



# **Understanding risk in commercial sex markets: The case of men who visit full-service sex workers**

Giulia Berlusconi

School of Social Sciences, University of Surrey

# Welcome & housekeeping

**14:00-14:40:** Overview of the research findings from the project 'Understanding risk in unregulated markets: the case of men who purchase sex'

**14:40-15:00:** Q&A

Please add your questions as we go in the Q&A

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Dr Giulia Berlusconi

Lecturer  
University of Surrey



Dr Luca Giommoni

Reader  
Cardiff University

# Background

- Ongoing policy discussion regarding further criminalising sex buyers in England and Wales – sex buyers already face prosecution for buying sexual services from someone who has been coerced, even when they are unaware of the exploitation (Policing and Crime Act 2009)
- Questions re: implementation by law enforcement (Kingston & Thomas, 2018; Matolcsi, 2020) and deterrent effect (Coy, Horvath & Kelly, 2007; Huschke & Schubotz, 2016)
- Questions re: sex buyers as ‘accountable active participants’ (Sanders, 2008a: 414) or ‘eyes and ears of sexual exploitation’ (Keighley & Sanders, 2024), contributing to identifying and reporting cases of trafficking and exploitation
- **The impact of current and future legislation on sex buyers’ choices ultimately depends on how buyers understand the risks associated with buying sex, and how their perceptions of risk influence their attitudes and behaviours**

# Research questions

- How do men who engage with and visit full-service sex workers understand and perceive **law enforcement risk** associated with it?
- What role does sex work **policy and legislation** have in shaping their understanding and perception of risk? And to what extent do changes in legislation may impact on their willingness to visit service providers?
- Under what circumstances may sex buyers become **'accountable active participants'** in commercial sex markets?

# Interviews

- Fifty completed interviews with sex buyers – more interested, but limited time/resources and saturation
- Recruitment mostly via social media (Twitter/X) – key support from sex workers
- Interviews via WhatsApp, Telegram, and MS Teams (both audio calls and chat)
- Focus on anonymity and confidentiality
- Questions on participants' involvement in commercial sex markets and online communities, experiences of risky or harmful situations (including suspected cases of trafficking), views on sex work policy and legislation, merits and potential outcomes of the ongoing policy discussion on criminalisation

# Interview participants

- Range of experiences – from a few months to 10 years, with most buying sex for **1-5 years**
- Variety of **reasons to start engaging with sex workers** – end of romantic relation, fun or pleasure, limited access to dating during Covid-19, loneliness, limited social skills or low self-esteem, ...
  - “ *So, my involvement with commercial sex workers started when I got introduced by a friend. [...] So, this friend of mine took me to the place – I'll avoid mentioning the names – he took me to the place and that is how I started getting involved with them. The first time we just go see the place, but then that is how I started getting involved with them (Sebastian)* ”
- Variety of ways to engage with sex workers – **online** (most frequent), but also brothels and street-based sex workers, with a few relying on personal networks or visiting massage parlours
  - “ *I kind of mix both. [...] I'm just online, I just meet them online and maybe once a month, go to the brothels and everything (Samuel)* ”
- Among buyers who go online, only a minority reads the reviews and even fewer contribute to **reviews and discussion forums**

# Online ads, brothels, and street-based sex workers

- Variety of **reasons to chose a specific way to engage with sex workers** – friend’s recommendation, habit, convenience, safety concerns, ...
- Similar **safety concerns** seem to lead to opposing decisions, and personal experience seems to affect choices
  - “ *Mostly you arrange anonymously. So, I think privacy matters as well when arranging online as opposed to either going physically in the street or to the brothel (Theodore)*
  - “ *{W}e prefer [brothels] at the moment, because I can say we've got accustomed to it and it is more close to where we live and 100% I pretty much know the owners, the people who are there (Niall)*

# Understanding and perception of risk

- Many are worried about **interactions with the police**, while a minority is not as they are not involved in any illegal activity
  - “ *Sometimes interaction with the police means that you have to go get booked, and sometimes things might escalate that can be on your record. Those are the things that I constantly worry about (Felix)*
  - “ *[S]o any trouble with law enforcement would put me in a position where i have to explain and come out (Archie)*
  - “ *I would have no reason to worry about the police not unless I knew I was committing sexual offences (Joshua)*
- Worry about interactions with the police often comes from **personal experience** or the experience of someone they know
  - “ *[The police] took us and booked us in. Then when it was sorted out that there wasn't any illegal activity that was being connected to the place we were at, we were let go (Theodore)*
- Tendency to **change behaviour and improve safety measures** after a negative experience



# Views on trafficking and exploitation

- Most shared their **concern re: seeing someone who has been coerced**, although at times they worried about their safety and interaction with the police (vs. sex workers' wellbeing)
- Some are not concerned because **they have not had any personal experience or think it is very unlikely**, especially online
  - “ *I never thought of it and I think those that I did see never really looked exploited (Simon)*
  - “ *Most of my choice's are people for around the community I know or are friends of friends (Dominic)*
  - “ *I don't think it happens online (Caleb)*

# Views on trafficking and exploitation

- Several ways to avoid seeing someone who may have been coerced – these **indicators** match those developed in previous studies (L’Hoiry et al., 2021; Giommoni & Ikwu, 2021)
- Non-British nationals, young-looking, new providers, requests for advance payment, requests for personal information, ...
- Acknowledgement that identifying exploitation **before the meeting** is challenging (vs. during the meeting)

“  
*Before the meeting, you could imagine someone who is being exploited could have their account even managed by a third party, so methinks prior to meeting, it may be hard to decipher (Alexander)*

“  
*I tend to have a conversation with a person first, although it's not always smooth. There are those that say they would rather do the action, and then we go separate ways [...]. But then there are others... They will take their time and are willing to have a chat, and then you get to read from their perspective or from their heart, from how your interaction goes, that this is someone who is doing this out of free will (Theodore)*

“  
*[P]erhaps exploited persons dont always offer the best services (Harry)*

# Views on trafficking and exploitation

- If they met someone who may have been coerced, many would be **willing to report** to the police (or to an NGO anonymous helpline), but would also be worried about the consequences of reporting
  - “ *Yes , because [reporting] it could unravel a lot security wise for the both of us but it would be safer to contact the police being quiet (Orlando)* ”
  - “ *Yeah, I could maybe do an anonymous tip and then let the police do the arrest (Felix)* ”
- Others did not mention reporting, but said they **would not engage** with the sex worker and leave (and pay before leaving)
  - “ *Honestly, I prefer to just run, just run for my life. [...] I would just put on my clothes and just try to get out of the place as soon as possible (Samuel)* ”
  - “ *One case... I was with a girl. [...] She was just really shy [...] so I had to stop it right there. [...] I saw the person, she was of the right age. And she is actually British. So, I don't think she's been forced. She's from our country. So, I didn't think she was being victim of human trafficking, being born here. So, on my part, I just decided to leave and decided to pay (Niall)* ”

# Views on policy and legislation

- Some admitted no knowledge of **current sex work legislation** and not checking before starting to engage with sex workers
- Most knew that paying for sexual services is legal, but many only confirmed to be aware of Policing and Crime Act 2009 s14 after being prompted
- A small minority seemed to be fully **aware of Policing and Crime Act 2009 s14** (i.e., mentioned it without being prompted)

# Views on policy and legislation

- Participants were fairly divided when asked what they would do in the case of **further criminalisation**
  - 20 would stop engaging with sex workers, 18 would continue, 11 are unsure
    - “ *I think if it's made illegal, then I'll stop, because then I wouldn't want to get myself mixed up with the issues with the law and law enforcement (Felix)*
    - “ *I would simply play safe and utilize the opportunity when I cross the border (Caleb)*
    - “ *Yes, it will really substantially reduce my exposure to it, definitely. Yes, it will really impact it. But at this point, I think yes, it would reduce my time to it, but I cannot say really 100% stop. Maybe I'll be more cautious or just try to stop in some instances and use other services when necessary. It will reduce my usage of it, but I can't say it'll really stop it (Thomas)*
    - “ *I will not be going to the brothels, but I will still be getting the services (Alistair)*
    - “ *I think I will have to risk (Dominic)*
- Little acknowledgment of **enforcement** of the law when considering risk from further criminalisation

# Views on policy and legislation

- Some acknowledged further criminalisation may lead to **reduced demand**, with a few reflecting on its impact on providers
  - “ *I think if they did that all together, it will affect... There are people that are genuinely in the sex work industry for a living, to make something for themselves, to reach a certain goal (Theodore)* ”
- Others expect **little impact or displacement**, or worry about increased levels of crime and exploitation (see Campbell et al., 2020; Kingston & Thomas, 2019)
  - “ *When something has been legal for a while, then it becomes illegal, and people have really gotten used to it to the point where they'll just find other ways (Thomas)* ”
- Participants were also fairly divided when asked whether further criminalisation may help **prevent trafficking and exploitation**, with a few noting how these are already illegal
  - “ *Trafficking is a crime already, they should work on implementation (Jack)* ”

# Summary and conclusion

- Perception of risk seems to be associated with personal experience (vs. understanding and appreciation of the law)
- Limited interest for, and knowledge of, current legislation (esp. in relation to trafficking and exploitation)
- But concern re: seeing someone who has been coerced, as evidenced by long list of safety measures and thought given to them
- Concern for interactions with the police, but overall willingness to report cases of trafficking and exploitation
- Mixed reaction to further criminalisation – deterrent effect from law (vs. its enforcement)
- **Need to improve safeguarding and identification of survivors – sex buyers are often framed as exploiters or abusers, but are often the first to encounter vulnerable sex workers and seem aware of exploitation and willing to report it (see Keighley & Sanders, 2024)**

# Limitations

- Possibility of respondents giving desired answers (esp. in relation to trafficking and exploitation) – long list of safety measures and thought given to them
- Self-selected sample of sex buyers who were comfortable engaging with academic research and share their experience



# Any questions?

Please add your questions in the Q&A or raise your hand

**Dr Giulia Berlusconi**

[g.berlusconi@surrey.ac.uk](mailto:g.berlusconi@surrey.ac.uk)

