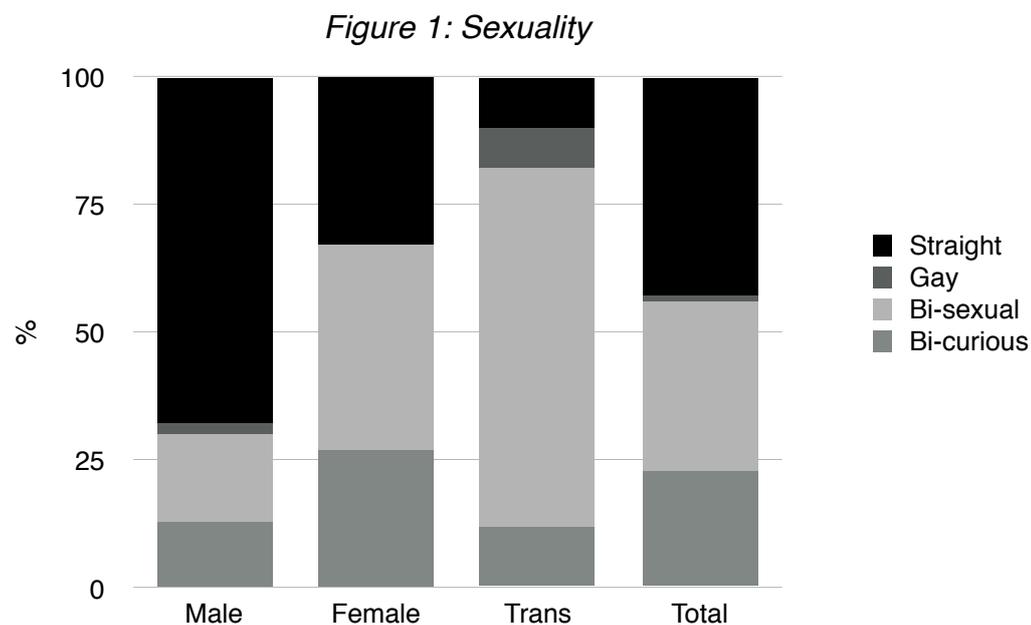
Perhaps the most dominant stereotype of commercial sexual exchange is that only women sell sex. This was not borne out by our analysis, which found that one in three (33%) people advertising as escorts self-identified as male. In addition, 4% of escorts self-identified as trans, of whom 70% self-identified as female, 27% as male and 3% as non-binary.⁶ Just under two in three (63%) of total escorts self-identified as female.⁷

Our findings support those of another recent, large-scale survey, the Student Sex Work Project, that sex work does not equate to 'women's work' - indeed,

male students were found to be more likely than female students to engage in commercial sexual activity (Sager et al. 2015, 7).

Sexuality

Debates about commercial sex are also articulated in profoundly heterosexist terms, with both sex workers and their clients assumed to be heterosexual. Yet we found that less than half (44%) of people in our sample self-identified as straight. Although just 1% self-identified as gay, over half (55%) self-identified as bi-curious or bi-sexual.



Male escorts were more likely to identify as straight (68%) than female escorts (33%) or trans escorts (10%). Just 2% of male escorts identified as gay, as did 1% of female escorts and 8% of trans escorts. Trans escorts were the most likely to identify as bi-sexual (69%) compared to female escorts (40%) and male escorts (17%). Female escorts were the most likely to identify as bi-curious (27%) compared to male escorts (13%) and trans escorts (12%).

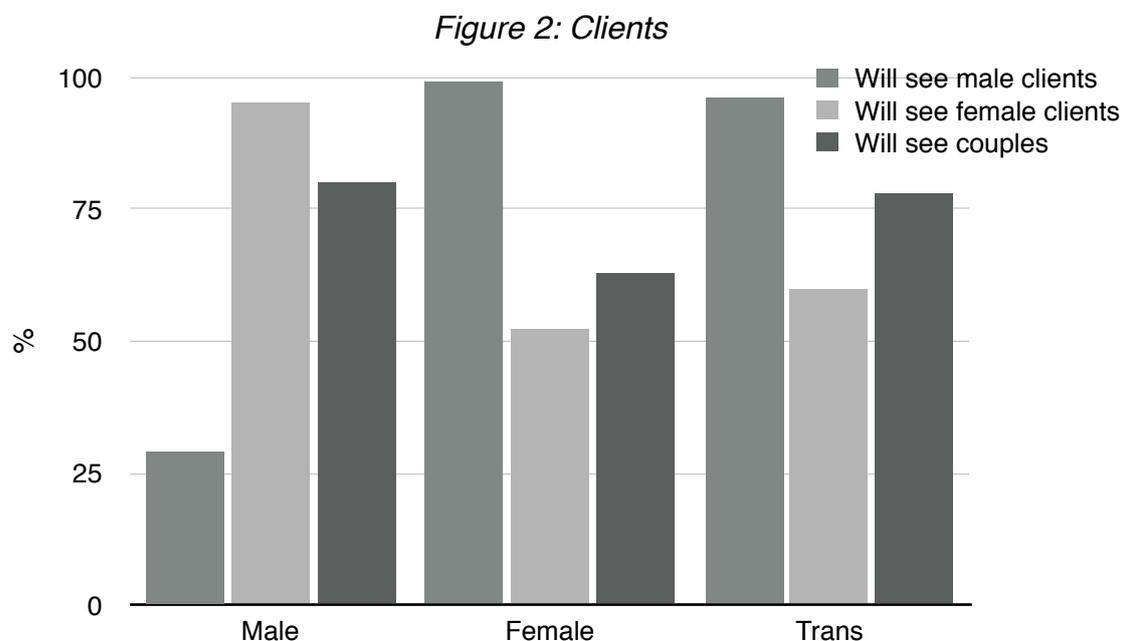
Clients

Nor do the data suggest that the vast majority of clients are straight men. We found that although three-quarters (76%) of people in our sample advertised to male clients, the majority also advertised to female clients (66%) as well as to couples (69%).

Although nearly all (99%) of female escorts advertised to male clients, over half (52%) did so to female clients, and nearly two-thirds (63%) to couples.

Nearly one-third (29%) of male escorts advertised to male clients, most (95%) advertised to female clients, and four-fifths (80%) to couples.

Nearly all (96%) of trans escorts advertised to male clients, nearly two-thirds (60%) did so to female clients, and over three-quarters (78%) to couples.⁸



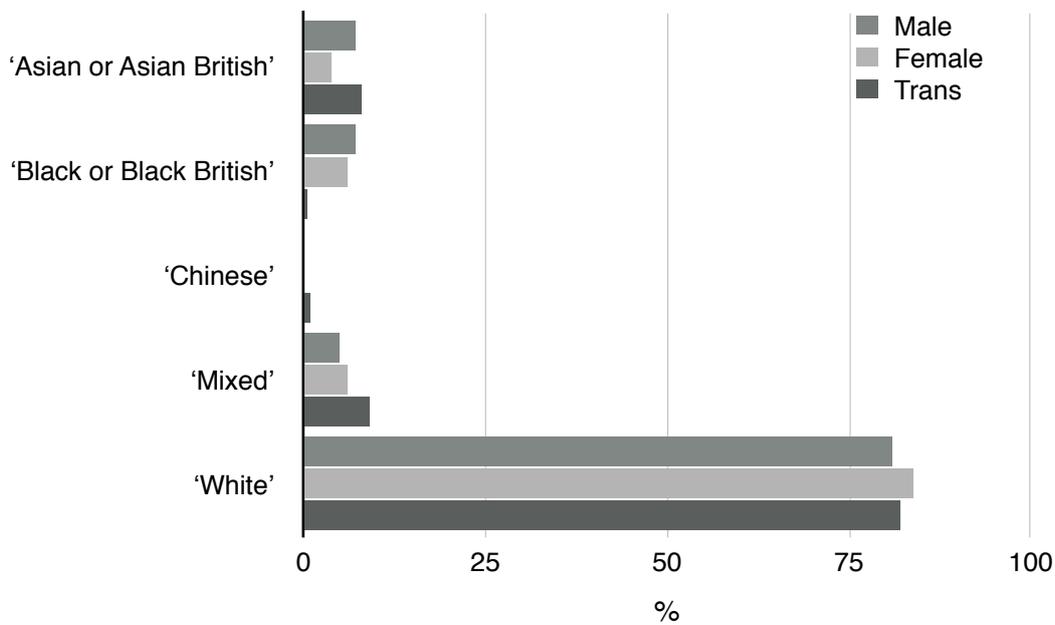
It is also worth noting that 40% of escorts on the site explicitly advertised to disabled clients. This supports previous research into sex work and disability (Owens, 2014): for example, 37.6% of male and 16.2% of female respondents in a *Disability Now* survey stated that they had considered commercial sex as a viable option to meet their sexual needs (Sanders, 2007, 444).

Ethnicity and language

Of people in our sample who specified their ethnicity (n=14,814), 83% identified as 'White', 6% as 'Mixed', 6% as 'Black or Black British', 5% as 'Asian or Asian British', and 0.2% as 'Chinese'. This differs from the findings of the 'Big Brothel' survey by The Poppy Project, which reported for instance that 7 workers were 'White', 146 were 'Oriental' and 103 were 'Asian' (Bindel and Atkins 2008).

Of people in our sample who specified their first and second language, English was more than four times more likely to be listed as a first language (n=11,931) than a second language (n=2,781).

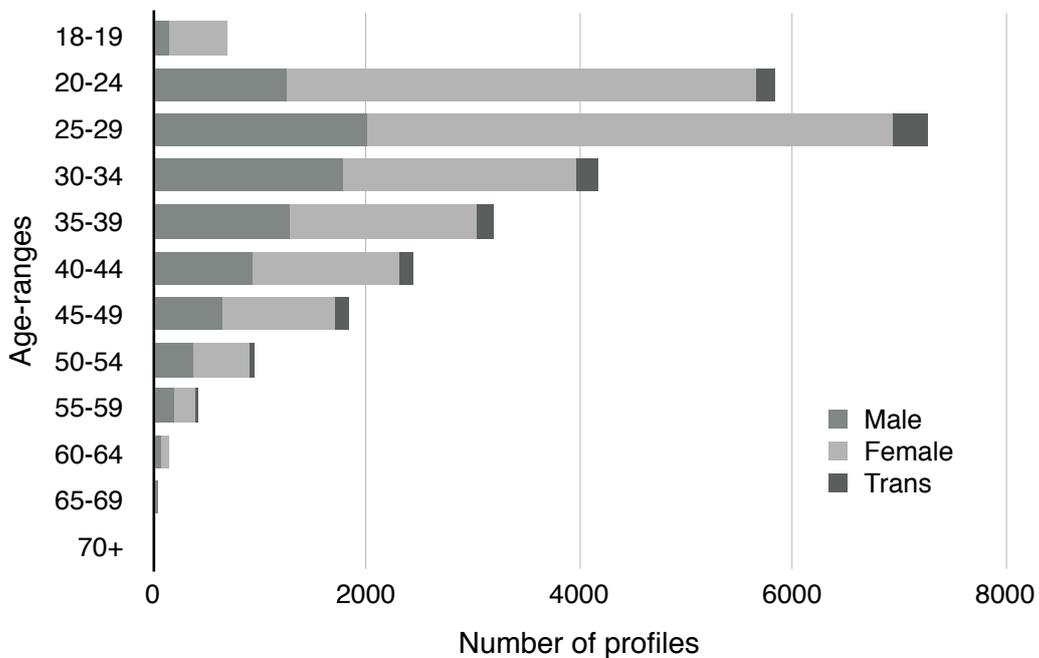
Figure 3: Ethnicity



Age

Nearly half of people advertising as escorts stated that they were in their twenties, with 22% in their early twenties and 27% in their late twenties. Less than 3% stated that their age was 18-19 years old. In addition, 27% stated that they were in their thirties, 16% were in their forties, 5% were in their fifties, and less than 1% were over sixty years old.

Figure 4: Age



The advertised ages of female escorts tended to be lower than male and trans escorts. For example, 3% of female escorts listed their age as 18-19

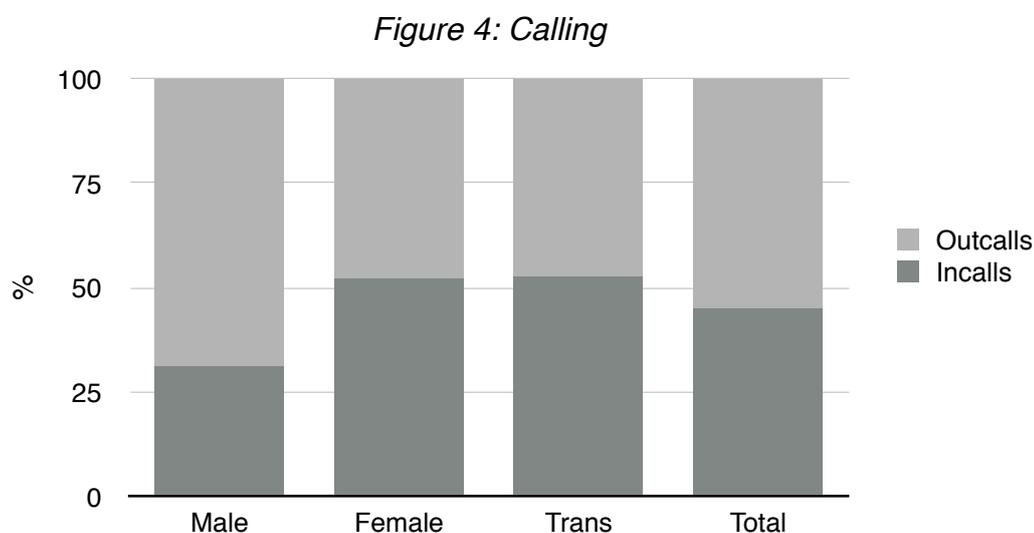
years old compared to 2% of male escorts and 1% trans escorts, and 55% of female escorts stated that they were in their twenties compared to 37% of male escorts and 43% of trans escorts. However, cultural pressures to appear 'youthful' mean that sex workers often significantly understate their ages on their profiles and, although such pressures impact particularly on women, some male and trans escorts also advertise lower-than-actual-ages (Smith 2012b). For example, data provided by the site administrators revealed that, of fully verified escorts (n=10,556), women understated their age by an average of 2 years whereas men did so by an average of 1 year.⁹

Previous research has estimated the median age of sex workers to be between 26 years (Platt et al. 2011, 378) or 27 years (Ward et al. 2000, 292), with migrant women being identified in some research to be significantly younger than UK-born women (Platt et al. 2011, 278). The average entry age was identified as approximately 23.1 years in one study (Sanders 2004, 49). Research on the ages of clients has estimated the average age to be 28 (Staneková, et al. 2004, 197), 34.7 (Groom and Nandwani's, 2006, 1), 34.7 (Groom and Nandwani 2006, 1) and 45 (Sanders 2008).

Yet calculations of average ages obscure the considerable diversity in the ages of both sex workers and their clients. Indeed, the stated ages of escorts on the site ranged from 18 years (the minimum age to advertise sexual services under UK law) to 91 years.

Calling

Overall, people in our sample were more likely to offer outcalls (80%) than incalls (67%). However, female and trans escorts were more likely to offer incalls than outcalls.



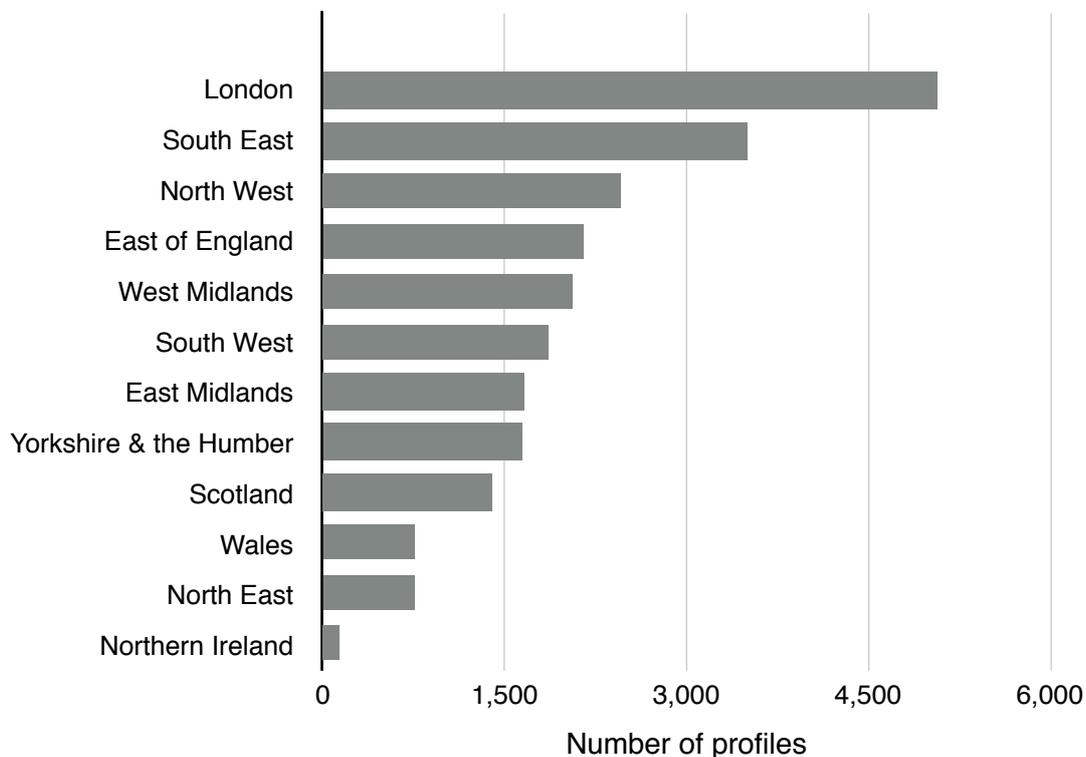
Although many escorts and sex workers prefer to work independently, the law encourages lone working as they seek to avoid criminal prosecution for brothel keeping charges. Yet it is well documented that this law increases the likelihood that they will experience violence as workers operate alone (Kinnell 2008; Sanders & Campbell 2007).

The criminalisation of clients also increases the risks to both workers and clients because they are more likely to meet in remote locations in order to avoid the police (Levy, 2014). This risk to sex workers has been duly recognised by both the French and Luxembourg governments when they rejected plans to make it an offence to purchase sex on the grounds that it would increase the dangers for sex workers, as they would be more likely to work alone if the law was introduced (Kingston & Thomas, work in progress). In addition, the general public have been shown to recognise the risks to sex workers and clients that criminalisation can bring, and as a result have expressed their support for licensing and regulation (Kingston 2013).

Locality

People advertising as escorts were dispersed across the United Kingdom, but key regions were London (22%), the South East (15%), the North West (11%) and the East of England (9%).

Figure 5: Regional location



Within these regions, there was a geographical concentration within the major cities: for example, 62% of escorts located in Northern Ireland listed Belfast as a key locality; 36% in Wales listed Cardiff; 31% in the West Midlands listed Birmingham; and 32% in the North East listed Newcastle. However, individual members are able to list multiple locations on the site and so it cannot be concluded that most escorts are located in the major cities.

Of those who specified travel preferences (n=12,175), just 12% indicated that they would not travel at all. In contrast, 27% would travel for an hour; and 23% would travel for 2 hours or more.

As noted above, the criminalisation of sex workers and clients increases the likelihood they they will move to more remote locations in an attempt to avoid prosecution. These more remote locations are less likely to provide support for sex workers, as the majority of sex work support organisations which dis-tribute condoms and provide advice and support to sex workers are located in major cities. Criminalisation therefore increases the likelihood of displacement, relocation and independent working whilst simultaneously making it more difficult for sex workers to access these important services.

Services advertised

There is considerable diversity in terms of the types of services advertised, with over one hundred different types of activity listed on the site. Importantly, escorts are able to clearly state which types of activity they do *not* offer as well as those that they do. For example, 84% of people in our sample specified that they would not receive BDSM and 68% stated that they would not give BDSM. This undermines popular assumptions that sex workers sell their 'bodies' for clients to 'use' at will; instead, there is considerable specificity and diversification in terms of the type of services that individual escorts do and do not offer.

It is often assumed that - because sex workers have multiple partners - they are 'automatically a health risk', even though there is compelling evidence that sex workers can and do act as health educators (Sanders 2006, 2435). In fact, 90% of people advertising as escorts explicitly stated that they would not engage in unprotected sex, although the figure was lower (57%) for those who did not offer oral sex without protection. Only 6% of female escorts offered unprotected sex, compared with 11% of male escorts and 11% of trans escorts.

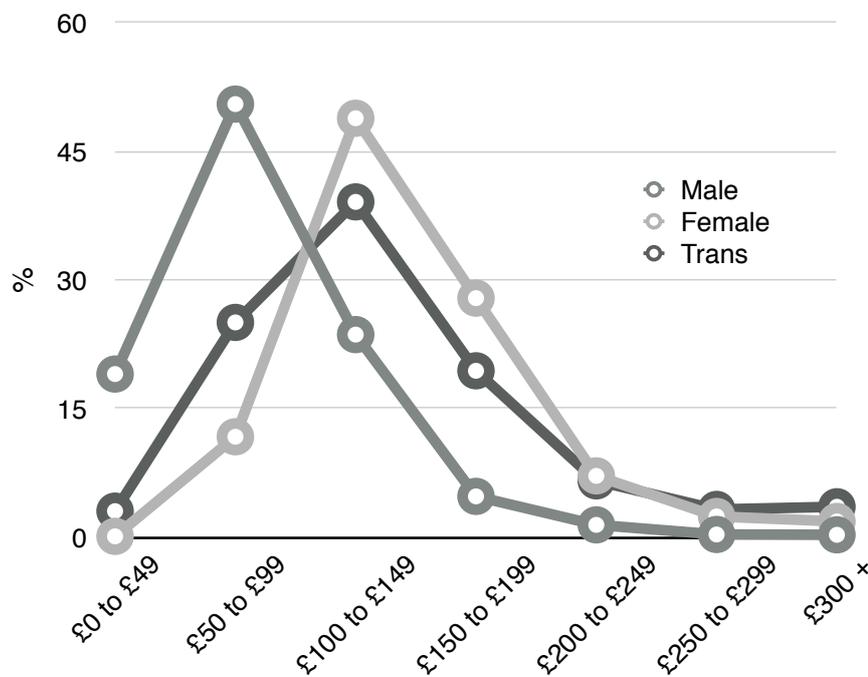
In contrast, a study of the general public finds that more than half (51%) have had unprotected sex with casual partners (de Visser et al, 2014), and

another study involving 16-25 year olds finds that one-third have had unprotected sex with multiple or casual partners (Lim et al. 2009).

Rates

Female and trans escorts tended to advertise higher rates than male escorts: in terms of hourly rates, 70% of male escorts listed rates of less than £100 compared to just 12% of female escorts and 28% of trans escorts. 28% of male escorts advertised hourly rates of between £100 and £199, compared to 77% of female escorts and 59% of trans escorts. Trans escorts were the most likely to list very high rates, with 7% advertising hourly rates of £250 or more, compared with 4% of female escorts and less than 1% of male escorts.

Figure 6: Hourly rates



Discussion

Political debates about commercial sex frequently reproduce age-old sexist stereotypes that women are sexual objects and men are sexual subjects. Calls for national policy to follow a 'Swedish model' of criminalisation depend upon constructions of sex workers as victimised women and their clients as predatory men. Our research directly contradicts such assumptions, and instead points to a diversity of identities and practices in the contemporary sex industry. This highlights the need to rethink dominant stereotypes and popular prejudices about sex workers and their clients, and to develop policy

that acknowledges and responds to the complex reality of the contemporary UK sex industry.

The criminalisation of clients will only increase the dangers that sex workers and their clients may face in their attempts to avoid criminal prosecution. The government should consider the wealth of evidence that demonstrates that criminalisation increases the risks and likelihood of violence. In addition, claims that the Swedish model 'works' ignores evidence from Sweden that this approach exacerbates violence and is not supported by practitioners (Levy 2014). It also ignores other countries that recognise and appreciate the increased dangers sex workers would face through this law, as well as evidence from countries such as Norway where the law to ban the purchase of sex increased the majority of sex workers' exposure to violence (Pro Senet 2012).

It is also worth noting that calls to criminalise the purchase of sexual services assume that law introduced to 'tackle demand' will be used to penalise clients. Research on the use of s.14 of The Policing and Crime Act 2009 has demonstrated that the police have not been using the law (Kingston & Thomas 2014) and that, despite policy changes to see sex workers as victims rather than offenders, the police continue to prosecute sex workers more than clients (Kingston & Thomas 2015).

Furthermore, a change in the law should come with the support of the general public. A lack of public support and divided public attitudes was one reason why the previous review on 'tackling demand' (Home Office 2008) did not seek the introduction of a full ban on the purchase of sex in 2009. Research on public attitudes has demonstrated that there is a deep divide as to whether to criminalise prostitution (Pitcher et al. 2006; Sagar 2005; Williams 2005), and the majority of participants in Kingston's (2013) research support the legalisation and regulation of prostitution, believing that it could never be eradicated and would be better managed through licensing.

This research also has implications for local-level practice. The systematic erasure of male and trans sex workers in political discourse means that there are few projects commissioned to provide support services to male and trans sex workers (Bryce et al 2015). Ironically, for many male and trans sex workers the only source of support comes from within the sex industry itself (Smith 2012b). There is therefore 'an urgent need for policy revisions to ensure that future provision is inclusive, relevant to the needs of all sex workers and recognises the rights to public protection for all' (Bryce et al. 2015).

Finally, it is important to note that the data presented inevitably obscure a considerably more complex and fluid picture than can be captured through

search engine results. For example, Smith's (2012b) research explores how the gender and/or sexual identities that people perform when escorting do not always match up neatly with the sexual and/or gender identities they perform in other contexts of their lives. This further underscores the need for political debates and policy practice to do justice to - rather than continue to ignore - the multiplicity of identities and practices in the sex industry today. Gender, sexuality, embodiment and desire take many forms, and the sex industry is no exception to this.

Acknowledgements

We are indebted to the site administrators for their permission to present this data, and to Mike Adkins and Anna Poll Morris for their invaluable feedback on material from earlier drafts of this report.

Notes

¹ To cite the data or analysis presented in this report: Nicola Smith and Sarah Kingston (2015) *Policy-Relevant Report: Statistics on Sex Work in the UK*, 7 October 2015, University of Birmingham and Lancaster University.

² For example, the End Demand campaign states that the 'majority of those who are paid for sex are women and girls, while the majority of those who buy sex are men' and repeatedly refers to sex workers as 'women in prostitution' (End Demand 2015). Similarly, the open letter to Amnesty International, which opposed the organisation's draft policy to decriminalise the sex industry and which was signed by more than 600 people including prominent celebrities, explicitly referred to sex workers as 'human beings bought and sold in the sex trade, who are mostly women' (Abdel-Hamid et al. 2015).

³ Accessed 5 August 2015. We do not include the name or address of the website here because this 'may compromise the anonymity of individuals or have a negative effect on an online community' (British Psychological Society 2013, 18). Although these risks are much lower for aggregate quantitative data analysis than for other types of research (ibid), this needs to be weighed against the fact that sex workers are a highly stigmatised population who lack full legal and social protection. On balance, we have decided against explicitly identifying the website in order to minimise the risk of harm to its members, either individually or collectively, through the research. This research has received full institutional ethical approval.

⁴ Although we present findings from a very large dataset, we make no claims to 'representativeness' on the grounds that such claims rest upon problematic assumptions about the sameness and replicability of individual human experience (Lawson 1995). Our aim is neither to capture the totality of commercial sex in the UK nor to reveal what 'type' of person becomes a sex worker or client. On the contrary: we present this data in order to highlight the diversity and complexity of the identities, practices, meanings and embodiments involved in the contemporary UK sex industry.

⁵ The search engine was used to view overall numbers rather than people's individual profiles.

⁶ Of male, trans and female escorts, 4% also advertised as couples, of whom 83% were listed as female/male, 15% as female/female and 2% as male/male.

⁷ These categorisations obscure a rather more complex reality, for neither gender nor sexuality are static and monolithic identities.

⁸ Unfortunately we could not find an option to search for trans clients, but this certainly does not mean that they are not an empirical presence.

⁹ Fully verified members provide proof of identity, including their age, and so the disparity represents the difference between the ages stated on their ID and on their profiles. Many thanks indeed to the site administrators for sharing this data, which could not be accessed via the search engine itself.

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