



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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