

Migrant Workers in the UK Sex Industry

First Findings

July 2009

Summary

The main aim of the project is to improve understanding of the links between the sex industry and migration in the UK. This is predominantly addressed in current public debates in terms of trafficking and exploitation. Interviews with 100 migrant women, men and transgender people working in all of the main jobs available within the sex industry, and from the most relevant areas of origin (South America, Eastern Europe, EU and South East Asia), suggest that although some migrants are subject to coercion and exploitation, a majority are not. The research shows a great variety of experiences and trajectories within the sex industry, which were influenced by key factors such as:

- social-economic background,
- family history,
- educational aspirations and achievements,
- immigration status and policy,
- professional and language skills,
- gender and sexuality,
- individual emotional history.

The research underlines that the current emphasis on trafficking and exploitation to explain the variety of the trajectories of migrants into the UK sex industry risks concealing their individual and shared vulnerabilities and strengths, the understanding of which could form the basis of more effective social interventions.

Key points

- The majority of the migrant workers in the UK sex industry we interviewed were not forced or trafficked
- Immigration status is by far the single most important factor restricting their ability to exercise their rights in their professional and private lives
- Working in the sex industry is often a way for those interviewed to avoid the unrewarding and sometimes exploitative conditions they meet in non-sexual jobs
- By working in the sex industry, many interviewees are able to maintain dignified living standards in the UK while dramatically improving the living conditions of their families in the country of origin.
- The stigmatisation of sex work is the main problem interviewees experienced while working in the sex industry and this impacted negatively on both their private and professional lives
- The combination of the stigmatisation of sex work and lack of legal immigration documentation makes interviewees more vulnerable to violence and abuse
- Relations between sex workers and clients are described as generally characterised by mutual consent and respect, although some reported problematic clients who were disrespectful, aggressive or abusive
- The impossibility of guaranteeing indefinite leave to remain to victims of trafficking undermines the efforts of the Police and other authorities against criminal organizations
- Most interviewees feel that the criminalisation of clients will not stop the sex industry and that it would be pushed underground, making it more difficult for migrants working in the UK sex industry to assert their rights in relation to both clients and employers
- All interviewees thought that legalising sex work and the people involved and making it easier for all migrants to become and remain documented would improve their living and working conditions and enable them to exercise their rights more fully

Research Background

In an environment of increasing labour migration, ever more restrictive immigration policy and an increasingly globalised capitalism that favours 'flexible' workers, migrants have come to form the majority of those who sell sex. Debates on migration and the sex industry are often characterised by an ethnicist anti-migrant discourse, by an almost exclusive focus on women, as well as by a marked emphasis on trafficking and exploitation. In the UK, the Home Office is promoting new prostitution strategies aimed at reducing the exploitation of women by criminalising clients and by introducing potentially arbitrary ways of disrupting or closing down commercial sex premises. By gathering 100 life histories of migrant women, men and transgendered people working in the UK sex industry the research provides an evidence-based analysis which can contribute to the elaboration of more effective policies and social interventions on migration, prostitution, trafficking and social exclusion.

Reasons for Migrating

Migrants working in the UK sex industry migrate for a variety of interrelated reasons, including: taking up a job opportunity; improving their and their families' living conditions; completing their studies in the UK; learning English; living in a country associated with freedom, prosperity and opportunities; paying off debts contracted at home; escaping war, homophobia or patriarchal oppression; living more rewarding and pleasurable lifestyles; seeking new experiences away from home; and joining their British partners or their relatives and friends living in the UK. The UK was often seen as a place offering opportunities for economic, social and cultural self-advancement and this perception was usually based on accounts of returning migrants and the media, the latter particularly for younger people.

Socio-economic Background of Interviewees

The research shows a great heterogeneity of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds amongst interviewees, ranging from situations of relative privilege to individual and social circumstances marked by extreme poverty and hardship. For the majority, the decision to migrate was a way of re-starting a project of social mobility which became unviable at home, because of the limitations or decline of shared or individual economic circumstances; lack of opportunities for self-advancement; gender, sexual or racial/ethnic discrimination; or as a consequence of individual circumstance and/or social events, such as the outbreak of war; the end of a romantic relationship; or the death of a parent. For a minority, migrating was a way to escape

The Role of Networks

The research findings highlight the importance of the role of networks of friends, family and partners in obtaining information about the occupational opportunities available in the UK and in providing the information and the economic support to obtain documents and transport. In a minority of cases interviewees were able to save the money they needed to migrate while working at home. The possibility of accessing a support network, usually through a partner, a friend or an extended family member, determines the first steps toward finding places to live and work once in the UK and this initial

network affiliation often remains a crucial reference for the migrant well after the initial moment. A minority of migrants resorted to the services of agencies and illegal organisations and responded to job adverts (au pairs, massages, etc.) in order to find employment abroad. These circumstances were the most frequently associated with the few cases of exploitation met in the context of the research, which sometimes originated from within networks involving partners, relatives and friends.

Immigration Documentation and Sex Work Stigma

Most interviewees were technically documented, but the conditions they had to meet in order to be and remain documented determined their ability to exert their rights in their working and private lives. Interviewees whose documentation had to be renewed or who did not correspond to the intended duration and/or to the purpose of their stay in the UK had to accept personal and professional circumstances that made them more vulnerable to emotional and other forms of labour exploitation. The research shows that there is a direct correlation between the degree of difficulty in obtaining and maintaining documentation and the vulnerability of interviewees to exploitation, including trafficking, whether they work in the sex or in other industries and whether they are female, male or transgender, as the following extract from the interview with a 31 year-old Brazilian man shows:

The tourist visa expired after 3 months and I had no money, so I worked in a packaging firm outside London...in Kent... night shifts of 12 hours...and we had to pay £12 each for the transport they arranged. Then eventually I learnt about the student visa and I got a regular 20 hours job at a gay sauna...

The stigma associated with sex work often undermined important emotional relationships as most interviewees felt they could not be open about their work with their partners, families and friends, both in the UK and at home. For many interviewees it was difficult to reconcile working in the sex industry, particularly if selling sex, with their and their partners' understanding of the requirements of a romantic relationship, which were often under considerable strain, as the following interview with a 29 year-old Brazilian woman shows:

If I told him he'd leave me. I feel I'm cheating on him. Even if I never do it with men for pleasure, I'm still giving them my body. I actually want to forget about this work, but on the financial side it's good...

The perceived need to lead a double life in order to hide working in the sex industry from friends, families and partners caused suffering for many interviewees, while others appreciated this division as it allowed them to maintain clear boundaries between their professional and private lives.

The stigmatisation of sex work was the main problem interviewees experienced while working in the sex industry and it impacted on them differently according to their gender and their job in the sex industry. Male and transgendered interviewees experienced less stigmatisation than their female colleagues, because of the relatively higher degree of acceptance of sex workers within the gay community. However, some transgendered interviewees reported being

under a higher degree of abuse from clients when working as transgendered than when working as males as they felt that some clients had unresolved issues with their own (homo)sexuality. In general, female interviewees working as strippers experienced less stigmatisation than flat workers or escorts. Finally, cultural and individual understandings of privacy and shame in relation to the sex work stigma influenced interviewees' choice of work within the sex industry. Some female and male interviewees preferred selling penetrative sex indoors to stripping in public, as they felt it would allow them to preserve their anonymity and privacy. Regardless of their gender and job differentiation, many interviewees felt that the combination of the stigmatisation of sex work and lack of documentation made them more vulnerable to violence and abuse while at work.

Sex and Other Work Experiences

The pre-migration working experiences of interviewees range from no experience to having had multiple and skilled positions. Most interviewees had several non sexual jobs, sometimes combined with sexual ones. For a minority, sex work was the only job they ever had. Many interviewees had skilled jobs in their countries of origin and were unable to capitalise on their skills in the UK because of their immigration legal status. At the same time, some interviewees underlined the skilled nature of their sexual jobs, which was predicated on their abilities to manage the emotional implications of the relations with their clients, as the following excerpt from the interview with a 30 year-old Brazilian woman shows:

It's very quick money, but not easy. You have to have strong psychological skills. We get all sorts of clients with problems.

Most interviewees did not come to the UK with the intention of working in the sex industry, but chose to do so in order to avoid the less rewarding and sometimes exploitative conditions they met in non sexual jobs, both at home and in the UK. Perception of exploitation and advantage are very relative, as the following excerpt from an interview with a 42 year-old Ukrainian woman shows:

This job [selling sex in a flat] is better; the money is good and quick. The cleaner job was really hard work and no good money. I still say I'm a cleaner, I have to lie, but I don't want to be one.

The majority of interviewees were introduced to the possibility of working in the sex industry by friends and colleagues they met through non sexual jobs. In some cases, it is the very friends and, more rarely, extended family members who enabled them to come to the UK who are involved in (and introduce them to) the sex industry.

Many interviewees had already had sexual jobs at home or in other countries and came to the UK with the intention of working in the sex industry or keeping this possibility open in case other plans did not work out. Most were satisfied with their experience of migration to the UK and of working in the sex industry. This included people who experienced exploitation, most of whom continued to work independently in the sex industry after having freed themselves from their exploiters, as the following excerpt from an interview with a 25 year old Lithuanian woman shows:

The guy was not too bad, I mean, he only took 20 per cent and kept saying that he loved me and that he kept the money for us, but I was fed up so one day I told him that I wanted to work for myself and that he would not have seen a penny for me anymore, and that was it.

When prompted to discuss what aspects they liked about working in the sex industry most interviewees mentioned: earning money quickly; managing time flexibly; having more opportunities to travel; being able to afford a dignified life and to help their families; meeting interesting people; and getting a unique insight into human sexual and non sexual behaviour. Negative aspects included: the stigma attached to sex work; having sex with unattractive, unclean and/or aggressive clients; the difficulty in combining sex work with romantic relationships and private life more in general; the risk of STIs; and instances of violence (robberies) and abuse (rape) at the workplace. Overall, the majority of interviewees felt safe in their current jobs and described relations at work as friendly and respectful, including those with clients

The Intricacy of Exploitation and Consent

A minority of interviewees felt that they had been forced to sell sex and that they had been exploited. Only a very small minority of interviewees were deceived and forced into selling sex in circumstances within which they felt they had no share of control or consent. In the majority of the cases encountered, interviewees were aware that they would be selling sex, but not of the exploitative working conditions that they were required to endure, which led them to find ways to escape through the co-operation of clients, colleagues and, especially if documented or not intending to stay in the UK, the Police. The following is an excerpt from the interview with a 30 year old Lithuanian woman:

I mean, when I got there the guy told me that I had to work for a year... I only wanted to stay long enough to pay back the expenses and earn £3000! Then he kept all the money (...) When I got to this flat to work I felt safe... I then told the maid and she called the police immediately.

Many interviewees indicated that one of the main factors underpinning exploitation were feelings of allegiance and loyalty embedded in romantic relationships. Socio-cultural and individual understandings of love were indicated as one of the main factors preventing many women from emancipating themselves from exploitation, as the following quotation from an interview with a 23 year old woman from Romania shows:

It depends a lot on the girls, some believe anything the guy says 'for love'...they don't get it and they don't listen when I tell them to wise up... On the contrary they go back to the pimp and grass me off...and I have to deal with the threats of their pimps too!

Almost all of the interviewees who felt that they had been exploited kept on working in the UK sex industry independently. All interviewees, including those with experiences of trafficking, drew clear distinctions between exploitative and non-exploitative practices in the sex industry and accepted it was possible for women to sell sex freely and consensually. They all underlined how restrictive migration policies and the criminalisation of clients and (indirectly) of sex workers would make them more likely to take risks and accept undignified and dangerous conditions

Future Plans

The majority of interviewees were satisfied by their overall experience of migration and work in the UK sex industry. At the same time, most interviewees indicated that they wanted to leave the sex industry for a number of reasons. These included ageing and the way they felt it would impact on being desirable for clients in the future; the desire to form families in the future; and the fact that many felt intellectually unchallenged in their sexual jobs. Many migrants planned to save or had saved money in order to take up an independent economic activity, usually outside the sex industry, in the UK or in the country of origin. Interviewees with a precarious documented status wanted to make it permanent and aspired to obtain the right to live and work indefinitely in the UK.

Conclusion

Contrary to the emphasis given in current public debates about cases of trafficking and exploitation, the evidence gathered in the context of this project shows a great variety of trajectories within the sex industry, which were influenced by key factors such as: social-economic background; educational aspirations and achievements; immigration status; professional and language skills; gender and sexuality; family history; and individual emotional history. Amongst these factors, being able to maintain legal immigration status determines the possibility for migrant sex workers to assert their rights and counter stigmatisation and exploitation. At the same time, the research shows that most interviewees chose to work in the sex industry and that only a minority felt that they had been forced to. The research strongly suggests that vulnerability, particularly to trafficking and exploitation, results from migrants' socio-economic conditions, lack of information about their rights and entitlement to protection in the UK, their personal family and emotional circumstances, but, most of all, from their immigration legal status.

Policy Implications

By engaging with the life histories of migrants working in the UK sex industry the research highlighted a number of vulnerabilities and strengths that are obscured by the current emphasis on trafficking and exploitation in public debates and policy. These can inform more efficient and ethical policies of social intervention aimed at improving their living and working conditions. The research evidence strongly suggests that current attempts to curb trafficking and exploitation by criminalising clients and closing down commercial sex establishments will not stop the sex trade and that as a result the sex industry will be pushed further underground and people working in it will be further marginalised. This would discourage migrants and UK citizens working in the sex industry, as well as clients from co-operating with the police and sex work support projects in the fight against actual cases of trafficking and exploitation. The interviews informing this research support the view that the success of initiatives against trafficking and sexual exploitation could be greatly enhanced by provisions that would:

- make it easier for migrants to become and remain documented;
- allow the sex industry to operate legally;

- guarantee victims of trafficking the certainty of obtaining undetermined leave to remain in the UK, regardless of their ability or choice to denounce their exploiters and to co-operate usefully with the authorities; and
- provide victims of trafficking with adequate long-term support and protection to successfully integrate within the UK society or, if they so wish, in their countries of origin.

About the project

The research team was led by Dr Nick Mai from the Institute for the Study of European Transformations, London Metropolitan University. London was chosen as the main site of the research (selected interviews were undertaken in Sheffield and Liverpool) because of the scale and diversity of its sex industry and of its migrant population, which offered a great potential to illustrate a variety of links between migration and the sex industry.

The research draws on 100 (67 women, 24 men, 9 transgender) in-depth semi-structured interviews with migrants working in all sectors of the sex industry and from the main areas of origin involved (South America, Eastern Europe, EU and South East Asia). The project adopted a participative ethical approach. The research team included people working in the sex industry and members of organisations representing sex workers. A monetary acknowledgement of subjects' participation in the research was given.

The sample was compiled according to a combination of random and purposive criteria, in order to ensure that all the most relevant dimensions and experiences of migrants in the UK sex industry were included. This means that the evidence gathered allows the research to produce scientific generalisations, albeit of a non-statistical nature. The vast majority of interviewees were randomly approached through their commercial contacts, rather than through sex work support projects, in order to tap into different strata of migrant workers than those captured by existing research. In a second phase, we co-operated with the Police and selected sex work support projects in order to purposively interview a larger number of people with experiences of trafficking and exploitation than occurred through the random method. During the undertaking of the research we discovered that the vast majority of interviewees were using the services of sex work support projects, which means that our results can be compared with those of research using sex work projects as their unique or main access to interview subjects.

Further Information

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His main research interest is on the relation between child and youth migration from Eastern Europe and North Africa into the EU, the negotiation of youth, gender and sexual identities and the associated risks and opportunities, including issues of exploitation and the engagement in illegal or irregular activities.

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The final report of the research will be available in October 2009 at this webpage:

<http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/research-units/iset/projects/esrc-migrant-workers.cfm>

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