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Chapter

Victimized Female Sex Worker Representation in the UK News Media

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Abstract

Sex workers face a high level of violence as well as discrimination and stigma in regard to their profession. This chapter examines how British news media portray female sex workers when they are victims of violent and sexual crimes. The authors used discourse analysis to better understand how the victim's status is perceived, created, or changed through the reporting of media. Four news organizations were chosen for data collection: Independent, The Guardian, Daily Mail and The Sun. Using an inductive approach, six discourses were found *Victim blaming*, *Labelling*, *Media sensationalism*, *Vulnerability*, *Legitimisation*, and *Any woman*. Nils Christie's *Ideal victim* theory provided a framework to discuss the results. While *Victim blaming*, *Labelling* and *Media sensationalism* question the victim's motive to be in the place of the crime, the activity the victim engaged in, and their responsibility in regard to the victimisation they suffered, *Vulnerability* and *Legitimisation* portray the victim as weak, according to the theory. Implications for victims and society are discussed.

Keywords: victims, homicide, sexual violence, sex workers, news media

1. Introduction

Sex work and the rights of its workers have been regarded as an important debate with the aims of either abolishing the sex trade completely or protecting its workers at all costs [1]. A topic for discussion throughout history, it has been often described as one of the world's oldest professions, although also considered by some as the world's oldest oppression [2]. Are the women trading sexual favours for money oppressed and in need of rescue or are they instead empowered and using their bodies and sexuality for their own monetary gain? Sex work and the discussion surrounding, it was found to be heteronormative and often fortified existing stereotypes regarding gender [3]. Sex work is sometimes considered as sexual relations between consenting adults, but how much consent there is when sex workers' bodies are sold and consumed as a commodity? According to Moran and Farley, "cash is the coercive force" [4].

Prostitution in the UK is not illegal, with the exception of Northern Ireland. It is not unlawful to sell or buy sexual services, but the activity is regulated. For example, brothels are illegal, as well as the exploitation of individuals for gain (i.e., controlling prostitutes). Buying and selling sex in public spaces are considered acts that can cause

public disturbances and are also illegal. These regulations were introduced to minimize the exploitation of people working in the sex trade. In the UK, the term prostitution, includes both street and different forms of indoor sex work covering brothel workers, escorts and workers in massage institutions, where sexual acts are offered. In a report by the House of Commons in association with the Home Affairs Committee, it was revealed that around 11%, or 2.3 million, of British men had previously paid for sex on one or more occasions [5]. The most common way of initial contact between sex workers and clients was online as opposed to contact made on public streets. Although the average age for initiating sex trade activities was found to be 20–24 years, it was a common practice for sex workers to advertise themselves as younger than their real age so that they were able to attract a larger number of customers. The report noted that many sex workers started selling sexual services with the goal of earning more money, and some women described themselves as single mothers trying to support their families.

In 2016, it was estimated that around 72,800 individuals were involved in prostitution throughout the UK [5]. In 2021, that number had raised to 105,000 individuals [6]. The large difference between the two statistics could be the result of an effective growth in the number of sex workers. Changes in the work market's structure due to the COVID19 pandemic, with increased job loss in some sectors, might partially explain the variation. However, since there is no need for anyone working in the sex trade in the UK to register, it is very likely that those numbers are only the tip of a much larger hidden population in the country and therefore explaining any variation is only speculative.

Prostitution was described by the House of Commons and the Home Affairs Committee as the most dangerous profession in the world where many workers recounted being victims of violence from sex buyers [5]. A survey included in the report of this governmental organisation found that 49% of workers in the sex trade reported having daily concerns about their own safety [5]. The report also informed about 152 sex workers' victims of murder between 1990 and 2015. On the other hand, the report informed of 456 sex workers prosecuted for loitering and soliciting in 2014–15, but it did not show any statistics about the number of men prosecuted for violence, rape or sexual exploitation of a sex worker.

Prostitution is a complex issue interwoven with social problems, such as homelessness, violence and alcohol and drug abuse that increases the vulnerability of workers to victimisation during sex trades and places them at high risk for homicide [7]. Furthermore, sex workers often face discrimination and stigma potentiated by mainstream discourses in part reproduced and maintained by news media [8]. The stigma actively hinders sex work victims from openly speaking out and being seen as non-participants in their victimisation [9]. In order to provide a safer environment for the people engaged in sex work, stigma and discrimination need to be fought. To aid sex workers who have been the victims of violence, we first must recognise them as victims. Nuanced media representation could help fight against existing stigma and open the door for better support of sex workers [10].

2. Media's rhetoric

Media coverage has a direct effect on both the general public opinion and on the minorities described in the news. Analysing the rhetoric displayed in the news articles can help us understand the laypersons' views on sex work and expose stigmatization biases [11]. In this regard, several scientific investigations are noteworthy.

A study by McCracken pointed out important differences in the media's discourse when reporting on men who purchase sexual services versus when reporting on female prostitutes [11]. The men were portrayed as responsible for their own actions, while, at the same time, characterized as 'confused' and 'pathetic'. On the other hand, the news depicted an image of female sex workers as lost, desperate women entrenched in drug use, and homelessness. In general, the women were seen as sellers of sexual services in order to be able to survive or escape violent relationships or sustain their drug use habits. McCracken's study showed how media, through its emphasis on the sex workers' personal choices, portrayed the women as the source of the problem. The narrative presented the women as having the choice to leave prostitution and drug use. The media's discourse tended to focus on the individual level, which easily leads the public to view the sex trade as a problem of the participating individuals and not a societal problem to be dealt with on a larger scale [11].

In a different study, Wallinger discussed how victims are affected by the media's representation of human trafficking [10]. The author found that a story had to be considered newsworthy by the editor in order to be published, and survivors of human trafficking whose stories were not deemed newsworthy were given limited space in the news. Wallinger hypothesised that the public would be unlikely to gain an accurate perspective and form opinions on the issue of human trafficking when the media did not bring forth an adequate representation of the victims or varied the representations in such a way that confused the public [10]. The author suggested that a lack of or distorted public awareness might be related to the little opportunity trafficked women have to change their living conditions.

Dawthorne analysed the discourses presented in articles from the London Free Press and found that the majority of the news portrayed sex work as harmful and exploitative, either as a direct result of the nature of the profession or the associated conditions [12]. The author found the discourse to convey the notion that women involved in sex work were unable to easily leave the occupation. The prostitutes were portrayed as in need of being rescued. Sex workers were often stigmatised as drug addicts, while sex buyers with drug use problems were never characterized as such. Sex workers' profile was often depicted as girls under the age of 18, abusing drugs and in need of help. Moreover, sex workers were described based on class affiliation, often in terms of poverty and homelessness where the women were in need of protection and money. This picture was in accordance with the mainstream discourse that prostitution is harmful to young and vulnerable women that are victimised by older and powerful men [12].

In the same line of work, Read analysed the impact of the discourse surrounding sex work, generated within the dominant public sphere, and concluded that it had a strong effect on maintaining the stigma surrounding the industry [13]. In addition, the identities of both the sex worker group and the individuals in it were negatively affected by this stigma. Stigma has an impact on the physical and emotional wellbeing of the individuals affected by it and lowers the chances for life improvement, while, at the same time, contributing to portraying sex workers as deserving of mistreatment [13]. Interestingly, escorts, whose clients had higher social and cultural status, tended to experience less stigma than those working as street prostitutes, who were using drugs and meeting a greater number of clients. Read further pointed out that criminalisation reinforces stigma, and in this regard, decriminalising groups of sex workers like street prostitutes would positively impact the risks they take and possibly the resources available for them [13].

In a different study, Farvid and Glass analysed the media representation of prostitutes in New Zealand [14]. As in previous studies, sex workers in street prostitution

received the most negative media coverage, while in-house prostitution was not seen as a problem to the same extent as far as they were kept away from residential areas. Street prostitution was represented as dirty, dangerous, associated with crime and drugs, exploitative, socially disturbing and capable of inciting moral panic. The women were seen as disposable. Conversely, in-house prostitution was represented as more enjoyable, profitable and, in a certain way, a legitimate form of work. The visibility of prostitution was identified as the biggest concern in the media's reporting. The authors considered that such media coverage creates a structural stigma against street prostitutes and justifies the regulation of this type of sex trade. The fact that the media was reporting more on the sex sellers than the sex buyers signaled double standards. Even as the selling of sex was legal, the sex workers were socially and morally condemned, more so if they work on the streets, while the men buying sex were not [14].

3. Analyzing contemporaneous news media discourse in the UK

After reviewing the scientific literature for general media's rhetoric about sex work, we were curious to know how British news media represent cases of female sex workers when victims of violent or sexual crimes. Our research intends to shed light on aspects of crime victim identity and understand how the victim's status is perceived, created or changed through the reporting in the news media. We purposefully chose four news organisations as sources of data, *The Guardian*, *Daily Mail*, *Independent*, and *The Sun* since they are well known and reach a large readership both online and in print. These news organisations differ ideologically, with the Daily Mail and The Sun being supporters of the conservative party, and Independent and The Guardian leaning towards socialist political ideology [15, 16]. With this choice, we intended to capture a wider spectrum of discourses and focus on more than one corner of the news media. In order to cover the contemporaneous narrative, the articles included in the study were all published between 2016 and 2021. We specifically focused on female sex workers because women made up the majority of prostitutes [5], and there were very few news articles that reported on male sex workers' victims of violent or sexual crimes.

In the group of violent crimes, we included murder, gun and knife attacks and physical assault. Sexual crimes, included rape, sexual assault, sexual grooming and molestation. Often, sexual crimes were reported to have been perpetrated with severe violence and to have left behind physical and psychological injury. The two types of crime were chosen because sex workers are at an elevated risk to become sexually and violently victimised [7, 8]. Crimes, such as robbery or theft were not considered and included in the data material if they were not also accompanied by the commission of a violent or sexual crime. Sex trafficking victims were excluded as in itself involves a certain type of victimisation that produces a different discourse surrounding its reporting. The articles in the data material used sex worker, prostitute and escort synonymously and these terms all referred to women selling sexual favours. The term sex worker did not here encompass all other related work, for example, web-camming, nude dancing and pornography. There was no exclusion of material depending on the age or nationality of the victim.

The compiled articles were found using the news organisations' own search engines on their websites using the keywords "prostitution", "prostitute", "sex work", and "sex worker". The search produced an index of articles that were read through to find all written in regard to violent or sexual crime against a person involved in sex

trade. All reporting on crimes of a violent and sexual nature were added to the data-set. Articles that mentioned crimes against a sex worker with no violence or sexual aspects were excluded. In total, the data material consisted of 50 news articles.

We used critical discourse analysis (CDA), a method that conceptualizes language as a tool to convey ideology and that allows the discovery of power dynamics hiding behind the language choices [17]. Language exists within social context and language and society affect one another [17]. By using this framework, we conceptualise that the news media report on sex work uses ideologies and perceptions existing in a society, but, at the same time, when media reports on sex work victims, they influence the reader's perspective.

We proceeded to analyse the data following the CDA three levels [17]. In the first level, we interpreted the text regarding choices of words and sentence structure. In the second level, the objective was to understand the discourses behind the text and why the news authors made certain choices. In the third level, the analysis aimed to under-stand the social context that framed the discourse and the social and cultural practices that it included. We proceeded as follows: first, we read the data several times to get familiarized with the material. All portions of the articles mentioning the victims were compiled and coded for language use. Examples of this were terms, such as prostitute, mother and victim. All of the material was then screened for ideologies and implica-tions. Pictures present in the articles were also part of the analysis because they are considered a part of the discourse since they can humanise or further victimise the individuals. The emerging themes led us to divide the material into different dis-courses. For example, the implication that the victim was a participant in their victimi-sation was frequently found. These portions of the text were compared in the different articles, searching for similarities and differences. The theme of victim participation was then examined to reflect on the hidden ideologies, as proposed by Fairclough [17]. Worth noting is most articles reflected more than one discourse, and some discourses were more prone to overlapping than others. This was determined by reading through the data material again after all discourses had been identified and defined.

All names in the data material were redacted alongside any identifying informa-tion, such as cities or road names, either disclosing about victims or perpetrators. All data collected is public information, and we made no attempt to contact the individu-als mentioned. Excerpts from the articles in the data material are referenced to the newspaper that published them, but no year is referenced so that we comply with research ethical principles.

During the analysis we found six discourses and named them as follows: *Victim blaming*, *Labelling*, *Media sensationalism*, *Vulnerability*, *Legitimisation* and *Any woman*. These discourses often overlap, such as the discourses of *Legitimisation* and *Vulnerability*, or *Victim blaming* and *Labelling*. The discourses of *Victim blaming* and *Labelling* was rooted in ideologies that reinforce the existing stigma regarding sex work. The media's sensationalistic way of reporting, found in many articles, may also contribute to reinforcing stigma. On the other hand, discourses of *Legitimisation*, *Vulnerability* and *Any woman* negate the stigma and paint a more humanising and relatable portrait of the victims.

The results are discussed in the frame of Nils Christie's *Ideal victim* theory [18]. Christie identified five attributes that build up the perception of the *Ideal victim*. Firstly, the victim is weak, sick individuals, elders and children are particularly well suited to fulfill this criterion. Secondly, at the time of the crime, the victim is engaged in a legitimate and respectable activity, for example, eating in a restaurant, buying in a shop or helping an elderly lady cross the road. Thirdly, the victim is in a place where

they have the right to be. If, for example, a person who is trying to buy drugs is then the victim of a crime, they could not claim a legitimate reason to have been in the place where the crime was committed and therefore they would move away from the status of *Ideal victim*. Christie argues that the *Ideal victim* must be free from guilt in relation to the crime, which depends on the perception of said guilt and whether the victim might have taken better precautions. In short, the *Ideal victim* is an individual that after victimisation more easily gains full and legitimate victim status from the public eye. The perpetrators' characteristics and role in the crime are also important to build the victim's status. For there to be an *Ideal victim,* there must also exist an ideal perpetrator as they are mutually dependent on each other. Accordingly, Christie's fourth attribute conceives the perpetrator as strong in contrast to the victim's weakness. Moreover, the perpetrator must be unknown to the victim (fifth attribute). When a case possesses all or most of these qualities, it is much easier for the victim to be perceived as an (ideal) victim. Victims who do not meet these criteria have difficulty gaining legitimacy in society, as well as in the legal system. Finally, for Christie, the victim must have enough power to make their case known and successfully claim the status of (ideal) victim. They must be strong enough to talk about their experience and be listened to, but, at the same time, they must still be perceived as weak. Victims who are perceived as "too strong" risk losing the status of (ideal) victim [18].

3.1 Victim blaming

Victim blaming was found in a great part of the data material. This discourse discredits the sex workers' victim status and portrayed the women as responsible for the victimisation, either because of their choice of work or because of their risk-taking behaviour. A *Victim blaming* narrative moves the victims' status away from Christie's conceptualization of the *Ideal victim* since the women are not seen as innocent and non-partaking in the crime. The discourse challenges the idea of engaging in legitimate or respectable actions at the time of the crime, as well as the legitimate reason for being in the place where the crime was committed. Instead, the victims are seen as engaged in illegitimate, and sometimes criminal activities in a high-risk place they chose to be. Since the victims have chosen to work in the sex industry and chosen to meet up with a client that subsequently harmed them, they are seen as participants in the criminal act itself.

While the *Ideal victim* is seen as free of any guilt, the victims described with a victim-blaming mentality are seen as culpable in relation to the crime, even if not as guilty as the perpetrator. Even though the women are portrayed as working in a dangerous profession, they are not seen as in need of being rescued or as non-participating individuals. One example of this narrative was found in the following excerpt from an article about a murdered woman:

> "... prior to her death, [the victim] checked into [a hotel] on August 4 for a planned one-night stay in Room 804. A hotel worker said they found a nearly empty bottle of booze, crack pipes and a joint in her hotel room. [...] Also found in the room were a pair of pink panties, a pair of black 'booty shorts,' cosmetic bags and a single, sling-back stiletto heel shoe. Days after her apparent wild hotel stay, the mother-of-three's body was found in a barrel" (Daily Mail).

The focus on the drugs and alcohol on the scene indirectly points to the victim's use of these substances. The use of the expression '*apparent wild hotel stay*' transmits a picture of the victim's behaviour as reckless and careless. The implication of her

behaviour being reckless relayed an ideology of her participation in the victimisation. The article further mentioned how the victim was seen entering a building in the company of a 'gang member'. This communicates that she willingly walked into a building with a potential predator most likely previously known to her, contrary to the unknown perpetrator attribute of the *Ideal victim* status.

The reference to *'pink panties'* and *'booty shorts'* creates a sexualised and objectifying picture of the victim, which is strengthened by the photograph used to illustrate the article. In the picture, the victim is posing in a mirror wearing a revealing swimsuit. Five days earlier, the same newspaper had published initial news about the case in which five other fully clothed pictures of the victim were included. This means that the body-revealing picture was chosen specifically as the only one to be included in the latter article, as other pictures were available. The excluded pictures were not of a sexually implicit nature and instead tied the woman's identity to something other than sex work. The initial article showing the six pictures also twice mentioned the fact the victim had a prior conviction of prostitution and drug-related crimes. In one of these instances, the information was used to caption the swimsuit picture. This reinforces the negation of the woman's victimisation status as it again contradicted the victim's legitimate activity and legitimate reason to be in the location of the crime. It is also noteworthy that the finding of her underwear in the hotel room was included in the article. Was this an abnormality or report-worthy finding, and would this information have been included in an article about a murdered woman who did not work in the sex trade? Most likely not.

In a different article, covering the murder of a female sex worker, we read:

> "Her father [name], who lives in [location], said he was 'never fully aware' of what she did for a living, but she had "very posh friends" and traveled a lot... [...] In a statement read to the court, he said: 'She drank a lot and took cocaine most days. I think she was addicted. I don't think she liked the thought of getting older'. [...] 'I thought she was quite reckless towards her work. I don't think she carried out many checks on her clients'" (Independent).

The fact that the murdered woman was using cocaine and partied, and was not open about her economic source, is relevant to be brought up only because it increases the woman's risk of being a victim. The victim's partying behaviour and drug use, and the fact that she kept her work a secret suggest the image of a carefree or careless individual who did little to protect herself against danger. This is elevated again by the suggestion of her recklessness towards her work when not checking up on her clients before meeting them. This information transmits the idea that the victim should have done more to minimise the hazards she exposed herself to. If she had done so she might have then not become a victim.

The following excerpt is from an article where a murder victim's earlier convictions of prostitution were mentioned without relating it to the crime they were reporting about:

> "It has also emerged that [the victim] was known to police, having clocked up more than 120 convictions for prostitution offences between 1996 and 2006. Originally from [location], she was one of two prostitutes handed an Asbo in 2006, banning her from setting foot in nearby [location]" (Daily Mail).

The choice of reporting previous convictions, an anti-social behaviour order sentence (Asbo), and referring to the woman as a *'convicted prostitute'* brings forth the

same victim-blaming mentality found in the former examples. The previous convictions were not related to the crime that was being reported and their inclusion seems to have the purpose of signaling a history of anti-social behaviour and questioning the victim's legitimate and respectable activity. Some articles were not as apparent in their remarks on previous convictions. Instead, they wrote about how the victims were "*known prostitutes*", subtly implying they might have previously been arrested.

In the data material, some sex workers are seen as more vulnerable than others, not because of risk factors, such as drug use or location of sex trading, but as a result of the workers' actions and attitudes. Highlighting reckless behaviour to signal a victim who had not done her due diligence to make sure the client she was meeting was not going to harm her was a narrative that emerged in many articles. The *Victim blaming* discourse can be linked to the idea that sex workers are disposable [14], especially if the victim has a drug addiction problem and works on the street, compared to non-addicted in-house sex workers. The disposable sex work victim is seen as deserving to be victimised and at least partially responsible for the victimisation [14]. The *Victim blaming* narrative brings forth aspects of the victim leading to the victimisation, deviating the focus of the reporting news from the perpetrator.

3.2 Labelling

Labelling refers to the discourse found in the data material that highlights the victims' activity in the sex trade without it having significant relevance to the reporting of the crime incident. The *Labelling* discourse is closely related to that of *Victim blaming* as it often uses the victim's activity in order to negate her victim status. Moreover, the *Victim blaming* discourse often reports on the victim's previous convictions and drug use, contributing to labelling her as a criminal or as having a criminal past. Both *Labelling* and *Victim blaming* narratives work similarly to discredit the status of the *Ideal victim*. The focus on the profession in the sex trade delegitimises the reason for the victim to be in the place where the crime is committed, as well as the engaging activity. For instance:

> "*[The victim], who had moved to the UK from [a country] 10 months previously, was found lying face down and lifeless by her housemate [name], who was also a sex worker*" (The Guardian).

In this excerpt, the occupation of the victim's housemate was wholly irrelevant to the crime being reported and was not found where else in the article. The only purpose of its inclusion seems to be to indicate that the victim was a sex worker.

In the next example, the woman was murdered by her partner so her profession was irrelevant to the crime report.

> "*Police believe [the victim], a transgender escort, was murdered and maimed by [the perpetrator] at their [location] apartment before he fled the scene and took his life in a nearby industrial bin soon after police arrived to investigate reports of a foul smell coming from the flat*" (The Guardian).

It is noteworthy that the article did not identify or highlight the risks associated with transgender sex work. In fact, the article misgendered the victim by referring to her with the "he" pronoun in one instance when explaining that the victim and the offender had met while the victim was working in the sex trade.

In the next example, the article's author chose to report the case as follows:

> *"[Nationality] prostitute [name] disappeared after moving in with [the perpetrator] and was last seen alive with him in the summer of 2016" (Daily Mail).*

The relationship between the victim and perpetrator was portrayed as of a romantic nature but with severe violent and abusive aspects. In this excerpt, the woman is identified by her nationality and profession although it is clear the perpetrator was a man with whom she was in a relationship with.

3.3 Media sensationalism

Media sensationalism was found in news focused on provoking a response in the reader. This discourse refers to articles' content that uses extravagant language and excessive detail more in line with entertainment than reporting actual facts. It seems to be aimed at producing a reaction and leaving an impression on the audience. For example, one of the Daily Mail news articles that we previously referenced described how the woman's pink underwear and "*booty shorts*" were found in her hotel room. This sexualisation has the potential to create a startling response in the reader. *Media sensationalism* is found in articles that bring forth information not necessary to accurately report the incident being covered. Sensationalism may be directed to gain the editor's attention and consideration as newsworthy as Wallinger indicated [10]. For example, another article published by the Daily Mail included explicit descriptions of the intimate details of a crime committed by a serial rapist. The victim's injuries and the violent sexual acts were reported in much more detail than in other similar articles, entailing the risk of causing further harm to the victim. The article was very unrestrained in its wording and might have left readers feeling uncomfortable.

An article in the Independent quotes a sex worker who described the violence, she had been submitted to in an online forum for sex workers. The victim mentioned a term relating to an unusual and abusive sexual act using an everyday object, followed by a detailed description of the act. The newspaper chose to include many explicit details, and it is unclear if the victim had given permission for it to be published by the media outlet. To inform about such details seems to have the purpose to gain a certain part of the audience more than informing the public. We chose not to include the quotation here since we consider it would violate the victim's integrity.

The use of theatrical and emotional language also contributes to sensationalise the news. For example, in one article the author chose to report the incident as follows:

> *"A FEARED killer with a love of 'blood and pain' who slaughtered two women 21 years apart has today been caged for life. […] In 2018, the twisted predator killed mother-of-four [victim name] and later dumped her naked body in a stream…" (The Sun).*

The use of the word "slaughtered" implied an animalistic act not reserved for humans. Instead of "murdered", the author chose a more disrespectful act. In the same article, another victim is mentioned to have been killed by a predator and also dumped naked in the stream This creates an image of the victim as more exposed to the animalistic and predatory perpetrator, and the little she could have done to escape her faith. In this case, the victim status is closer to the *Ideal victim* since the news gives the idea that she did not participate in the victimisation. It also makes the story more embellished raising the level of newsworthiness [10]. The choice

of the word "dumped", which was also seen in other instances in the data, signaled how the victim had been treated in ways one might discard waste, and the fact she was naked further showed her as defenceless and subordinate to the offender. The perpetrator was portrayed as not possessing any respect for the victim and disposed of her as if she was expendable. The news was powerful to imprint a picture of the scene in the reader's mind.

In the material, we can see how sex work itself is often sensionalised in the news. We found similarities to the *Labelling* discourse, where the victim's profession in the sex trade is mentioned without much relevance to the information being reported. The sex work itself is mentioned, not because it relates to the crime, but because it labels the victims and has the capability to produce a reaction in the reader. The sensationalistic mentions of the victims' profession evoke emotions and responses that increase the newsworthiness. At the same time, it further stigmatise the victims. If the work itself is perceived by many as the most noteworthy part of the news, many women in the sex trade might choose to conceal it, and in this way internalise the stigma [13], which will inevitably and negatively affect them.

3.4 Vulnerability

Some articles efficiently pointed to the victim's vulnerability, avoiding any blaming and offering a picture closer of the *Ideal victim*. For instance, one article discussed the repercussions of the Brexit referendum leading to higher levels of xenophobic hate crimes against sex workers since many of them were immigrants. The article highlighted the elevated level of vulnerability beyond their profession with an already high risk of violent and sexual crime victimisation. The article cites the words of a sex worker who said,

> "I have been threatened by men on the street who said they would attack me. When I went to the police, they said 'are you telling me you're a prostitute because if you are, I am going to arrest you.' I have experienced increasing racism and sexism from the police since the referendum was announced" (Independent).

In this example, is visible the victims' experiences with law enforcement when reporting a crime and their perception of the treatment they receive by the authorities. The same article discusses different aspects of institutionalised misogyny towards women selling sexual services, how it produces further stigma and, as a consequence, they are not believed when reporting a crime. The sex workers also indicated that male clients sometimes threaten to report the victims for prostitution to the police or to the home office in order to get them deported out of the UK. They feel vulnerable not only because of the men who purchase sex from them but also from the justice system. In this case, the article mentioned the profession of the victims since it was relevant to criticise the police officer's response, but it does not accomplish characteristics of the *Labelling* discourse.

In a different article, by the Independent, the victim's profession is mentioned only once at the end of the news to explain how her work made her more vulnerable to victimisation. She was not seen as partaking in the criminal incident or blamed for the crime committed. Beyond this, she was also described as vulnerable as a result of her work, fulfilling the *Ideal victim*'s weakness attribute. The elevated vulnerability of female sex workers was implicit in other articles that for example, report characteristics of the perpetrator or perpetrators. For instances:

> *"[The perpetrators], and the unidentified security guard raped the terrified victims*
> *on their beds before demanding more money from them" (Daily Mail).*

In this case, the location of the crime was the victims' home where they also worked. Therefore, they had a legitimate reason for being at that location. The article inquired the victims about their experiences and how the crimes had affected them, highlighting the victimisation and effectively avoiding any narrative of their participation in the criminal act because of their profession. The perpetrators were described as having degraded the women, demonstrating how their actions were much below the level of treatment the women deserved. The victims were in this instance not only portrayed as vulnerable at the time of the crime but also afterwards. The psychological trauma caused by the event was described and showcased how the victims continue to be vulnerable after the offence occurred. The victims were characterised as being afraid of men and of being alone. The same article cites the court judge assigned to the case who declared that sex workers were as protected by the law as any other person and there was no possible justification for the criminal acts performed against them. This narrative by a representative of the law implies a dismissal of the *Victim blaming* discourse and the view that sex workers are partially responsible for their victimisation as a result of their profession.

In another article, by the Daily Mail, the victims were described as "*defenceless*" and "*shaking violently*" while the attackers were described as going after "*lone vulnerable women [working] in their own homes*". A detective sergeant indicated that the victims were targeted because the perpetrators did not expect the women to report the incidents since they consider it an occupational hazard. Through this quote, the opposite was being communicated, as the women did report the crimes, and the perpetrators were brought to justice. The article also brings forth the notion that many of the victims had "*lasting psychologically damaging effects*" to show the aftermath and consequences of the victimisation and how damaging it is, in the long term, no matter the victim's profession.

The *Vulnerability* discourse is also generated by describing how sex workers warn and look after each other. For example, one article reported about a website where information about customers was shared and warnings about some specific individuals, who were considered dangerous, were issued. The women used the website to tell their stories from their perspective and were not portrayed in the news as participants in their victimisation. In the article, we read:

> *"An escort has described how a client turned violent and gave her a skin infection*
> *- one of the thousands of accounts of blacklisted men on a make-shift web forum*
> *set up to protect sex workers. [...] One woman who recognised the man's number on*
> *the forum added: 'Also had a very bad experience with this man. He attempted to*
> *blackmail me for a free booking by threatening to tell the hotel and got VERY nasty*
> *when I refused. Be careful of this one girls" (Independent).*

This article had a subtle educational purpose aiming at displaying a part of the sex traders' work life. It portrayed sex workers as someone with an elevated risk of being the victim of violent or sexual crimes. By showcasing this in a respectful manner, the news has the ability to counteract the victim-blaming mentality and create empathy in people unfamiliar with the sex trade.

3.5 Legitimisation

A discourse found in several articles was intended to legitimise the sex workers' victim status, as well as the sex trade itself. This was found in news commenting on the right intervention of the justice system when sex workers are victims of crime and articles that highlight their right to a safe work environment. When sex work is seen as legitimate, and its workers as deserving of rights, the stigma is negated because it is no longer shameful for the women to participate and be associated with it. Read found that the discourse surrounding sex work is created by people outside the trade [13]. In this regard, a legitimising narrative about sex work and sex workers when media reports about crimes committed against them would greatly benefit them. A shift in the discourse surrounding sex work would most likely facilitate that the voices of sex workers would be heard more often.

Some articles defend that sex workers deserve the same rights in the workplace as any other professional and are not to be expected to be sexually harassed. Some go further to defend that even in professions where sexual services are sold, consent is important. In these articles, women in the sex trade are considered as valid to consent or not consent to various types of sexual contact as any other woman. It is argued that their safety and comfort should be at the forefront and be respected to the same extent as in other professions. For example, in one article by the Independent, we read:

> *"[Name], the director of the country's human rights commission, said the case was an 'important reminder to businesses across the country', not just to sex workers, that everyone has the right to freedom from sexual harassment. 'All workers, regardless of the type of work they do, have the right to freedom from sexual harassment in the workplace. We encourage all business owners and employers to ensure that they understand and respect those rights,' [name], who represented the sex worker in the case, said in a statement."*

Legitimisation contradicts victim-blaming. Instead of communicating that sex workers contribute to their victimisation, should be the ones to take precautions, and not act in a reckless manner, the *Legitimisation* discourse showcase empathy towards the women and does not distinguish them from women in other professions. It is instead up to clients to treat them with the respect they deserve.

In another article, two victims were described not as prostitutes but as women who "*offered sexual services at the basement flat via [website] and had only worked at the property for three days before the raid took place*" (Daily Mail). In this case, the women were characterised as offering a service and therefore their profession gained more credibility. They were further described as having only been working there for a short time, which again characterised the work in a manner one might describe other types of work of a non-sexual nature.

Some articles chose to define the victims as survivors, overcoming hardships following exploitation and victimisation and depicting a strong image of the women. Besides, survivors are not participants in the criminal act, which legitimises the victim's status and relates it to the *Vulnerability* discourse. Women who are seen as vulnerable and not contributing to their victimisation have a more legitimate victim status and are closer to the *Ideal victim* compared to those portrayed in articles with a victim-blaming mentality.

Moreover, we found a legitimising narrative on the characterization of violent crimes committed against sex workers as hate crimes. In such case, the victims are

considered as a part of a marginalized group, especially vulnerable, and are not to blame for the crimes committed against them by perpetrators expressing hate words.

Some articles emphasize potential positive aspects of working in the sex trade, such as the amount of money earned and break the stereotype of clients as "dirty old men". For instance,

> *"Most people expect them to be dirty old men, but actually the peak age is roughly about 27 to 45. Peak career is IT, and we've also had professional footballers, GPs - you name it.' A prostitute - also a mum - who can earn £3,000 in a week, also reveals how she gets around the issue of not being sexually attracted to a client" (The Sun).*

Elevating the positive aspects may help to destigmatise the work, in opposition to the narrative mentioned by Dawthorne that sex workers are perceived as in need of saving [12]. However, this might also relate to the idea that in-house sex work, more often than street prostitution, is enjoyable and a free choice [14].

3.6 Any woman

This discourse is encapsulated in articles that portray victims as average women from the perspective of the public eye, giving the idea that the crime committed against them could have happened to anyone. It could have been the readers' mothers, daughters, sisters or friends. Some articles describe victims' families, backgrounds, and dreams for the future, avoiding a characterization solely as sex workers or prostitutes, and in this way bring them closer to any of us. One article published in The Sun mentioned briefly the nickname of a murdered woman, which humanised her and offered a sense of her personality. Victims' portrayal as any woman, through relating to the reader, has the power to inspire empathy and negate the stigma of sex work because it does not invoke victim-blaming. On the contrary, it characterises the victims as individuals who are greatly missed and who leave a huge positive impact on the people in their lives. For instance:

> *"She said: 'For those who knew my mum, she was a million beautiful things. She imprinted on everyone's heart who met her. Because of [the perpetrator], my mum violently and brutally lost her whole life and our lives were turned upside down. [...] The detective said: '[one of the victims] was a mother with four children, she was a daughter, she was a sister. She was wanting to go back to [her country] and to start her life and get back to the person she was'" (Daily Mail).*

In a different article, the victim was said to be "*always happy*", "*always trying to look after her friends*", a "*really, really lovely person*" and someone who "*was willing to give anybody a chance*". This choice of words to describe the woman humanises her by bringing forth characteristics that most people value. It makes her relatable and shows how she is not only a sex worker but also a valued friend and a helpful person. Most readers would be able to relate these characteristics to people in their lives, which showcases the discourse of how the victim could have been any woman.

In another example, portraying a similar narrative, a friend of a murdered woman reported:

> *"I really miss her. We used to go clubbing together, we were good friends. She used to love to go shopping. She was lovely, really friendly but also a quiet person. It was a shock for all that knew her, you never think something like this will happen" (The Sun).*

The *Any woman* discourse was also identified in a news article reporting on the search for a missing woman who was suspected of being murdered. The author chose to refer to the woman by her name and to describe her in terms of her age. Only once, at the end of the article is her profession in the sex trade mentioned, accompanied by the explanation that this made her particularly exposed to crime. When commenting on her appearance the author wrote the following:

> *"She is described as white, 5ft 5in and slim, with fair skin and straight brown hair"*
> *(Independent).*

She is further described to have hazel eyes and two tattoos, which likens her to many women, and offers the picture of an average individual.

Many articles, instead of providing a description of the victim, included photographs of them in their daily lives, frequently accompanied by family and loved ones, contributing also to humanising them. In contrast to the publication of a picture displaying a victim in a swimsuit, these pictures did not sexualise the women but instead placed them in the context of their own lives. Often the pictures were taken in a setting that would look familiar to the reader. Some of the articles described the victim as a mother, for example as "the mother-of-three". In this case, the woman's identity was broadened to more than a sex worker. Instead, she had a family and was responsible for supporting her children, which, to a certain extent, gave the readers an insight into the motives for her to choose the profession.

In an article published by The Sun, it was written: "*The victim was just 42 years old*", implying that the victim was deserving of life, and did not deserve to be murdered.

We also found articles that reported the victims as coming "*from various walks of life*" suggesting that any woman could become a victim. In this case, there was no distinction made between the different professions and those who were working in the sex trade were described in the same way as the others. This conveyed that there was no difference in the value of the victim status between the different professions mentioned:

> *"They were teenage girls, shop assistants, prostitutes, clerks. They were mothers,*
> *daughters, sisters and wives. And the broad spectrum of victims from various walks*
> *of life meant that no woman was safe with [the predator] at large" (Daily Mail).*

4. Discussion: media discourse and stigmatization.

In this study, we found six discourses used to report on female sex workers when victims of violent or sexual crimes: *Victim blaming*, *Labelling*, *Media sensationalism*, *Vulnerability*, *Legitimisation* and *Any woman*.

Most articles in the analysed data did not only use one of these discourses but several. Articles using the *Victim blaming* discourse also often use *Labelling* to disclose the victim's profession, drug use and prior criminal charges. *Media sensationalism* can be seen alongside other discourses but has the strongest overlap with *Labelling*. *Vulnerability*, *Legitimisation* and *Any woman* are often seen together as they all focus on portraying the victim in a more respectful light without painting her as a participant in the criminal act.

Victim blaming considers the victim as a participant in her victimisation and at least partially responsible for it. The victim should have done more to protect herself

and would have then become closer to the status of the *Ideal victim*. Readers of articles using this discourse are presented with a victim who is to blame for the crime committed against her. In contrast to *Victim blaming*, *Vulnerability* presents the victim as defenseless and not as a participant in the criminal act.

Labelling centres the identity of the victim in her profession among other characteristics. Conversely, *Legitimisation* displays both the work and the victim status as legitimate. The discourse of *Any woman* also contradicts *Labelling* by portraying a relatable woman that is someone's sister, mother, daughter and friend.

Media sensationalism aims to trigger the reader and to create entertainment rather than having a specific informative or eventually educational purpose. *Media sensationalism* is produced through the use of embellished and theatrical language or the inclusion of explicit details and photographs.

Wallinger found that varying representations may have a serious effect in confusing the public's perception of the victims [10]. The use of the six different discourses in our study, although overlapping, might cause the same confusing effect on the public's perception of sex workers. To prevent this from happening, it is necessary consistently portray sex worker victimisation in a respectful and destigmatising manner. Wallinger argued that the public will not change their perception of sex workers if the media does not bring forth adequate representation [10]. When the media chooses certain words and hide relevant aspects or informs about irrelevant ones the readers are not presented with a nuanced picture of prostitution [11]. For people holding a victim-blaming mentality towards sex work, a legitimising narrative could have the ability to change their view if such discourse is written and seen.

The media affects both the group of people being reported and the public [11], but it is noteworthy that discourses surrounding sex work are not constructed by sex workers themselves. On the contrary, they are built within the dominant public sphere [13] that news media makes a part of. Even though sex workers are not participants in building discourses surrounding their work, they are negatively affected by the stigma they impose [13]. It is, therefore, essential that news articles promote inclusiveness by carefully choosing what they report and how they do it in order to call out the harmfulness of *Victim blaming* and *Labelling*.

Victim blaming contradicts three of the attributes of the *Ideal victim* status: being engaged in a legitimate activity, having a legitimate reason to be in the place of the crime and most relevant being guilt-free of any participation in the criminal act. On the contrary, *Victim blaming* considers the victims as participants in their own process of victimisation because of their professional choices and risk-taking behaviours. Although it recognises that sex work is a dangerous activity and women are at risk, it does not consider them to need rescue.

The *Victim blaming* narrative found in our study characterises the women as carefree and reckless, addicted to drugs and alcohol, who voluntarily meet with potentially dangerous clients. In addition, they are considered responsible for their own safety and should take all possible precautions to avoid victimisation. If a victim has failed to evaluate the potential risks that the meeting with a client implies, she is the one to blame and should have done more to protect herself.

We also found that some representations sexualise and objectify the victims. When the information that a murdered woman's underwear was found in the hotel room she was staying in is reported, it is because the news author purposefully chooses to highlight the fact that the victim was a sex worker since most women bring underwear when staying at a hotel. This type of narrative fortifies the existing stigma surrounding sex work, which, according to Read, is easily internalised by sex workers [13].

Labelling refers to a narrative that brings up the victim's profession, drug use or prior convictions without it having significant relevance to the reporting of the crime. The woman's profession labels her as a prostitute, her drug use labels her an addict and her past convictions label her a criminal, alongside being a victim. It questions the reason that led the victim to be in the place of the crime, as well as her activity when the crime was committed, which places her far away from the *Ideal victim* although not as straightforward as the *Victim blaming* discourse. Being labelled as a prostitute, drug user or criminal implies that the victim had nefarious reasons to have been on the scene of the crime, suggesting that she was selling sex, buying or using drugs or committing a criminal offence. The use of such labels surreptitiously leads the reader to question what the victim was doing and where she was doing it. Questioning these *Ideal victim* attributes can only contribute to negating the women's victimisation. As McCracken found in many articles that painted female sex workers as lost and desperate with issues of drug use and homelessness [11], the *Labelling* discourse also reinforces the existing stigma surrounding sex work.

Media sensationalism uses extravagant wording when reporting on the criminal victimisation of sex workers and sometimes uses excessive details and information that have no other purpose than provoke a reaction from the reader, leave an impression and increase what has become known as "clickbait" in the digital era. Some articles relay sensitive information and details of the crime that has the potential to cause further harm to the victim. *Media sensationalism* strengthens stigma and prejudice. The objective is not to inform but to entertain. It is disrespectful in every aspect and uses the victims' stories for a clear profit, disregarding the victim's status. Unfortunately, in our study, *Media sensationalism* was found on different levels, in many articles.

Vulnerability can be likened to the *Ideal victim*'s attribute of weakness [18] because it considers that the woman does not participate in the action that victimizes her. In this case, the victim's weakness, strengthens and legitimates her status as a victim. This discourse involves explanations of how minority groups of sex workers have an increased risk of becoming victims since the motive of the crime can contain xenophobic taints. In addition, the *Vulnerability* discourse identifies the increased risk that victimised sex workers have of being arrested and prosecuted when reporting the crime, highlighting processes of secondary victimisation by the legal system. We found the word "vulnerable" in many articles when describing the victims. Some focus on how they were terrified during the attack or explain the physical and emotional harm caused by the violent act. The *Vulnerability* narrative often uses the victims' own words to tell their stories. However, it involves the risk of reinforcing the stigma, when the women are portrayed as needing rescue [12]. Therefore, the news should avoid portraying the women as they often do, lost, desperate, entrenched in drug use and homeless [11]. The narrative of news media should educate about vulnerability without fortifying stigma. By using respectful and empathetic communication and not labelling the sex worker by her profession, media organisations may advance in a more ethical way of constructing and reporting the news.

Legitimisation aims to validate the women's victim status and their work in the sex trade. This is sometimes achieved through showcasing interventions made by the justice system and relaying an ideology that sex workers have the right to a safe work environment. This discourse does not blame the victim. Instead, it portrays the perpetrators as fully responsible for the criminal acts. In this case, the narrative shows empathy for the women who are not distinguished from workers in other fields or

trades. Sex work is legitimised by considering it as work, meaning that it is not a part of the victim's identity. *Legitimisation* counteracts the effect of *Labelling*. Victims are described as survivors, which paints a picture of a strong character, a feature included in Christie's *Ideal victim*; someone with the ability to claim the victim status and make their case heard, but not strong enough that can fight the perpetrator and avoid the victimisation [18]. The *Legitimisation* discourse has the potential to reduce the existing stigma surrounding sex work and prevent it to spread through the media.

When the victim is portrayed in a very relatable light, it offers the idea that she could have been *Any woman*. In our study, we found this portrayal to be respectful and it does not deprive victims of their individuality. They are likened to mothers, daughters and friends and described as having aspirations and dreams. They are normal women who are not defined by their profession. Many of the articles using this discourse quote family members and friends who have been impacted by the loss of a loved one. The *Any woman* narrative can work to inspire empathy in the reader and create an understanding of the reasons behind the women's choice of profession. The women are painted as complex individuals and not labelled by their work's choice, an important feature that can help reduce stigma.

Nothing about a specific woman or the crimes that victimized her seems to determine whether she will be reported using *Victim blaming*, *Labelling*, *Media sensationalism*, *Legitimisation*, or be described as vulnerable or as any woman. The use of discourses in news reporting stems instead to originate from the authors and the news organisations opinions. We found very little pointing towards discourses arising from the sex workers themselves, which shows an important unexplored line of research and a direction for future studies.

5. Conclusion

Sex workers do not live up to the *Ideal victim* standard because *Victim blaming*, *Labelling* and *Media sensationalism* discourses question their reason to be on the scene of the crime, the activity they are engaged in when the crime is committed and blame them for the victimisation they suffer. When these discourses are used, sex workers are not considered legitimate victims. On the other hand, *Vulnerability* and *Legitimisation* highlight their weaknesses and bring them closer to the *Ideal victim* status. *Victim blaming* and *Labelling* utilise stigmatising concepts, such as "prostitution" and "drug and alcohol addiction" to create a picture of reckless women who share responsibility with the perpetrators victimizing them. *Vulnerability* and *Legitimisation* utilise the same concepts to conclude instead that they make the victims weaker and more vulnerable. As a result, they are not seen as active participants in the criminal act. In this regard, guilt is not a consequence of the women's actions but of the ideology of the individual conveying the discourse. Positive, respectful, destigmatising discourses should be given more room in news media in order to protect sex workers from the harm that stigmatisation implies, as explained by Read [13]. *Victim blaming* and *Labelling* should be more actively called out as narratives that have harmful impact on women working in the sex trade. Discourses in the media are affected by the public's views on prostitution but at the same time, they also have an impact on the public's perception [11]. Oftentimes, victims are used to relay societal ideology. The aim of news media should be to inform the public about news events, while publishing articles written with the respect, dignity and empathy that every victim deserves.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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