



# Women Who Buy Sexual Services in the UK

END OF FUNDED PROJECT REPORT – BRITISH  
ACADEMY/LEVERHULME SMALL RESEARCH GRANT

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## The Project

The women buy sex (WWBS) project sought to explore women's experiences of buying sexual services in the United Kingdom (UK); what they purchase, their reasons for buying sex, how they negotiate their physical and sexual health safety, and how their experiences feed into current policy debates. The 18 month project was funded by a British Academy/ Leverhulme Small Research Grant and ended on 1<sup>st</sup> February 2016. The proposed project intended to interview 12 male/female/trans escorts who sell sex to women, as well as 12 female clients in the UK. We also intended to host an end of project event, present at two national conferences and begin writing two journal articles.

This project sought to build on previous research that has documented how female sex buyers travel to destinations such as the Caribbean and Asia to purchase sex (e.g. Cabezas, 2004; O'Connell Davidson & Sanchez-Taylor, 1999; Romero- Daza & Freidus, 2008; Sánchez-Taylor, 2001). In addition, it addresses an absence of research on women who buy sex in the UK, as much previous research on clients has focused on men (e.g. Sanders 2008; Hammond, 2015). The findings therefore contribute to growing an empirically grounded UK sex work research base and consider the place of female sex buyers in UK policy debates, which have increasingly sought to criminalize clients.

## Research Activities

The project far exceeded the proposed plans:

- We have presented at seven national and international conferences/seminars.
- We have interviewed 38 providers of sexual services to women and 12 women who have self-identified that they have paid for/seek to pay for sexual services.
- Secured a monograph contract with Routledge due to be published in 2018.
- Secured institutional funding from Lancaster University to develop a project website ([womenwhobuysex.org](http://womenwhobuysex.org)).

- Consulted regularly by both national and international press to take part in television (e.g. RT TV; Televisa Mexico) radio interviews (e.g. BBC Radio Berkshire; Radio 5 Live, 2015), newspaper interviews (e.g. The Independent; The Telegraph, Daily Mail, The Sun, The Mirror, The Times – all 2015) magazines (Closer; Cosmopolitan - 2015).
- Invited to speak at festivals and events nationally and internationally (e.g. Academia Film Olomouc, International Festival of Science Documentary Films, Hungary, 2015; Sick Festival Brighton, 2015).
- Consulted on the development of five UK documentaries on male escorts and female clients in 2015 (e.g. Minnow Films; Winfall Films; Off the Fence Productions; TiFiNi; Kindle Entertainment – all 2015)
- Established a Facebook and Twitter page & wrote a blog post.
- Secured institutional funding from Lancaster University to employ two undergraduate research students to assist the project.
- Secured institutional funding from Lancaster University to employ four undergraduate student interns to develop health and safety guidance for female clients to be uploaded on the WWBS website.
- Currently working on two journal articles.

## Research Design & Methods

In the bid application we proposed to undertake the research in Manchester and Leeds, UK. At that stage, we were unaware if female clients purchased sexual services in those cities, but based on a general internet search we found providers advertising in those locations. However, due to the hidden, secretive and stigmatized nature of the sex industry and pertinently the lack of space for female clients to meet or communicate, we broadened the location of the study. We discovered that many clients and sex workers/escorts travel for work purposes and sometimes purchase sexual services whilst abroad and thus interviewed female clients and providers in Australia, Canada, and Cyprus.

Given the international and secretive nature of this project, we conducted semi-structured interviews online, by telephone and in person, depending on the location and desires of our participants. Most of the interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed by a member of the research team. Each participant chose a pseudonym name, signed a consent form and was given an information sheet and details of the twitter, Facebook and website. Interview questions were piloted and scrutinized by the research team prior to the main study.

Interviews formed the majority of research data. However, we also received communication from people through the project website; receiving over 350 email requests/comments from providers (current and prospective) and clients. These included requests to take part in the study; offers, mainly from men, to provide sexual services to women and requests to purchase sexual services. We also downloaded responses made on newspaper column pages to newspaper articles based on our research project. Although this data may not be considered as reliable as our interview data, we believe these responses may give some indication of attitudes towards the research and the topic of inquiry.

## Advancements in Knowledge & Understanding

Given that an additional 26 interviews were undertaken and further information has been gained from the website and newspaper responses, we are still analyzing data. Our preliminary analysis does however suggest a number of themes (explored below). From this analysis we have secured a monograph contract with Routledge, due to be published in 2018.

### *Motivations (buying sex)*

Findings from the project demonstrate that there are significant similarities between current literature on the motivations of male clients, and what we found from interviews with providers and female purchasers. For example, research has identified that the reasons why some men have paid for sexual services includes motives such as there being no emotional ties or threats posed to their primary relationship; their partners not fully

satisfying their sexual needs; seeking sexual partners with specific physical features (see for example Campbell 1997; McKeganey and Barnard 1996; Vanwesenbeeck, et al. 1993). These motivations were also identified in our research.

We also found however, that sexual service providers identified that they believed there are fundamental differences between their male and female clients. In particular they claimed that their male clients were more specific about the sexual encounters in terms of what they sought to purchase, whereas *some* women preferred more ‘natural unfolding’ meetings. They claimed that women sought companionship and intimacy and were much less specific than their male clients about what sexual services they wanted during the meeting. Some providers also stated that for them the experiences of providing services to women were more sensual, relaxed and romantic. However, although providers identified some differences between their male and female clients, in the book we will explore whether these differences are distinct given that male clients also seek companionship, affection and intimacy. As we will explore the motivation for companionship and intimacy resembles the ‘girlfriend experience’ that has been documented in the literature on male clients (Sharp and Earle 2002).

### **Sexual health**

Within the narratives provided by participants, there were numerous examples of good sexual health practice. Some sex workers and clients discussed the importance and their insistence of condom use for oral/vaginal/anal sex. Other good practice revolved around sexual health testing with sex workers discussing the importance of regular medical testing. The frequency varied from weeks to months. There was however, less emphasis by clients about the need to be tested.

Despite lots of good practice, there was evidence that not all participants engaged in this good practice. There was divergence across the sample in relation to unprotected sex. Some sex workers reported never being asked for unprotected sex and never offering it. Others stated that some clients have requested unprotected sex but that they have refused

such bookings or managed to encourage the client to engage in safe sex. Whilst some sex workers explicitly offered explicitly unprotected penetrative sex.

There were a number of other 'risky' sexual practices discussed by providers of sexual services to women. For example, some sex workers discussed doing their own visual sexual health screening. Whilst this is useful to spot any obvious issues, some STD's do not have obvious symptoms that can be diagnosed in such a way. Diseases and practices were placed in a hierarchy. For example, most participants saw oral sex (on a female) as carrying very little risk and were happy to engage in this without the use of protection such a dental dams. Oral sex (on a male) appeared to carry more risk and some chose to only engage in this with a condom whilst other were happy not to. Penetrative sex was seen as the most risky practice and led condom use. These practices are similar to other off-street sex work transactions (see Sanders, 2008; Vanwesenbeek, 2001).

These findings suggest that there is some misinformation or lack of awareness about sexual health. It suggests that more work needs to be undertaken in health promotion raising awareness about safe sexual health practices to ensure that people are able to make informed choices about their sexual health. However, it is important to point out that risky sexual practices occur across the general population and not just those who engage in paid for sex.

### Safety

The discussions around safety provided mixed results. A minority of sex workers saw female clients as potentially dangerous whilst in the main others did not. For others, bookings made for only one person posed little risk but concerns were raised about bookings made for couples. From the data analysed thus far, sex workers seemed more concerned about their safety than clients did, and overall safety did not seem to be a significant preoccupation for female clients. However, both clients and sex workers discussed strategies for staying physically safe. There was overlap between the two groups. For example, participants in both groups discussed telling people where they were going (not always telling people they were off to buy/ sell sex though) and meeting in public

places or hotels and seeing regular sex workers/ clients. Participants felt that having access to information about the person, or place they were visiting was important to safety. For example, participants used feedback from websites to help improve the chances of meeting a genuine client/ sex worker. Others used technology to allow them to look up the place they were visiting to enable them to plan an escape route if it should be needed. Many sex workers discussed using their gut /judgement when arranging and arriving at bookings. Pre-meeting communication such as via email or over the phone was an important screening tool. Again, these practices and concerns about safety mirror issues raised in the sex work literature on female providers and male clients (see Sanders 2005).

### **Policy & Law**

Discussions on policy identified that many providers of sexual services had some knowledge of the legal framework that surrounds prostitution and sex working. Although many also acknowledged that their knowledge was partial, incomplete and dated. Participants felt that the laws surrounding the sex industry are ambiguous and unclear, making it difficult for them to know whether they are operating in contravention of existing laws. They also felt that current laws were increasing the dangers posed to sex workers and their clients, particularly the criminal offences of soliciting and brothel keeping because the industry often gets pushed underground, as those involved seek to avoid criminal prosecution.

Participants also highlighted that there are gender biases in current policy and law in that female clients are assumed not to exist. A small number of clients and providers identified that the diverse and complex nature of the industry is overlooked and that only monogamous heterosexual sex is recognized by policy makers. This diversity in sexual practices is identified in existing research that has documented the range of sexual services provided by lesbian, gay, trans and couple providers (Elifson, et al. 1993; Harcourt & Donovan 2005; Kulick 1998).

The findings suggest that greater awareness and understanding of female clients is needed. Policy documents and political debates that have surrounded prostitution in the

UK and abroad have identified 'demand' as male and this is perpetuated in public attitudes (Kingston, 2013). Neither single female clients nor couples are identified in law or policy and despite gender neutral language in existing UK laws, the policy debates and documents that have supported their implementation have demonstrated gender biased assumptions about clients (Kingston, 2010; Smith & Kingston, 2015). In addition, the findings suggest that greater awareness and understanding of existing prostitution laws are needed, given that providers and female clients admit that their knowledge is partial, incomplete and dated.

### **Research Challenges**

This research project has also highlighted the methodological challenges of conducting research with female clients. Unlike male clients, who communicate through sites such as 'punternet', very few women have been known to post on these sites. Similarly both the street sex scene and brothels predominantly cater for male clients making access to female clients much more difficult. Previous research has utilized such venues and online sites to access clients (see Sanders, 2008; Hammond, 2010), and although attempts were made through these avenues, we did not recruit any female clients this way.

## **Funding**

We were awarded £9,954.00. Funds awarded enabled us to employ a research assistant (Scarlett Redman) for 6 months, part-time. It also enabled us to provide participant fee incentives to 20 participants. The end of project event is scheduled to take place on 14th April 2016.

Detailed breakdown of costs:

RA 0.5 for 6 months	£8,514.17
Participant fee incentive, £20.00 per person	£400.00
End of Project Event @ Lancaster University	£ 837.50



Travel Expenses	£ 202.33
Total Spending	£9,954.00

## OUTPUTS

The main output of the project includes a monograph, titled 'Women who buy sex: Intimacy, Companionship & Pleasure' to be published with Routledge in 2018. To our knowledge, there is no comprehensive text which explores the experiences of women who pay for sex who cannot be categorized as 'sex tourists'. Thus, this book will be an important and significant contribution to existing literature on prostitution and sex work. It questions current understandings of the purchasers of sex in a policy and theoretical context that often see clients as only male; thus challenging prevailing stereotypes. It will also showcase rich empirical qualitative data from the WWBS project, in order to examine the complex, nuanced and insightful experiences of female sex buyers in the UK. A key point is the need to move beyond the boundaries of traditional understandings of prostitution and sex work and challenge dominant assumptions that only men pay for sexual services. The book will hence be a useful resource for academics, students, researchers and policy-makers who wish to understand the experiences, motivations and characteristics of women who pay for sex and of those who sell sexual services to women.

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