Risking safety and rights: online sex work, crimes and 'blended safety repertoires'.

Abstract

It has been well established that those working in the sex industry are at various risks of violence and crime depending on where they sell sex and the environments in which they work. What sociological research has failed to address is how crime and safety have been affected by the dynamic changing nature of sex work given the dominance of the internet and digital technologies, including the development of new markets such as webcamming. This paper reports the most comprehensive findings on the internet based sex market in the UK demonstrating types of crimes experienced by internet based sex workers and the strategies of risk management that sex workers adopt, building on our article in XYZ in 2007. We present the concept of 'blended safety repertoires' to explain how sex workers, particularly independent escorts, are using a range of traditional techniques alongside digitally enabled strategies to keep themselves safe. We contribute a deeper understanding of why sex workers who work indoors rarely report crimes to the police, reflecting the dilemmas experienced. Our findings highlight how legal and policy changes which seek to ban online adult services advertising and sex work related content within online spaces would have direct impact on the safety strategies online sex workers employ and would further undermine their safety. These findings occur in a context where aspects of sex work are quasi-criminalised through the brothel keeping legislation. We conclude that the legal and policy failure to recognise sex work as a form of employment, contributes to the stigmatisation of sex work and prevents individuals working together. Current UK policy disallows a framework for employment laws and health and safety standards to regulate sex work, leaving sex workers in the shadow economy, their safety at risk in a quasi-legal system.

Key words: sex work, crime, safety, violence, digital technology, reporting crime.

Introduction

In 2007 Sanders and Campbell published an article in the *British Journal of Sociology* which considered how differing organisational and regulatory features of street and indoor managed brothel based sex work shaped sex workers experiences of crime, particularly violent crime. Identifying differential experiences across those sectors, with higher levels of violent crime committed against street sex workers, we proposed some lessons for UK policy development in order to 'design out violence' and challenge stigmatising discourses. Ten years on, the UK sex industry has undergone significant changes brought about by structural, technological and cultural developments with increasing economic and social acceptance of the sex industry. Key changes can be noted around the diversity of the sex industry (Pitcher 2015), with male and trans sex work markets growing (Laing et al 2015) and groups such as students becoming more evident as sex workers (Roberts et al 2013; Sagar et al 2016. An important change has been the levels of migrant sex work dominating indoor markets in London and other major cities (Mai 2009) bringing particular vulnerabilities and risks (Platt et al 2011), and at the same time a shrinking of the street sex market (Feis-Bryce 2018). However, the most notable change has been how online and digital technology has had a game-changing impact, reshaping how commercial sexual services are marketed and experienced, with available data showing that the online sector now constitutes the largest sector of sex work and that most commercial sex is facilitated online (Cunningham and Kendall 2011; Jones 2015; Sanders et al., 2018).

Yet relatively little is known specifically about internet-based sex workers' experiences of violence and crime during their work and how they manage risk (cf. Moorman and Harrison 2016; Sanders, Connelly and Jarvis-King 2016) which were some of the core questions of this research. In this article, we draw on the largest study of UK internet based sex work to date (Sanders et al., 2018), which focuses on independent sex workers (that is individuals

who are not working with a third party, manager or agency). We examine online sex workers' experiences of crime, locating these within the wider literature on sex work and trends in other sex markets. We reflect on the organisation of online sex work and safety strategies utilised by workers in the online sector and argue that digital and online technology has created new ways of working and new safety strategies, yet at the same time has made possible new crimes and threats for sex workers, specifically digitally facilitated crime.

This paper first introduces the methodology that underpins the research, then maps the existing literature on crimes and risk management strategies, noting a shifting trend in recent years as sectors and workers move into different spaces. The third section focuses specifically on our findings around digital crimes online, using qualitative and quantitative data to explore sex workers experiences including why under-reporting to the police occurs. The fourth section takes the reader into further understandings about the types of risk management strategies that are employed by internet based sex workers, which is where we introduce the concept of 'blended safety repertoires'.

The Study

This article draws on empirical research findings from Beyond the Gaze research project: a study of the working practices, regulation and safety of Internet-based sex work in the UK, carried out by a research team based at the Universities of Leicester and Strathclyde. Ethical approval was given from the former. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council this is the largest UK study of internet based sex work sector carried out to date. It adopted a participatory action research (PAR) approach and had a multi-method research design. The PAR method was crucial to ensure we had experts from the sex work community guiding the study from the outset. We employed eight community co-researchers who formed an advisory group and took part in all aspects of design, administration and delivery of the fieldwork, as well as analysis, dissemination and writing up of the findings. In addition, we

had many supporters from the sex work community and key web platforms in the industry which enabled the study to gain credibility and access to many avenues to recruit for the interviews and survey.

Methods adopted included semi structured interviews with online sex workers, police officers and other stakeholders (e.g. managers/ moderators/marketing/IT and online advertising platforms/forums/safety schemes for sex workers), an online survey of projects providing support to sex workers, desk based research to map online spaces where sex workers market and/or provide services, the largest online survey to date of internet based sex workers in the UK and similarly one of customers of sex workers using the internet.   This article draws predominantly on qualitative data collected in interviews with sex workers (n=62) all of which worked by advertising online. The interviews were carried out between November 2015 to October 2016 and quantitative data from the online sex worker survey carried out November 2016 to January 2017 producing 641 valid responses. The survey asked broader questions around working practices, relationships with customers, web platforms, job satisfaction, working conditions, experiences of crimes, safety, police relationships and attitudes to the law.

Interviews were carried out through a range of mediums with the majority via telephone, Skype or WhatsApp plus 14 face to face interviews, enabling participants to choose their preferred communication medium. Participants were recompensed £20 for their time. Interviews lasted between 40 and 200 minutes and were recorded on a digital recorder, under strict data management procedures due to the sensitive nature of the data and the need for high levels of security around identity of the participants. The transcribed interviews were entered into Nvivo and a detailed coding process enabled the dataset of over 2 million words to be organised, digested and linked across nodes. Our working main nodes were around 100, each with between 6-15 subnodes, to enable the detailed information from the interviews to be compared and contrasted. The analysis of the interviews informed the

survey, as did our advisory group of community co-researchers who gave detailed feedback and assisted in the piloting of the survey.

Of the interview participants 68 per cent (n=42) were CIS female, 26 per cent (n=16) CIS male and 6 per cent (n=4) transgender women. In relation to sexuality, 61 per cent identified as straight, 18 per cent as gay or lesbian and 21 per cent as bisexual/bi-curious. Age distribution of the sample was spread fairly evenly, with 12 interviewees aged 18-25; 11 age 26-30; 17 aged 31-40; 12 aged 41-50 and 10 respondents aged over 50.

Amongst survey respondents nearly three quarters 73 per cent (n=469) were women, 19 per cent (n=124) male, 3 per cent (n=19) transgender and a further 3 per cent (n=18) non-binary or intersex. The age distributions were largely in the 20's and 30's: 20 per cent (n=131) were 18-24, 37 per cent (n=236) 25-34, 27 per cent (n=170) 35-44, 11 per cent (n=71) 45-55, 5 per cent (n=30) 55 or over. The majority (95.9 per cent; n=615) worked in independent indoor sectors, as independent escorts, webcam workers, providers of sexual massage or BDSM services. Respondents were based across the UK, with the highest proportions in London, the South East and the North West.

Shifting trends: crime against sex workers and risk management

A considerable body of both UK and international research examines sex workers' experiences of crime particularly violent crime, exposing high levels of violence compared to the general population. Deering et al., (2014) in a systematic review of global studies of sex work and violence reported that workplace violence over a lifetime was recorded by 45 to 75 per cent of sex workers, with 32 per cent to 55 per cent experiencing violence in the last year. They describe the burden of violence and called for violence against sex workers to be made a public health priority, nationally and internationally. Recent research examining UK data on sex work related homicides which compared prevalence to available data for other professions found 'sex work is the job in the UK with the absolute greatest risk of

occupational homicide for women' (Cunningham et al., 2018) but that indeed the trend had changed from risk being highest in the street market to now being highest for indoor workers.

Within the academic literature, differential experiences of crime across sectors of the sex industry have been explored, but primarily comparing street and indoor managed brothel sex work, overall finding higher levels of victimisation in the street based sector (Deering et al., 2014; Shannon et al., 2008, 2009; Lowman 2000). The overall trend from research findings has suggested that street sex workers experience higher levels of crime and harassment than indoor sex workers (Kinnell 2008) and that the indoor sector is safer (Church et al., 2001; Jeal and Salisbury 2007; O'Doherty 2011).

Research has illustrated how the structure and organisation of indoor sex work can reduce risk relative to street sex work (Sanders and Campbell 2007; Lowman 2000; Scott et al., 2005; O'Doherty 2011; Kinnell 2008). But much of the research which has included indoor sectors has focused on massage parlour/sauna/brothel based sex work and such establishment based or 'managed' forms of sex work are generally organised differently to agency or independent escorting and BDSM work. Sanders and Campbell (2007) argued that the indoor setting can provide opportunities to introduce a range of measures to try and reduce and 'design out violence'. For example, the presence and role of others (including other sex workers, receptionists and security staff), who can intervene plus in-house security like CCTV systems can act as protective measures. Yet the variability of these strategies must be noted: Pitcher (2014) in her study of female, male and transgender sex workers in indoor UK settings, found that participants reported variable management practices; some which created 'a safe and supportive working environment' whereas others had 'less favourable working conditions or, in some instances, exploitative practices' which they had encountered.

Research is still building a picture of the nature and levels of crime experienced by male online sex workers (Scott et al., 2005; Ashford 2009) and the specific experiences of transgender sex workers (Laing et al., 2018) who experience transphobic violence, as well

as violence because of their sex work. Gaffney and Jamell (2010) found in a survey of 107 UK based male and transgender sex workers, the majority of whom were CIS male (97 per cent) who contacted customers via online methods, that 25 per cent had ever experienced physical violence from a 'client' and 14 per cent in the last year, and that 20 per cent had ever been 'forced to have anal or oral sex without consent' by a client and 12 per cent had been during the last year. Only 6 per cent who had experienced any crime reported it to the police. In an online survey of escorts, Jenkins (2009) found that 15.7 per cent of women and only 6.7 per cent of men had experienced violence or dangerous incidents, indicating lower levels of violence against escorts; yet, in comparison, 40.9 per cent of transgendered escorts had experienced violence or dangerous incidents. In the largest survey of online sex workers in the UK prior to Beyond the Gaze, a survey of 240 internet based sex workers (Sanders et al., 2016) found that 47 per cent had experienced crime in their sex work. Whilst online sex workers reported crimes similar to sex workers in other sectors, this research found new forms of targeted crime were evident with the most common crimes experienced (86 out of 240) being digitally facilitated which included threatening and harassing texts, calls, emails and verbal abuse. When attempting to identify the motivations for violence, recent work on hate crime experienced by sex workers, show that perpetrators with 'whorephobic' attitudes directly target sex workers, and even seek them out because of their 'perceived vulnerability' (Campbell, 2014, 2016).

Whilst the concerns around the implications of the move online to safety, risk and crimes experienced by sex workers has begun to emerge (Argento et al., 2016), the connections between crimes, under-reporting and safety strategies are questions that our research has addressed, filling the gaps noted by other scholars (Jones, 2015).

Digital world, digital crime: online sex workers experience of crime

Interview data illustrated that for a section of internet based sex workers incidents of violence were low (compared to studies for street sex work) and several described not experiencing any crime. In the Beyond the Gaze survey reports of sexual assault (including rape or removal of condom without consent) were low with 7.6 per cent (n=49) having experienced this in the last year and 19.5 per cent (n=125) per cent in the last five years, 77.7 per cent had not experienced this in the last five years. Physical assault was reported at a lower level: 5 per cent (n=32) had experienced this in the last year and 12.9 per cent (n=83) in the last five years. Significantly, 84.4 per cent (n=541) had not experienced assault in the last five years. These low levels of serious crimes are relevant as it provides evidence that working through online methods can be safer. Yet at the time there are four key points of caution to be considered when thinking about the decreased risks for sex workers.

1)   Comparing these levels of workplace violence experienced in our sample to data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (Office for National Statistics 2016) suggests online sex workers experience higher levels of work related violence, with 1.3 per cent of women and 1.5 per cent of men having been victims of violence at work during the previous year (ibid). From our survey, threats of violence had been experienced by 12.6 (n=81) per cent of respondents in the last year and one quarter of workers during the last five years (25 per cent n=160), while 72.9 (n=467) per cent had not experienced this.

2)   Sex workers are amongst the most likely group of workers to be murdered. Analysis from Sanders et al (2018) of the UK sex worker homicide data base demonstrates that there have been some dramatic changes in the composition of murders against sex workers in the past twenty years, with the trend changing from greater risk being on the street, to now more murders happening in indoor premises (see Cunningham et al 2018). Another alarming and notable trend is the high vulnerability of migrant sex workers, with more non-British nationals murdered in the past decade.

3) The most significant finding of our research was the high levels of digitally facilitated crime experienced by people in this online sector. The most commonly identified crime type in the Beyond the Gaze survey was persistent or repeated/unwanted contact or attempts to contact through email, text or social media (see Table 1): 45.12 per cent had experienced this in the last year, 65.1 per cent (n=417) in the last five, with just under one third 34.2 per cent (n=219) had not experienced this over five years. This was followed by threatening or harassing texts, calls or emails with 36.3 per cent (n=233) experiencing this in the last year, 56.2 per cent (n=360) in the last five years, with 42.7 (n=274) per cent not experiencing this in the last five years. Both these crime types can form part of harassment and stalking. In our survey in most crime categories there were no major gender differences but more females than males had received threatening texts in the past 5 years (58.4 per cent, n=274, and 46.8 per cent, n=58) and repeated unwanted email contacts past 5 years (66.1 per cent, n=310, and 55.6 per cent, n=69). While the numbers are relatively small, a higher proportion of female than male respondents had experienced physical assault over the past five years (14.5 per cent, n=68, compared with 8.1 per cent, n=10) and also sexual assault (20 per cent, n=94 compared with 12.9 per cent, n=16).

4) It is important to dissect the differences between independent sex workers who provide in-person services such as escorts and BDSM workers with those of technology-mediated indirect sex workers (such as webcammers and phone sex providers) who engage in no in-person contact, reducing the opportunity for certain crime types. While the numbers of TMI workers in our survey sample was relatively small our data does show differences in relation to the types of crime experienced. For example, while 60.2 per cent (n=118) of those who worked exclusively as independent sex workers/escorts had encountered threatening texts, calls or emails in the past five years, only 55.1 per cent (n=27) of TMI-only workers had experienced this.

Table 1: Top five crime types experienced in last 5 years

The everyday nature of harassment

Verbal abuse and repeated unwanted contact, or attempts to contact in person were also concerns that sex workers shared (see Table 1). Below are three snapshots of these crimes from our interviewees which put these statistics into the context of individuals everyday lives:

> One customer he called last night ten times and today he'll call fourteen, fifteen times.. But I just put the phone on silent … I've had people screaming down the phone at me, "Bitch, I'm gonna get you,"... I have felt frightened before where I'm thinking, I wonder if he really does know where I am and, you know, if he has really searched my IP address from that email. (Helen, 26, independent escort)

> There have been times where people have threatened me, going through texts and ringing me on private numbers to say they would, like, rape my mum or something. Yeah, people who've threatened to tell my family about what I do because they were people from the area I used to live and they knew about it. (Victoria, 19, trans woman independent escort)

A male migrant escort describes one of several incidents of online abuse and threats he had experienced in:

> They asked for extra pictures, so I sent them… then the person didn't show up for the appointment and I messaged him again asking like, "What's happening?" and the guy said like, "Oh, I know your address, I have your phone number anyway and I have your, pictures and I know your profile's online, so I'm gonna like talk to the

police and, and also a journalist"…and I got really scared' (Ruz, 27 male independent escort)

In our survey, in most crime categories there were no major gender differences but more females than males had received threatening texts in the past 5 years (58.4per cent, n=274, and 46.8 per cent, n=58) and repeated unwanted email contacts in the past 5 years (66.1 per cent, n=310, and 55.6 per cent, n=69).

An important aspect to consider are the differences between independent sex workers who provide in person services such as escorts and BDSM workers with that of technology-mediated indirect sex workers (TMI's such as webcammers and phone sex providers). While the numbers of TMI workers in our survey sample was relatively small our data does show slight differences in relation to the types of crime experienced. For example, while 60.2 per cent (n=118) of those who worked exclusively as independent sex workers/escorts had encountered threatening texts, calls or emails in the past five years, 55.1 per cent (n=27) of TMI-only workers had experienced this. But clearly TMI's still do face such crime and this was demonstrated in interviews: *I've had messages that were telling me to go kill myself and stuff – but they were anonymous and it comes back to having a thick skin*' (Jane, 29, webcam worker).

Percentages were not dissimilar for verbal abuse, and relatively high proportions of both direct and indirect workers had experienced non-payment or attempts to underpay (55.6 per cent; n=109 of independent sex workers 53.3 per cent; n=40 of TMI-only workers). TMI workers appeared less likely to have experienced any form of violence in their work, most likely because they had sex work jobs with no in person contact.

Under-reporting to the police

Our research shows that the high level of under-reporting of crime to the police by sex workers in other sectors in the UK (Krusi et al., 2012; Klambauer 2017) is replicated

amongst workers in the online sector. Only 114 (23 per cent) out of 496 respondents who had experienced a crime stated that they had ever reported incidents to the police, proportionately more female than male respondents (25.4 per cent, n=93, compared with 16.5 per cent, n=15). More female than male respondents said they would be likely to report - 37.1 per cent, n=172 compared with 28.1 per cent, (n=34). Feis-Bryce et al., (2015) have described a range of specific factors that deter male sex workers from reporting crimes.

A range of factors shaped under-reporting in our study: fears that they and/or their sex work location would become identified by the police; fears that the police may take action against them or others they worked with; fears that criminal justice investigations would jeopardise their anonymity leading to identification of their sex work to family, friends, employers, acquaintances and the wider public; previous experience of unsatisfactory response from the police; fears about perpetrator reprisals; for some victims their own perceptions of the 'severity' of the incident and how they would be treated in the criminal justice system. Several described having low confidence in police responses and feeling alienated from the police:

> I've been threatened, and it's not very pleasant and all I've had to do is just ignore … I feel if the police over here were a little more accommodating, I would be more inclined to open up to them and report threats, and report any concerns I …But because the police alienate you over here (Alex, 53, female independent escort).

Fear that the police will be alerted to their involvement in sex work and this would be detrimental in some way leading to; 'complications', 'exposure', 'public identification' arrest or disruption of their business were all reasons for not reporting: Fears of exposure are highlighted by Cheryl:

I have to be honest and say probably not… because for the fact wouldn't be taken seriously and then there's always that risk that's somehow going to alert people what you are and who you are, my family for example. I think the fear of, like the police coming to my door and then people saying to my children, oh your mam had the police at her door and then I think I can honestly say, probably not, which I know is wrong. (Cheryl, 38, female independent escort)

Hannah felt that although she had the right to report, she was prevented because she feared the consequences:

I think about something happening to me and my instinct would be, to definitely report it to the police and I'd expect to be treated with respect and have it taken seriously. That would be my expectation and I'd advocate for myself if it wasn't. But on the other hand, it would bring things out into the open for me and I'd get into trouble. Because I probably would, you know, I'd ultimately be found out … even as a victim, you know, my employer would probably become alerted. So that's why I know I can't. (Hannah, 34, dominatrix and webcam worker)

In interview narratives we found a degree of confusion about the legalities around selling sex which undermined the desire of some participants to report incidents to the police:

It's something I would want to do, but I'm not sure how it works…, but if something more serious than that had happened, I would definitely consider going to the police, even though I'm not sure what they would do because I've read that it's illegal. But at the same time, I read it's legal, so I'm not really sure how things really are. (Victoria, 19, trans woman independent)

I was actually sexually assaulted, I never reported it to the police because I thought it was illegal what I was doing, I didn't know the legalities, I didn't really have anyone to turn to (Emma, 37, female independent escort)

Some respondents highlighted anxieties about repercussions from the perpetrator, also decisions not to report were based on an assessment about how the crime would be perceived by practitioners in the criminal justice system and whether it would be taken seriously:

> The first crime was like an instance of like sexual assault, which I didn't report to the police at the time because it was an in-call location where I was working by myself, where…The kind of perpetrator knew where I was. He would have known it was me… then another instance of assault was this summer, which was a sexual assault, which would probably not be perceived as such, I think, by like legal standards, but I would very much classify it as assault myself… being forced to perform a service that you wouldn't… coerced into a sexual activity because of the threat of violence… to me that's definitely assault but you know, it's probably not worth reporting. (Amber, 25, independent and dominatrix)

Several people described a 'threshold of seriousness' above which they would report *'If it was like a serious crime, obviously I'd go to the police' (*Lexie, 42, trans female independent) *'It depends how bad it got. I think I'd try and deal with it on my own initially'* (Alex, 53, female independent escort). The extent of this threshold varied:

> I would have to be very seriously injured… if somebody punched me in the face I wouldn't go to the police. If somebody robbed me I wouldn't go to the police. Recently someone tried to break into my house, now I don't think it was connected to my work, it might have been but it's probably not, it's probably just an attempted burglary. I just didn't want them coming round. But if I wasn't doing what I was doing—I probably would, it makes me very, very shy of the police' (Kate, 43, female independent escort).

Reporting anonymously to a third party was an option preferred or identified as more likely:

But I'd be reluctant to contact the police or have anything to do with the police. I think I'd be much more likely to want to report it anonymously. It would depend what it was and how serious it was. (Heather, 31, independent female escort)

I've had an incident where there was a problem at an in-call location where I was with another worker. And we reported it to the National Ugly Mugs scheme... I mean there is no way that we would have done that otherwise. (Amber, 25, independent and dominatrix)

Amongst the narratives of interview participants who said they would report a crime the key factors shaping this decision included: a sense of their right to justice and equal treatment, an understanding or belief that as they were working in a way that broke no laws the police could not take action against them, to prevent the offender repeating the crime, a belief that police responses to sex workers' as victims of crime had improved and they would receive a satisfactory response:

I would definitely report it to the police because that guy could not just attack an escort, he could attack anybody. If he's capable of doing that to, you know, an escort, he could do it to anyone really. So it's a bit, I know a lot of girls feel a bit uneasy about doing that, or they think they're not gonna be taken seriously, but I think things are a lot better now than they used to be. (Linda, 38, independent and webcam worker)

Interestingly in the survey of those who had ever reported incidents, 46.5 per cent (n=53) were quite or very satisfied with how the complaint had been handled by the police, with a smaller percentage (39.5 per cent; n=45) quite or very dissatisfied and a further 14 per cent (n=16) neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Interviewees who had reported work related crime to the police described a range of experiences and levels of satisfaction. The two following participants had very different experiences of the police in cases of harassment, 'doxing' and outing:

He posted my pictures all over the internet, making Facebook pages in my real name…to try and control me…I went to the police. In the end the police raided his house and took all his computer system away and destroyed it…they were very good. (Alex, 53, independent escort)

There was a terrible situation that my crazy neighbour found me on cam, he reported me to my landlord for what I did, he contacted a journalist about what I did and I had a reporter outside the house for two days that chased me down the street…he put a letter through one of my other neighbour's doors complaining about me. Passed that onto the police and they were like, yeah, it's not a criminal matter. I was furious. (Jane, 29, webcam model)

Overall, amongst internet sex workers there were mixed responses about involving the police in any crimes committed against them. Even amongst some of those who were very clear that they had a right to access justice and public protection, there were doubts about reporting work related crime, as this would mean drawing attention to themselves as sex workers in a context of stigmatisation and an ambiguous legal framework. These structural factors undermine sex workers legal consciousness and entitlement to protection and justice.

Safety strategies, screening and risk reduction

It has been established that sex workers develop a range of protective strategies (Sanders 2001; 2005; Harris, Nilan and Kirby 2011) and skills to manage and negotiate the risks involved in selling sexual services are part of the occupational culture (O'Neill 1994; Pitcher 2014). Beyond the Gaze research has found that at all stages of commercial sexual encounters negotiated or delivered online, particularly early interactions with clients, it is important that sex workers are enabled to put in place protective strategies (Ray 2007; Argento et al., 2016; Cunningham 2011). In our study, we asked sex workers if the internet

was important for their safety and about the safety methods they employed. For three quarters of survey respondents the internet was very (47.1 per cent, n=302) or quite important (28.1 per cent, n=180), with only 6.5 per cent (n=42) identifying the internet as not very or not at all important. The main benefits to safety of the internet identified in the survey were screening, accessing information about safety, being anonymous, being able to advertise on website platforms with safety features, enabling networking with other sex workers. Survey respondents explain:

> The anonymity and independence allows me to take my time to judge/screen a client. There is safety information available and certain resources are useful, on Platform 16 you can report timewasters/scams/abusive clients and the website then may issue a warning to other escorts. (Male, 25-34, escort/webcammer/sexual massage/BDSM)

> I can often use it to screen potential phone and cam clients. Obviously, it's not as useful as for escorting, but I do get long emails from potential clients and can search their username to see if they're a timewaster, genuine, dangerous, etc. There are blacklists of phone and cam clients (Female, 35-44, webcammer/phone sex).

The overall scope that the internet provided was considered a key resource for keeping safe, putting distance between the worker and the client and ensuring checking processes could be conducted before services were agreed.

Screening Strategies

Table 2 illustrates the methods survey respondents used to enhance their safety from a list of fourteen potential strategies. Choosing from these options identified a combination of online and offline methods forming multi layered safety strategies. This highlights the blended nature of safety repertoires adopted by online sex workers, with new online

techniques combined with established methods associated previously with risk reduction in both street and brothel settings (Moorman and Harrison 2016).

Table 2: Methods used to enhance safety at work

There were two dominant offline strategies which came up as important factors in safety management for most sex workers. The first was '*avoiding drugs or alcohol at work'* (64.2 per cent, n=357) and the third most common was seeing only or mostly regular clients (41.7 per cent, n=246). The second most utilised safety method was screening online: 44.2 per cent (n=246) identified that they carried out screening, which has been described as: *'a conscious and proactive strategy employed prior to meeting clients'* (O'Doherty 2011:11). Cunningham and De Angelo (2017) have identified the increased screening carried out by online sex workers as one of the factors making this method of work safer compared to street sex work. Argento et al., (2016:1) found that male online sex workers had more opportunity to screen potential customers compared to their street working counterparts, and they could use technology to better negotiate the terms of commercial sex transactions, which they argued 'reduced risks of violence, stigma'.

For many sex workers in the Beyond the gaze study who provided in-person services the online pre-booking interface with potential customers was very much linked to safety and considered an integral part of the screening process. They described how they used several online spaces, be that their profiles on advertising platforms, their own websites, email communication when discussing a booking, blogs and Twitter to reinforce messages about services, etiquette and expected client behaviour. These were all part of establishing boundaries and seen by sex workers as important in signalling the sorts of customers they wanted, avoiding misunderstanding, unrealistic or unreasonable customer expectations and shaping customer behaviour.

Free text responses in the survey enabled sex workers to compare their experiences of pre and post online sex work to highlight such advantages:

> With the internet, you can have photographs so people can have some idea of who they going to see when the door opens, they know what's going to happen because you can advertise what services you do and what you don't...There's far fewer nasty surprises than there was years ago with the newspapers…people can inform themselves now which makes everybody safer… people used to say 'it was this much on the phone and you'd say well not actually, you can't do that now because you say well look there's the site' (Female, 34-44, independent escort)

> I feel safer meeting a client who has booked me than I do if I was to meet someone off a dating site such as Grindr or Gaydar. This is because there is a lot more communication between myself and a client before we meet - and the communication is a way of negotiating (what activity is engaged with, timings etc) which reassures me. If a client requested to do something that I didn't want to do, I would turn them down. (Male, 35-44, escort/sexual massage)

Researching 'erotic entrepreneurs' in the USA, Hausbeck et al., (2017) also found the independent escorts in their study use a range of screening techniques including apps and tools from the ID verification industry. Such verification services were not identified by the UK based sex workers in our study, yet online sex workers as part of screening were using various online methods to verify customers identity or piece together information about them to inform decision making about customer bookings:

> Every single time I do an out call the first thing I will do..I will look at WhatsApp, see if they've got a presence on WhatsApp, see what they look like from their photograph. That way I know they can send me a photograph of their address via WhatsApp. … then Google the phone number, looking to see if there's any

presence which indicates that they are where they say they are, which is quite rare. But you do see things like someone who's involved in local football team or running, that sometimes happens. Or people who are self employed, their details come up…. I'm also looking to see if there's anything untoward. (Trans female, 35-44, escort, domination, BDSM).

If it's an outcall I require a utility bill, no exceptions, I require the booking reference from the hotel, no exceptions, real name … but for an in-call, essentially it just comes down to how they sound on the phone and then I put their number through Ugly Mugs and SAAFE and a client list that we have on Facebook… we have an anonymous Facebook account that we all have the login to … I use X (number checker application) as well… (Female, 20, escort)

Argento et al., (2016) stressed the greater opportunities and increased capacity which the internet gave male sex workers for screening and violence prevention. Screening practices using online technology in the Beyond the Gaze study were diverse and included: not taking a booking without having spoken to the customer over the phone or if a withheld number is used, or if it is a number they had previously blocked, using number check applications lined to sex industry warning schemes and generic online and phone number ID and blocking applications.

Another core method of safety strategies was arming oneself with information by sharing details on potential clients. Just over forty per cent (40.01per cent; n=223) shared information informally with colleagues for safety enhancement. Interview findings illustrated that such informal sharing could include a number of digital and online forms: for example, sharing via SMS or other messenger apps and through closed WhatsApp, Facebook and other social media groups.

I go on to various different forums and Ugly Mugs and I stick their number in every single one ... And I do use things like Google and social media to see if you can get

any clues about the person, without being intrusive to them. So that I can get an idea of what's going on behind that anonymous phone number… there's my advertising, there's my screening. SAAFE. I use local forums, cos they have ladies sections and I can search in there …I like to have as much information as I can. I've sometimes Googled them and found out things in newspaper stories … Such as somebody … but I found out that he'd had a conviction for harassing his former partner … so that's immediately flagged something up. Which is very useful. And I can pop things into like Facebook and stuff like that (Maggie, 41, independent escort)

Formalised information sharing systems were noted as an important source of keeping safe. National Ugly Mugs are a third-party report and alert service for sex workers and support projects. Individuals can alert NUM to an incident and then through legally compliant sanitised reporting alert the membership (of more than 4000 sex workers) to details that may prevent further crimes. NUM alerts were the sixth most indicated method for safety enhancement from our sample, showing that they do form part of the range of risk reduction strategies. The centrality of the internet to inform and develop safety strategies is clear through this wealth of data and in-depth analysis of how sex workers, operating online, take care of themselves. Yet, it is not simply the case that online technologies have over-ruled all previous methods. Indeed the combination of online and offline traditional methods is the most likely approach – what we have termed 'blended safety repertoires'.

Blended Safety Repertoires

Online and digital technologies play an important role within internet based sex workers safety practices, yet online tools are combined with non-digital safety methods, most of which are 'old school' strategies pre-dating the digital and online sex work revolution (Sanders 2005). Among the Beyond the Gaze survey respondents who felt the internet did not help with safety, one of the main points made in their additional comments were that although some information could be collected online, it was not sufficient to screen potential clients and that the worker's skills and other safety precautions were also important. One

female worker aged over 55 working across sectors stated: '*The internet brings in clients but does not screen them. I rely on phone chat and gut instinct*'; whilst a male working across indoor sectors aged between 25-34 commented: *'Most clients contact you by phone number. Phone number checkers and forums rarely bring up results. Assessing a person is ultimately up to you'.*

A clear example of where old and new strategies were used are the buddying systems where arrangements are put in place for a sex worker to notify another person when they are embarking on a booking, usually letting them know when, where and how long the booking will take place and agreeing a time they will notify the buddy when they are due to finish. Historically these were by landline phones, then mobiles and now through SMS and various messaging applications:

> I always message my friend where I'm going and who I'm meeting. This friend is the only other person who knows what I do. (Female, 25-34, independent escort)

> Giving a friend or partner the client and location details, and checking in. If I fail to check in, we have a procedure in place. (Non binary, 25-34, independent escort/BDSM)

The majority of other safety strategies identified were some type of action or measure involving physical target hardening measures, such as the deployment of CCTV, web cam or alarms or the management of and decisions about the physical and environmental spaces in which sex work took place. Working in specific sex work jobs, with no in-person contact was identified as a safety strategy, considered to reduce the possibility of certain crimes for both survey and interview participants. This was identified particularly by those who webcammed or did online chat only: '*Keeping all my work/interactions online and only working with recommended studios. (Transgender male to female, 18-24, webcamming); 'I only webcam therefore I don't personally interact' (Female, 18-24, webcamming/phone sex).* Indeed for respondents who only worked as webcammers, the internet enabled them to sell sexual

services without meeting clients in person. In interviews some described how this had been a specific consideration in their decision to webcam as opposed to escort or other forms of in-person sex work.

Blended safety repertoires, which combine the use of online and digital technology for a safety purpose, are now standard professional practice for the majority of internet based sex workers. Whilst 'old school' offline methods are still popular and seen as effective, online methods are now also central in sex workers repertoires and are perceived to have increased options for work related risk reduction and whilst many online sex workers recognise the limits to these methods, overall for the majority online methods are central for the safety of internet based sex workers.

Conclusion

Straightforward claims that indoor or online sex work is safe, or safer than street sex work need to be revisited in favour of analysis which captures and reflects the varied intersectional experiences and realities amongst online commercial sex workers. Sex workers experiences of crime vary across sectors and socio-demographics. Screening methods existed prior to the internet (Ray 2007) but our research further adds to the evidence that the organisation of online sex work and technology that shapes it has widened screening options for workers in the online sector, increasing risk assessment and reduction practices. Interview data showed the screening of potential clients was employed by the large majority of sex workers, particularly those offering in-person services, many of whom described adopting multi-layered screening strategies. Blended safety repertoires integrated traditional methods of screening with technologically enabled and enhanced modes of checking, verifying, communicating and assessing individuals before bookings are agreed.

Yet whilst safety is enhanced by technology, with lower levels of reported serious physical and sexual assaults experienced by both our survey sample and 62 interviewees, there are other forms of crimes which produced adverse effects which are prevalent *because* of technology. Crime online through the forms of harassment, stalking, threats to expose and 'out' sex workers, other threats to privacy and anonymity and the misuse of information are everyday worries and likely experiences for sex workers. In the decade that has passed since we wrote about designing out danger and enhancing safety through changes to the law, those arguments still stand, with no legal changes occurring during that time that improve the safety of sex workers.

In the UK, debates about sex work and development of governance frameworks to regulate prostitution continue to lie at the level of street sex work (through soliciting, kerb crawling and civil justice measures), modern slavery and legislation relating to brothels (Graham 2017; Feis-Bryce 2018). What remains a particularly disempowering element of the prostitution law is the fact that two people cannot legally work together (a law dating back to the Sexual Offences Act 1956), preventing crime reporting, disenfranchising workers from legally co-working, prohibiting legitimate organising together and preventing workers running their own business as any other. The consequences of this law are that the majority of sex workers in our survey (n=465) said that the single most positive change that would enhance safety would be a law reform to enable sex workers to work legally together without fear of prosecution or disruption. Our study supports Graham's analysis of the socio-legal framework as 'governing through crime' (2017:216) where she argues that '*In off-street sex work, sex workers often choose to work alone and increase their vulnerability to violence, or work within potentially economically exploitative conditions to gain protection from a third party. Therefore, while governing for the fear of crime, criminal law actually might increase the reality of crime for sex workers'.* Without a legal context for collective working the status of sex work is not given legitimacy but left open to vulnerabilities, placing sex workers at risk.

In the extensive policy, legal and policing attention given to prostitution in the UK over the past twenty years (Scoular and O'Neill 2007; Graham 2017; Sanders and Laing 2018) a very significant 'game changer' in terms of the organisation of the sex industry, has not been seriously considered. Only recently have the police recognised the enormity of the online sex industry (NCPP 2015) leading to a slow introduction of online sex work into police strategies and operational investigations (Sanders et al., 2018). Yet our findings suggest those strategies have tended in many force areas to have focused primarily on modern slavery rather than also addressing other crimes experienced by online sex workers who are not working under duress.

With this new awareness of the online sector, the lower levels of violent crimes, the emergence of digitally facilitated crimes and the use sex workers make of online platforms for safety the case for legal reform in the UK with safety at the epicentre is overwhelmingly evident. Law and policy need to recognise the option for independent working which the internet has provided (Sanders et al 2017) and how digital technology plays a crucial role for safety. Our findings highlight how legal and policy changes which seek to ban online adult services advertising and sex work related content within online spaces will have direct impact on the safety strategies online sex workers employ, preventing or making them more difficult to employ and undermining safety. The detrimental consequences of such laws are being lived out in the USA where in March 2018 amendments to law were passed. 'Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act' (FOSTA) and the 'Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act' (SESTA), have led to sex worker campaigns #letussurvive. These laws make online platforms liable for content generated by a third party, i.e. what their users say and do on their platforms. Under the laws it becomes a crime to operate "an interactive computer service" with "the intent to promote or facilitate the prostitution of another person". These pieces of legislation are already having huge ramifications for US sex workers (and others on platforms with US jurisdiction) in terms of livelihood and safety as platforms assess their risk for liability and some make changes in relation to adult commercial sex content prior to the law being

enacted in 2019. These changes will prohibit or limit the networking, peer support and information sharing which online spaces have enabled which are vital for screening and wider safety. Sex workers safety strategies will be disrupted or removed and workers may move to less safe forms of working. An initial impact survey of n=260 sex workers who had worked online, was carried out by a sex worker rights organization in the USA (COYORE-RI 2018) and found thirty percent (n=78) of participants reported having stopped screening clients, or having lowered their safety standards, sixty per cent (N=156) reported having taken sessions with less safe clients, out of financial desperation.

The UK can learn from the drastic consequences of internet regulation witnessed in the USA. Reform is required which enables sex workers to work together, which provides a framework within which sex work is recognised as labour, so employment, health and safety protections available to other workers are open to sex workers (Vanwesenbeeck 2017). Rather than a legalised system where premises are licensed by the state, we argue decriminalisation offers the best framework to tackle the issues of sex worker safety and rights, including access to protection from violence and other crimes (Armstrong 2017) to provide a base from which to challenge stigma and discrimination and to begin to address labour rights (Abel 2014). Under a decriminalised framework, police would be directed to work in the areas of greatest need, rather than implementing laws from the 1950s which are not fit for purpose in the modern day commercial sex era. One step in this direction would be reform of current brothel laws to allow people to work together. This would be a significant move forward to reducing crime, but should not be an end point. We conclude that current law and policy which creates a quasi-legal/criminal system, perpetuates rather than challenges discrimination and the stigmatisation of sex work. Critically the current law prevents individuals working together legally, mitigates against the legitimate status of independent self-employed sex workers and prevents existing employment law, health, safety and other regulatory frameworks being applied and further developed as protective measures for sex work. This is an adverse regulatory framework and is jeopardizing the

safety of sex workers, despite the clear advances to safety provided through digital technologies.

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Table 1: Top five crime types experienced in last 5 years

Rank	Crime Type	Per cent	Number
1	Persistent or repeated unwanted contact or attempts to contact through email, text or social media	65.1	417
2	Non-payment or attempting to underpay for services	53.8	345
3	Threatening or harassing texts, calls or emails	56.2	360
4	Verbal abuse	49.1	315

5	Repeated unwanted contacts or attempts to contact in person, or persistent following or being watched	29	186

Table 2: Methods used to enhance safety at work

		No	Per cent cases
Safety procedures	Buddy system	170	30.6%
	Having someone present in working location	129	23.2%
	Door security	61	11.0%
	Driver	58	10.4%
	CCTV	93	16.7%
	Panic button/alarm	45	8.1%
	NUM alerts	184	33.1%
	Sex worker forums	189	34.0%
	Ugly Mugs Ireland alerts	9	1.6%
	Phone number checker	144	25.9%
	Screening potential clients	246	44.2%
	Seeing only/mostly regular clients	232	41.7%
	Sharing safety information informally	223	40.1%

	Avoiding drugs or alcohol at work	357	64.2%
	Other safety methods	51	9.2%
Total		2191	394.1%

N=641