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# Beyond the Gaze: Practitioner Briefing

BEYOND THE GAZE

num national ugly mugs

University of Strathclyde
Humanities & Social Sciences

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ECONOMIC & SOCIAL RESEARCH COUNCIL

## Project aims and research methods

This briefing paper is a product of the Beyond the Gaze (BtG) research project which is the largest study to date of the safety, working practices and regulation of internet based sex work[1] in the UK. Funded by the ESRC and carried out by researchers at the Universities of Leicester and Strathclyde. The research had several key aims, including to facilitate the integration of online sex work into safety & health related provision. The study used a participatory action research model with community co-researchers assisting in all aspects of the project. Individual components of the study, undertaken between October 2015 and March 2017 were:

- An online survey of 641 sex workers of all genders based in and/or working in the UK, who use the internet in their work. The majority worked in independent indoor sectors, that is: independent sex workers/escorts, webcam workers, phone sex, BDSM[2] services providers or sexual massage. Many provide different forms of direct and indirect online sex work, moving between sectors according to need, this flexibility is facilitated by the internet.
- Semi-structured interviews with 62 sex workers of all genders.
- Semi-structured interviews with 56 police officers (16 forces areas across the UK were represented); and 21 individuals, including managers or moderators of online advertising platforms/ forums/safety schemes for sex workers, plus other experts on online regulation of commercial sexual services.
- An online survey of 1,323 customers of sex workers using the internet.
- An online survey of 49 projects providing support to online sex workers.
- Desk research to map online spaces where sex workers market and/or provide services.

With National Ugly Mugs (NUM) BtG established a Practitioners group to enable networking and sharing of practice regarding working with online sex workers and to support the development of practice guidance. This briefing presents summary findings & learning to inform practitioners involved in commissioning, delivering health and other support services who have contact with sex workers (including specialist sex work projects).

## Importance of the internet

BtG found the internet was of significant importance to sex workers in different aspects of their work, with 65.3% (n=419) agreeing or strongly agreeing they would not do sex work if it was not for the internet. This related particularly to those working exclusively in webcam/phone sex work, where 90.5% (n=67) tended to or strongly agreed with this statement, but also to more than two-thirds (67.5%; n=131) of independent sex workers/escorts who did not work in any other sex industry sector. The responses to the survey of sex workers showed the internet played a large part in improving working practices. For example, the following percentage of respondents agreed or strongly agreed the internet enable sex workers to:

- Decide where to work (89.4%; n=573), or when to work (89%; n=570).
- Work independently without having to rely on third parties (89.4%; n=573).
- Find out about their rights at work (81.9%; n=525).

For 38.3% it had improved the quality of respondents' working life. For many online sex workers online technology had provided greater control over working conditions and an increased ability to

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[1] The BtG definition of internet-based sex workers was: 'Sex workers based on their own, or in collectives, or working through an agency, who use the internet to market or sell sexual services either directly (i.e. interacting with clients in person e.g. escorting, erotic massage, BDSM) or indirectly (i.e. interacting with clients online e.g. webcamming').

[2] BDSM refers to those providing specialist services which fall into the fetish, bondage, domination and sadomasochism umbrella – here it refers both to in-person services, but may also apply to technologically-mediated services, for example, in the case of financial domination.

develop their own businesses and brand online. However, there were certain potential disadvantages, for instance:

- The internet had increased the amount of time respondents spent managing their work (64.1%;n=411) agreed or strongly agreed; and more than half of survey respondents were worried their friends and/or family might find out about their sex work through the internet (58.7%; n=376).
- Interviews also identified that key disadvantages were; as precarity (with the unpredictability of earnings) as well as stigma and privacy issues, with privacy sometimes jeopardised by: harassment, 'outing' and the misuse of information.
- Online and digital technology has created a plethora of new spaces for forms of sex work, new ways sex work is marketed, new issues and challenges for crime, safety, privacy, health and support services.

## Safety

Online and digital technologies play a key role within internet based sex workers safety practices with mobile and smart phone technology being embedded in many sex workers working practices. For three-quarters of survey respondents it was very (47.1%; n=302) or quite important (28.1%; n=180) for safety, with 85% (n=545) identifying it as important for monitoring enquiries and screening clients. This was one of the main benefits to safety from using the internet, alongside networking with others sex workers and accessing information about potentially dangerous clients.

Most sex workers blended online and offline techniques in their safety strategies. In the survey the most frequently identified safety strategy was a non-digital precaution, 'avoiding drugs or alcohol at work', with 64.2% (n=357) using this method and seeing only/mostly regular clients was the third most utilised method (41.7%; n=246). Screening potential clients (44.2%; n=246) was the second most utilised method, with a mix of online and offline screening techniques used. Sex work forums, networking and peer support were important for safety: the fourth most identified safety method was sharing safety info informally with other sex workers 40.1%% (n=223), 34% (n=189) identified sex worker forums as part of safety, they offered a place information could be exchanged about timewasters, dangerous individuals, some had warnings boards and were a source of 'buddies'. 30.6% (n=170) identified 'buddying' as a safety method utilised, buddies could be other sex workers, friends or partners. A third (33.1%; n=181) used National Ugly Mugs (NUM), which provides an online platform where sex workers can report incidents and receive alerts, it also offers a number and email checker feature. Such platforms are proving an important resource for online sex workers and our qualitative findings found sex workers who were members valued them.

## Crime

80.8% (n=518) had experienced at least one form of crime in the past five years. 62.4% (n=400) had experienced at least one type of crime in the past year, with the average number of types of crime experienced in the past 12 months being three.

*There were relatively high levels of digitally facilitated crime:* Persistent or repeated unwanted contact or attempts to contact though email, text or social media (65.1%; n=417 in past five years, 45.6% in the past year) and threatening or harassing texts, calls or emails were most commonly experienced (56.2%; n=360 in the past five years and 36.3% in the past year ). As part of these, threats to 'out' people about their sex work and to 'dox' i.e. posting sex workers personal details online were common.

Non-payment or attempts to underpay for services was also one of the key crimes experienced (53.8%; n=345), followed by verbal abuse (49.1%; n=315) in the last five years.

There was a lower incidence of violent and other crimes, most of survey respondents had not experienced violence in the last five years: the following numbers reported not experiencing these crimes in the past five years in their working capacity, sexual assault 77.8% (n=499), threat of violence 72.9% (n=467) & physical assault 84.4% (n=541). Yet levels of violence were reported at a level higher than work based violent crime reported in the British Crime Survey 2016, 7.6% (n=49) of our respondents had experienced sexual assault and 5% (n=52) physical assault in the last year, with 19.5% (n=125) and 12.9 % (n=83) experiencing these respectively in the last five years.

Crimes experienced had been under-reported to the police. Only 114 (23%) out of 496 respondents stated they had ever reported incidents to the police. Of those who had reported incidents, 46.5% were quite or very satisfied with how the complaint had been handled by the police. Only 33.1% (n=212) of respondents stated they were quite or very likely to report incidents to the police in future, whereas 39% (n=250) felt they were quite or very unlikely to report incidents.

**Privacy**

Protecting privacy was an important concern for the majority of sex workers, key privacy concerns were the risk of being identified, being outed, having data, content or identity stolen and used without consent and concerns online platforms used may be hacked (leading to loss of credits/income or personal data and confidentiality being compromised). Over one third of sex workers in our survey (37.4% n=240) stated information they had put online had been used without their consent, these included incidents where commercial benefit had been the motive and also where malicious identification, 'doxing' (personal details posted online identifying the individuals identity) and outing had been the motivation. The stigma associated with sex work heightened privacy and personal data protection concerns for many people in the study who were concerned about discrimination and judgemental attitudes. Family, friends, neighbours, current and future employers and authorities finding out about their sex work was one of the most prominent concerns expressed. More than half of survey respondents (50.6%; n=324) were concerned their neighbours might find out about their work. The majority of internet based sex workers in our study took conscious, considered actions to try to protect privacy. The salience of concerns about privacy and identification show the importance of providing confidential health and support services to sex workers.

**Use of internet for communication information and peer support**

Another important aspect of the internet was its role in enabling access to information and support, particularly support from other sex workers. The internet plays a key role in enabling sex workers to access peer networks and support. In the survey of sex workers, 61% of respondents (n=391) strongly agreed, and a further 19.7% (n=126) tended to agree the internet gave them access to such networks and support.

When survey participants were asked about the main websites or online platforms they used for advice or support those identified by the highest proportion of respondents were sex worker forums, with information, advice and support provided by other sex workers. There are a number of forums utilised by sex workers for advice about how to make best use of specific online advertising platforms but where wider peer advice can be accessed. One forum which was for service providers who used a market lead advertising site provided a space where sex workers could share information and advice on a range of sex work related matters including technical issues related to using the advertising platform, 45.7 % (n=211) of respondents said they used this forum.

A number of sex worker led forums have been established by sex workers in the UK which aim to facilitate peer information sharing and support. The second online platform most identified for advice by 39% (n=180) of respondents was one of the longest established of these. The forums people used were shaped by the sex work job they performed and gender identity, some forums have been developed specifically for certain cohorts. In survey open response data and interviews, respondents pointed to a range of forums utilised which were specifically for erotic dancers, webcammers, BDSM providers. Forums play an important role in fulling the advice and support needs of a considerable section of sex workers but use varies. Some use them regularly and others more occasionally, a section of sex workers choose not to participate. The safety benefits of forum membership (particularly info sharing about customers, warnings & access to safety buddies), combating the isolation of lone working, getting practical information from peers, a space to socialise with colleagues and a sense of community, plus providing a particularly useful resource for 'newbies' (people new to sex work) were the main benefits identified for forum participation

BtG found that a key trend amongst online sex workers is the use of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, or messaging apps such as Whatsapp and Skype to form private groups for professional networking, support and sharing safety information. As with forums these closed networks helped to reduce the isolation experienced by some independent lone workers. In our survey 34% (n=157) said they used Twitter and 16.2% (n=75) used Facebook for advice and support, Twitter was the fourth most popular source. Online spaces, including social media, forums are also being utilised creatively by sex workers as a vehicle for advocacy, for the individual and collective sex worker voice.

The findings from the BtG study suggest that recognition of the role played by online sex worker networks, peer support and advocacy is important for the development and delivery of the signposting, advisory and support work provided by health and other projects working with sex workers.

**Health and support services for online sex workers**
Analysis of sex worker interview data found a spectrum of use of health and other support services. Many sex workers who took part in interviews identified as resourceful, self-employed people, able to find information online and navigate services independently. As discussed in the previous section peer support was an important source of information, advice and support. A larger section described accessing mainstream sexual health services and/or sex work forums for support than referred to using specialist sex work provisions. For some the reason for this was there was no specialist provision in their area or the existing service was not seen as relevant to their needs. Key reasons identified in interviews as to why services weren't perceived relevant included they: were for sex workers involved in street/survival sex work with range of social disadvantages, did not have experience, knowledge or provisions to be able to provide relevant services for online/indoor sector, were perceived as having an ethos which directly or indirectly 'judged' some in the online sector or was at odds with the sex workers own ethos or approach to their sex working. For male sex workers services were perceived as women-centred. For those who accessed mainstream sexual health services for screening whether they disclosed their sex work to professionals varied.

There was a prevalent discourse amongst IBSW's interviewed that there was greater need for support amongst certain groups of 'vulnerable sex workers' most commonly identified were: those with problematic substance use and those experiencing exploitation such as modern slavery or trafficking. Specialist none-judgemental provisions were valued by the majority for their work with such 'vulnerable' groups but also for being there for all in health, safety crisis or other crisis. There was a section of sex workers interviewed who accessed specialist provisions for sex workers and feedback was positive on the whole, not only were the specific services accessed appreciated but the none judgemental and confidential approach.

Amongst interview participants specific information or support provision identified as relevant and useful to the needs of IBSW's were:

- Targeted sexual health services & free safer sex supplies.
- Emotional support & safe space for those who need it – including to redress the impact of working in a stigmatised profession and what was experienced as the isolation of lone working for some.
- Enabling spaces for peer support & sex worker led initiatives.
- An active but appropriate presence on sex work community forums & reaching out to online sex workers.
- Safety information, ugly mugs alerts, reporting options, intermediary role with police and support for sex worker victims of crime.
- Legal information and advice.
- Involvement in advocacy, policy influencing & challenging stigma.
- Information and advice about self-employment, particularly registering for tax and national insurance and aspects of business development.
- Specialist support for certain cohorts of 'vulnerable' sex workers in the online sector.

In the BtG survey of projects 71% (n=35) stated they were currently working with internet based workers, a quarter 25% (n=12) were not. Only 18 were able to provide numbers of OLSW's they had worked with in the previous year 2014-2015, numbers ranged from 1-100 and 61% (n=11) supported less than twenty.

Just over half of respondents 53% (n=26) to the project survey said they provided specialist targeted services for internet based sex workers, with 47% (n=23) not doing so. Amongst those who provided targeted provisions most commonly identified were *'having a profile with information about our service on online escort advertising platforms or forums'*, followed by *'contacting internet based sex workers via online information from escort advertising platform profiles'* and *'having profiles about our service on social media'*. Research with police found only a minority of forces who had a project in their area had one with a track record and expertise in providing services to people in the online sector.

Amongst the services who did not provide targeted provisions for IBSW's  the reasons identified for this were they: don't have the staff time and/or capacity to offer targeted provisions 65% (n=15), don't have the skills or knowledge to offer targeted provisions 48% (n=11), were not commissioned to work with the online sector 22% (n=5), have organisational aims & objectives which do not include offering a service to this sector 13% (n=3) and 17% (n=4) named other reasons. When projects surveyed asked what would help them enhance their services for online sex workers, the most commonly identified measurers were: training for staff at 78.7% (n=37), increased staff or volunteer resources to carry out the work (74.4%, n=35) ranked second, funding and guidance about how to deliver support ranked joint third (70.2 % n=33). These findings suggest considerable interest from projects in the enhancement of services for OLSW's with capacity, funding, training and guidance needs being the key matters to be addressed to enable further enhancement and development.

Professional networking via the Practitioners group during 2015-2017 highlighted the challenging context for services, with the majority wanting to enhance their provisions for internet based sex workers and trying to incorporate knowledge and practice shared but many restricted by capacity & resourcing issues. In only a minority of cases were projects securing greater capacity to extend services, indeed several members of the practitioners network at the start of BtG the initiatives who provided health and other support services to the online sector no longer existed by late 2017

due to cuts in funding and/or re-tendering or re-structuring of services. The significant impact of such has begun to be noted by other researchers and practitioners (Grenfell et al., 2016).[3]

Projects in the survey who provided targeted provisions for IBSW's were asked what they wanted to flag up as good practice, responses fell into six categories: effective methods of initial contact and ongoing communication, appropriate netreach worker approach & skills, specific provisions offered which met the needs of online sex workers, approaches to enable access for migrant sex workers, sex work community/peer and a flexible approach (flexibility in respond to the needs of sex workers and trialling new approaches and platforms).

The practice guidance being produced by BtG with NUM identifies a range of good practice principles for working with sex workers flagged by a number of expert bodies such as the World Health Organisation, UNAIDS, Global Network of Sex Work Projects which also apply to service delivery for IBSW's. These include amongst others: needs assessment & needs based interventions, confidentiality & privacy as key, none judgemental, sex worker inclusion/lead/peer support, community development & empowerment, do no harm, taking health & other provisions to community based settings, targeted specialist services for sex workers, flexibility, accessible, outreach/netreach, need to recognising diverse & particular needs e.g. for migrant & transgender people, recognising the social & legal context in which sex work takes place and impact on health, welfare and access to services, holistic services: addressing a wide range of health, social care & safety needs and human rights based approach. It will also cover a range of areas including: good practice principles & ethics, needs assessment & learning about the online sector, promotion of services & communication, netreach worker approach & skills (within current data protection and regulatory frameworks), specific provisions: meeting diverse needs in the sector, access for migrant sex workers, sex worker involvement/community empowerment, monitoring/evaluation, resources & useful links.
Services providers of health and support for sex workers need to ensure they have reviewed needs and practice in the light of the emergence of internet based sex work.

Commissioners in health, local government and representatives of trusts and grant giving bodies who have provided substantive funding to projects working with sex workers need to consider whether their criteria for allocation of funding or service level agreements have adequately taken into consideration the shift of sex work and it's marketing within online spaces. Also whether the services they commission and which are delivered are relevant and accessible to internet based sex workers and based on best practice as developed to date.

**Further information**

- A series of other briefings have been produced: https://www.beyond-the-gaze.com/about/briefings/
- Safety information for online sex workers is available https://www.beyond-the-gaze.com/safety-info/ and on the National Ugly Mugs (NUM) website https://www.uglymugs.org
- The practice guidance for working with online sex workers will be available on the NUM and the BtG websites later in 2018 https://www.beyond-the-gaze.com/practitioners/good-practice-guidance-for-working-with-online-sex-workers/
- A book 'Online Sex Work', based on findings from BtG is available at: http://www.palgrave.com/gb/book/9783319656298
- Follow BtG on  @beyondthegaze or  https://www.facebook.com/Beyond-the-Gaze-1496497424002122/
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[3] Grenfell, P; Eastham, J; Perry, G; Platt, L (2016) 'Decriminalising sex work in the UK', *BMJ* (354. i4459. ISSN 0959-8138 DOI: 10.1136/bmj.i445.

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