Beyond the Gaze: Briefing for Police on Internet Sex Work

Project aims

BtG is the largest study to date of the safety, working practices and regulation of internet based sex work in the UK. The aims of this research were to:

a. understand the wider theoretical significance of new technologies for changing the social practice of sexual consumption and the sex industry.
b. map the trends and understand the working practices in internet-based sex work markets[1] within the broader processes of the regulation and policing of sex work in the UK.
c. learn how safety and health services working with sex workers have responded to the needs of this sector.
d. facilitate the integration of online sex work into safety & health related provisions.

Note: this is not *a study of modern slavery and trafficking within the online adult sex work sector nor is it a study estimating the size of the online sex work sector generally or the percentage of those within who are victims of modern slavery or are coerced.*

Research methods

The study used a participatory action research model with community co-researchers assisting in all aspects of the project. There was an integrated service provision and developmental role built into the project team through a Research & Netreach Officer. Five stakeholder groups contributed to the project:
1) Police (the project had support from the National Police Chiefs Council, National Lead for Prostitution), national and local policy makers;
2) Sex workers who work online and the broader sex work community;
3) Sex work projects and practitioners working with sex workers;
4) 4) Web platforms and other marketing stakeholders;
5) Customers of sex workers.
Individual components of the study, undertaken between October 2015 and March 2017 were:

- 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 representatives across the UK; 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;
- online survey of 1,323 customers of sex workers using the internet;
- 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.

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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 is a term for a wide range of erotic services and 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.

UK online sex work landscape

- **Online sex markets have been pervasive since 2000**: research, policy, support service provision and policing are catching up with this shift of sex work and it's marketing to online spaces.
- **Mapping the online sex industry:** BtG found that attempting to assess the internet-based sex worker population by drawing on selected sites may not represent the diversity in online sex work & presents a number of limitations.
- **The online sector is the largest sector of the UK sex industry:** data provided by a market lead advertising platform for adult services showed that during a three-month period 1st August 2017-31st October 2017, 29,826 adult service providers were verified as advertising on the platform. This is only one platform and hence represents only part of the online sector in the UK. This illustrates the size of this sector especially compared to estimates of street sex work and indoor massage parlour/brothel workers made in previous research studies.
- **Geography:** online sex workers advertising via this platform and in the BtG survey were based across all regions and home nations of the UK in urban, suburban and rural areas, with concentrations in metropolitan centres of population.
- **Sex workers provide a broad range of services** via the internet, including direct services where marketing and communications are primarily online, but services provided offline; and more recent forms of indirect online sex work such as webcamming, instant messaging and self-produced internet content (e.g. personal websites, photos and videos). The majority (73%) were self-employed sole traders who worked alone.
- **Fluid and mobile sex work:** online and digital technology has facilitated more mobile and fluid forms of sex work across place and different services within the online sector and jobs in other areas of the labour market. Some survey respondents worked in more than one geographical area. Some stated that they travelled for work regularly, either to day appointments across their region of residence and/or to other regions, or staying in hotels or renting a property for work in the UK or other countries for a longer period. Such 'touring' has been further facilitated by the internet which enables sex workers to update their profile to include temporary locations, access marketing sites and make appointments.
- **Typology of online spaces:** The diversity of online working practices is reflected in the proliferation of online spaces used to provide or facilitate commercial sex transactions. BtG identified a typology of twelve sex work related online environments:

Type of online space
Escort directories/advertising platforms
Webcam platforms
Multi-service adult entertainment platforms
Dating and hook-up platforms with commercial advertising
Dating and hook-up platforms without commercial advertising
Customer Review Forums
Agency websites
Individual sex worker websites
Classified websites
Social media platforms/apps
Sex worker forums
Content delivery platforms

Changes in working practices: BtG found that the internet was of significant importance to sex workers in different aspects of their work, with 65.3% (n=419) agreeing or strongly agreeing that 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 for 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, the following percentage of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with these statements about the internet:

- it enabled sex workers to decide ***where*** to work (89.4%; n=573), or ***when*** to work (89%; n=570);
- it also enabled respondents to work ***independently*** without having to rely on third parties (89.4%; n=573);
- it facilitated monitoring enquiries and screening clients (85%; n=545);
- it enabled workers to find out about their rights at work (81.9%; n=525);
- it gave access to sex worker networks and peer support (80.7%; n=517);
- it had improved the quality of respondents' working life (78.3%; n=502).

However, there were certain **disadvantages**:

- the internet had increased the amount of time respondents spent managing their work (64.1% agreed or strongly agreed; n=411);
- more than half were worried that their friends and/or family might find out about their sex work through the internet (58.7%; n=376).

Crime and Reporting

- **Experience of work related 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. The average number of types of crime experienced in the past 12 months was three.
- **There were relatively high levels of digitally facilitated crimes**: persistent or repeated unwanted contact or attempts to contact though email, text or social media (65%) and threatening or harassing texts, calls or emails (56%) were most commonly experienced. 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%), followed by verbal abuse (49%).
- **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).
- **Comparing independent sex workers/escorts who worked exclusively in that sector with technology-mediated indirect sex workers** (TMI's such as webcammers) who worked in no other sectors: 60.2% (n=118) of those who worked exclusively as independent sex workers/escorts had encountered threatening texts, calls or emails in the past five years and 55.1% (n=27) of TMI-only workers. Percentages were not dissimilar for verbal abuse, and relatively high proportions of both groups had experienced non-payment or attempts to underpay.
- **Hate crime:** Just over 40% (n=258) of those who had experienced any crimes felt these were motivated by the perpetrator's attitudes towards sex workers.
- **Under-reporting:** Only 114 (23%) out of 496 respondents stated that they had ever reported incidents to the police, proportionately more female than male respondents (25.4%, n=93, compared with 16.5%, n=15). Of those who had ever 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.

- **Contact with police:** Most respondents 83.2% had not had any police contact during their work.
- **National Ugly Mugs:** NUM was an important initiative for third party reporting, information and support for sex workers who had been victims of crime. A third (33.1%, n=181) used NUM, which provides an online platform where sex workers can report incidents and receive alerts, it also offers a number and email checker feature. Ugly Mugs Ireland provides a similar scheme for sex workers in Ireland. Such platforms are proving a valuable resource for online sex workers and sex workers who were members valued them. Sex workers also share information about problematic customers via online sex worker forums and groups, some of which have alert functions, these forums are a source of peer support.

Safety strategies

- **Importance of internet in safety:** The internet plays an important part in safety at work - for three quarters of survey respondents it was reported as very important (47.1% n=302) or quite important (28.1% n=180) for safety. Only 6.5% (n=42) thought it was not very or not at all important. 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. The main benefits to safety from using the internet related to being able to screen potential clients, to network with others and to access information about safety, with sharing info about potentially dangerous clients being central to such networking. Most sex workers blended online and offline techniques in their safety strategies.
- **Sex worker forums & info sharing:** 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% (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.
- **National Ugly Mugs:** 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. Ugly Mugs Ireland provides such a scheme for sex workers in Ireland, 1.6 per cent (n=9) used Ugly Mugs Ireland Alerts. Such platforms are proving an important resource for online sex workers and our qualitative findings found sex workers who were members valued them.
- **Presence of others as a deterrent to crime:** just under a quarter 23.2% (n=129) identified having someone present in their working locations as a method for enhancing safety strategy, 9.5% referred to door staff (n=61) and 10.4% (n=58) used a driver.

Policing Online Sex Work

BtG was the first UK wide study to examine current policing of internet based sex work. An initial analysis of findings from interviews with police officers highlight the following key themes:

- **Infancy:** many forces identified their work on the policing of online commercial sex markets as in its infancy. There was a continuum along which forces can be placed from little knowledge and police engagement with online markets, to the other end, where proactive operational, strategic and community relations work was taking place.
- **Historic focus on publicly-visible sex work:** many felt that police policy on sex work had been focused on street sex work and the indoor massage parlour and sauna sector. Sex work has increasingly moved into internet-mediated private spaces yet law enforcement has traditionally

focused on more publicly-visible forms of sex work. Police forces had little knowledge about online sex work practices, yet there are legal and safety implications which need to be considered.

- **Varying knowledge & limited intelligence:** overall familiarity with online markets varied across the country. Most forces felt that they were still learning about the nature and extent of online sex work and that intelligence was limited. In many instances police forces had not developed an organised approach to data collection.

- **Mapping & monitoring:** some police force areas were considering, or had already commenced some form of scoping exercise into internet-based sex work and some had already undertaken their own mapping exercise to inform their future approach. These varied in terms of the scope and methodology, with resourcing flagged as an issue by many. Only a minority of forces mentioned that they had utilised or were considering using existing online search tools used more generally by police analysts as a tool for aiding mapping of online commercial sex work markets. A small number of forces were undertaking more routinised regular monitoring on online platforms, this tended to be part of work to identify and investigate modern slavery and trafficking.

- **Awareness:** forces appeared to be reaching a critical mass point in terms of an awareness that the online sector was a significant sector and that they should at the very least be aware of its scope and nature.

- **National & specialist resources:** when asked about national resources/ tools to support policing forces identified the NPCC guidance on sex work generally and pointed to the NCA as an organisation that may be developing tools. The majority were not aware of specialist specific resources, guidance or tools and were not aware of national coordination of monitoring of the online sector.

- **Modern slavery & vulnerability/safeguarding agendas**: the two main ways that forces were engaging with online markets was to identify and respond to modern slavery and public protection agenda, specifically within 'vulnerability' and safeguarding work.

- **Range of vulnerabilities:** some police forces identified that amongst online sex workers some experienced a number or vulnerabilities or indeed their involvement in sex work meant that they were targeted by a range of criminals which made them a 'vulnerable' group. A primary element of activities in relation to monitoring sex markets was the identification of certain indicators of vulnerability and exploitation.

- **Activity linked to modern slavery:** most police activities in relation to internet sex work were within a modern slavery remit. There appeared generally to be less awareness of the independent/voluntary nature of much online sex work.

- **'Pop up brothels':** some police participants referred to the identification of 'pop up brothels' defined as properties (be they houses, flats, holiday lets) that were rented temporarily and used for sex work, with services being advertised via the internet. Most forces who mentioned such premises focused on these as places where migrant sex workers may be coerced and where potential victims of slavery may be located. Fewer forces acknowledged that these could be premises where voluntary sex workers, both UK nationals or migrants, worked of their own volition. These findings highlight the need for a distinction between the use of temporary premises by independent workers and their use in circumstances which involve, trafficking, slavery and coercion

- **Challenges of identifying victims:** officers who had been involved in cases or initiatives related to slavery or trafficking identified the challenges involved in identifying if a sex worker was a victim of trafficking/slavery/coercion and those who might be working of their own volition, especially in circumstances where time pressures were present and disclosures had not been made.

- **Modern slavery identification, actions & impact:** There was some consciousness amongst officers that certain indicators of slavery and exploitation used might also flag up sex workers who were not trafficked or otherwise exploited, although this was not the intention of specialist teams. The potential implications of police actions related to modern slavery work which also involved those working of their own volition included disruption of sex workers' business, stigmatisation and potential threats to their safety if they are forced to work differently or to move from their current

premises because their privacy has been compromised or due to increased reluctance to trust and report crime to the police.

- **Community development work less common:** A minority of forces pointed to approaches in which they had ongoing community development work with sex workers and projects to build trust to better facilitate reporting of crime and coercion including disclosures of slavery & trafficking.
- **Proactive work rare:** proactive work with the online sector (beyond the trafficking and modern slavery agenda) was rare, one force stood out in terms of such work and this had been enabled by a grant from the Home Office, several forces had plans to develop work in this area.
- **Under-reporting of crime:** only a minority of forces referred to specific cases of crimes against online sex workers that had been reported to them and investigated. Force areas who had a sex work liaison officer/s, whose remit was all sectors, described cases they had dealt with. Most of forces felt crimes against internet based sex work were under-reported to them.
- **Limited involvement in safety work**: few forces had been involved in safety work with online sex workers or targeted initiatives to improve the reporting of crime amongst this sector to the police. The force area where a grant had been received for work with the indoor and online sector was one of a small number of notable exceptions.
- **Focus on female sex work:** overwhelmingly policing of online markets to date had focused on female sex work, few forces mentioned male sex work.
- **National guidance approach:** many forces said that the same approach they applied to sex work more widely was being, or would be applied, to online markets in new strategies on sex work. Forces (in England and Wales) referred to the National Police Chiefs Council guidance on sex work with most seeing this as having changed the balance of policing priorities in relation to sex work and identified that either existing/developing strategies would be informed by this guidance, which emphasised the safety of sex workers with a move away from enforcement
- **Limited interaction with online companies:** many police forces had limited interaction with online companies. While some forces were familiar with and used specific links on major platforms for criminal justice-related enquiries others were not aware of this facility. Some forces used certain major platforms to search for information, but many did not engage directly with the managers of these platforms, except occasionally in relation to specific operations. Some felt that they had good cooperation from online platforms.
- **Few force areas with support project with online sector expertise:** most officers were aware of, and (where they existed) worked with local partner agencies, such as sex work support projects. But 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 including netreach.

Law, Policy & Regulation
- **Mixed police views on regulation**: there were mixed views amongst police officers about how sex work should be regulated. Only a small number of police participants felt there should be more stringent regulation of websites advertising sexual services. Others felt this could reduce co-operation between sex workers, police and websites, make it more difficult to identify and investigate those who exploit sex workers such organised crime groups, driving the sector underground and possibly onto the dark net, making it even more

challenging for police forces. These potential impacts were seen as particularly heightened with current limits to resources and cyber skills capacity. Yet officers from several forces felt online advertising platforms should be more proactive in measures to safeguard against exploitation, trafficking and slavery.

- **Sex worker views:** the majority of respondents to the sex worker survey felt offering or advertising indirect or direct sexual services online and purchasing these services should be legal, as should working in the same premises with other sex workers and the involvement of third parties such as online platforms, receptionists or landlords. Many sex workers in our study felt stigma associated with both direct and indirect sex workers was heightened by a confusing legal and policy context, in which sex work had semi-legal status, which undermined safety.

- **Future law & regulation:** Across all groups involved in the research there were not consistent views on the best way to improve law and policy but there was a general consensus that the priority was to ensure greater safety and protection for sex workers and that this at the very minimum could involve legal change which permitted a small number of sex workers to share premises without fear of prosecution.

Further information

- **Go to the BtG website** https://www.beyond-the-gaze.com

- **Follow BtG on** 🐦 **@beyondthegaze or** [f] https://www.facebook.com/Beyond-the-Gaze-1496497424002122/

- **The book 'Internet Sex Work', based on wider findings from BtG is available from:** http://www.springer.com/gb/book/9783319656298

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