

Internet-based sex workers: Working conditions and job satisfaction (Sanders, Connelly & Jarvis-King 2015)

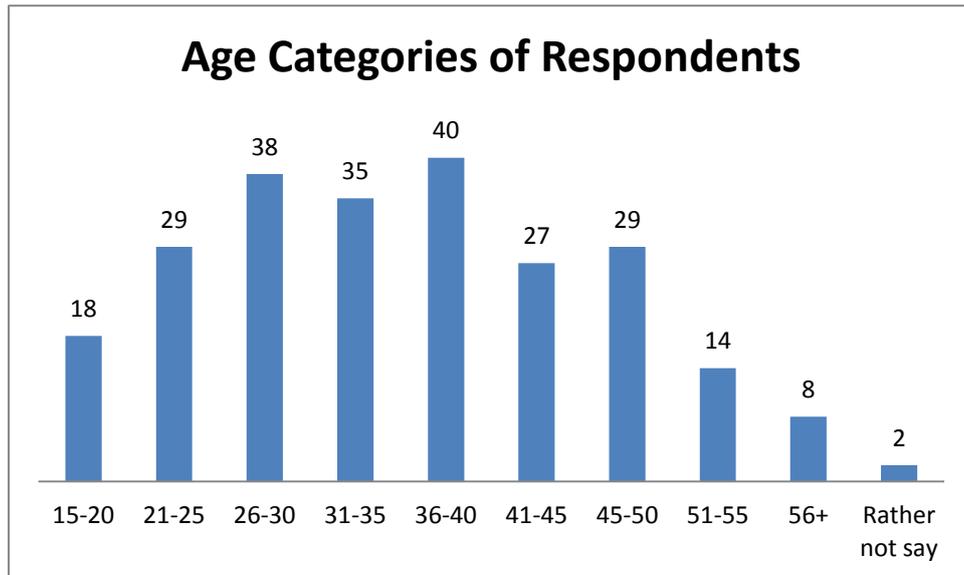
This piece of research was funded by the *Wellcome Trust* and carried out by Dr Teela Sanders with Laura Connelly and Laura Jarvis King as co-researchers. It was carried out in partnership with National Ugly Mugs www.uknswp.org/um which is a pioneering, innovative project, founded by the UK Network of Sex Work Projects (UKNSWP), which provides greater access to justice and protection for sex workers who are often targeted by dangerous offenders but are frequently unwilling to report these incidents to the police. Members of the scheme consist of sex work support projects, individual sex workers and online advertising sites or establishments. NUM takes reports of incidents which go to one centrally coordinated web based hub and members receive legally compliant warnings.

Project background

The pilot study aimed to capture some core demographic information, as well as ask about issues such as: work satisfaction, work histories, stigma, isolation, safety, contact with support services, and crimes experienced. The survey ran for 12 weeks from November 2014 to the end January 2015, amongst the NUM membership (that is, respondents had to be a member to complete the survey). An impressive 240 responses were received in this time.

Socio-demographics of the sample

Respondents were mainly female (82%; n = 196), without dependent children (77%; n = 184). Almost half, (46%; n = 111) defined their sexuality as 'bi-sexual'. The age of respondents was varied, with the youngest respondents being 18 years-old and the oldest being 63 years-old. The most common age category was 36-40 years old, with 40 respondents falling within its parameters. The age when respondents stated that they started working in the sex industry varied considerably from 12 years-old to 56 years-old. The average (mean) age of entry was 29 years-old. In relation to ethnicity, the majority of participants (73%; n = 175) defined as 'White British'. The majority (57%; n = 137) were privately renting at the time of completing the survey. A further 47 respondents (20%) stated that they were living in a home that they owned, while 27 respondents (11%) were living in social housing. Similar to the general population, 90 respondents (38%) have an undergraduate degree and 40 respondents (17%) have a postgraduate qualification. The most common sex market was 'independent escorting', with 214 (89%) respondents participating in this type of sex work. The second most common was 'webcams' (n = 44), although this represents only 18% of respondents, followed by 'phonelines' (n = 30; 13%). The length of time spent sex working varied between 1 year and 35 years, with the average (mean) being 6 years.



Work and work histories

The dominant previous work sector was retail (34%; n = 81), followed by the charity and voluntary sector (30%; n = 73), and the health and social care sector (23%; n = 56). The least common forms of past employment, each with fewer than ten respondents having worked in them, are: recruitment and HR (3%; n = 6); law enforcement and security (2%; n = 5); energy and utilities (1%; n = 3); and environment and agriculture (1%; n = 2).

- 109 respondents stated that they do sex work and another job at the same time, representing 45% of all respondents. 106 respondents do not do sex work alongside another job, which represents 44% of all respondents. Only 13% of all respondents said they were currently students.
- For the majority of respondents (56%; n = 138), sex work is not their only source of income but for 35% sex work was their primary income.
- The most common location for respondents to work was 'outcalls', for 157 of the 240 respondents (65%), followed by home working (n = 128; 53%).
- The vast majority (66%; n = 158) indicated that they are likely to continue working in the same way for the next year.

Working arrangements

- The majority (46%; n = 112) of respondents spend between three and five days per week sex working. A quarter of respondents (25%; n = 60) spend one or two days per week sex working.
- Over three-quarters (76%; n = 183) service 1 to 10 clients per week.
- Respondents were asked to select the percentage of their time spend dealing with 'time-wasters'. By a considerable margin, the most common response was 1-20% of their time, with 139 respondents (58%) selecting this option. The second most common response was 21-40% of time (19%; n = 46) and the third most common answer was 41-60% (12%; n = 29).

Internet advertising

- A large number of respondents indicated that they advertise their work through Adultwork (80%; n = 193). 40% of respondents (n = 94) indicated that they advertise through their own website, while comparatively few used Sleepyboy or Haloboy (both 3%). Other common websites include: Gaydar; Rentboy; Pleasuretoomeetyou; Punterlink; and Vivastreet.
- When asked if they feel confident in their own ability to maintain their online profile in a safe way, the majority of respondents (57%; n = 137) indicated that they do. A further 50 respondents (21%) indicated that they sometimes feel confident, while 27 respondents (11%) do not feel confident in maintaining a safe online profile.

Earnings

- More than half of respondents (54%) have a monthly income of less than £1499 from sex work. When we break this down further, the most common income bracket is £500-£999 with 21% of respondents (n = 50) falling within its boundaries. The second most common bracket is £0-£499 (17%; n = 40), followed by £1000-£1499 (16%; n = 39). In contrast, only 10% (n=27) of respondents have a monthly income which falls in excess of £4,000 per month.
- We asked respondents to indicate whether or not they feel that they are paid fairly for the work they do. The majority (64%; n = 153) believe that they are paid fairly. A further 27% (n = 64) believe that they are sometimes paid fairly for their sex work. Only a small proportion of respondents (8%; n = 20) do not believe that they are paid fairly. Some respondents provided a written response to this question, including:

“Sex works have lost their value, rates are very low and it's get worse each day.”

“The money I get when I have sex with a client doesn't nearly cover the amount of hours I spend "responding to inquiries" (read, filtering out timewasters on cruising sites) so though my prices are fair, my average hourly wage isn't (it's under minimum wage).”

- It is clear, however, that street sex workers are less content with their pay than respondents working in other sex markets. Indeed, 60% of street sex workers (n = 3) believe they are only paid fairly 'sometimes' and 40% (n = 2) do not think they are paid fairly at all. That said, it should be bore in mind that the sample of street sex workers who took part in the survey is small (n = 5).

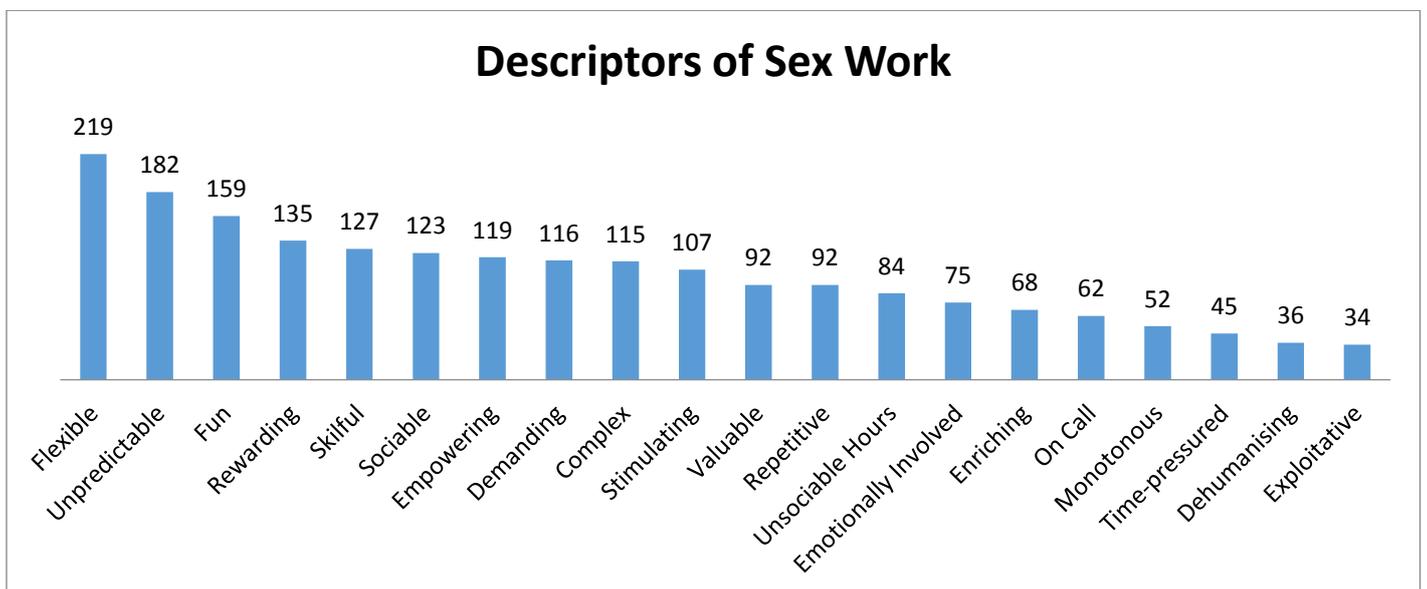
Relationships with clients

- The majority of respondents appear to have good relationships with their clients. Indeed, when asked to rate their relationship on a scale of 1 (positive) to 10 (negative), 90% of respondents fall on the 'positive' end of the scale (i.e. select numbers 1 to 4).
- Respondents were also asked whether or not the online communication they receive from clients and potential clients is respectful. By far the most common response was that communication is respectful 'most of the time' (73%; n = 176).

- The question about helping clients with their emotions and relationships elicited the most variable responses. That said, most fell towards the end of the scale signifying that they do help with emotions and relationships. Indeed, 19% of respondents (n = 45) do this ‘all of the time’.
- 56% of respondents (n = 138) have control over the sex acts they perform ‘all of the time’, compare to 2% of respondents (n = 4) who ‘never’ have control over their sex work.
- Interestingly, given what we know about the high rates of violence experienced by sex workers, most respondents positioned themselves closer to the ‘never’ end of the scale when asked about client’s aggressiveness.
- That said, the majority also indicated that if clients do become aggressive, they are able to manage the situation. Indeed, while 25% (n = 61) can manage this ‘all of the time’, only 2% (n = 4) noted that they could ‘never’ manage client’s aggression.

Job satisfaction

- Levels of job satisfaction are high. When asked to describe their work, respondents typically selected positive or neutral words. 91% of sex workers described their work as ‘flexible’ and 66% described it as ‘fun’. Over half of respondents (56%) find their job ‘rewarding’. On the other hand, relatively few used negative descriptors for their work: only 14% see their work as exploitative.
- Over half (52% n = 126) stated that they did feel able to stop sex working if they so wished. Just under a quarter of respondents (n = 57; 24%), however, indicated that they did not feel able to stop sex working.



Control in their work

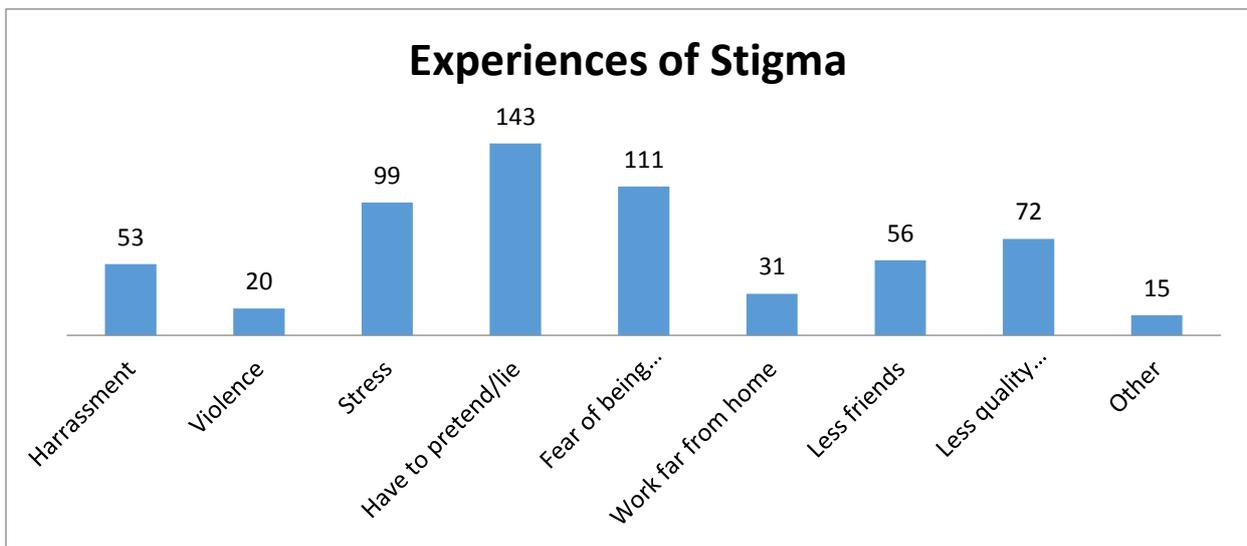
By and large, responses indicate that respondents have a great deal of choice in their decision making.

- 68% of respondents (n = 164) make their own decisions at work *all of the time*, compared to 0% (n = 0) who can *never* make their own decisions at work.
- 79% of respondents (n = 190) are able to refuse clients *all of the time*, compared to 0.4% (n = 1) who can *never* refuse a client.
- For the majority of respondents, the question about pressure from managers was *not applicable* (70%; n = 170), indicating that the majority do not have managers.

- For 193 respondents (80%), they are able to decide how often and how long to work *all of the time*, compared to 3 respondents (1.3%) who can *never* make this decision.
- 78% (n = 187) can decide their own prices *all of the time*, compared to 2% (n = 5) who can *never* decide their own prices.

Stigma

- 71% of respondents experience stigma at least ‘sometimes’, during the course of their sex working. This stigma most commonly results in sex workers having to pretend or lie about their job (60%; n = 143) and live in fear of being recognised (46%; n = 111).



- Interestingly, only 8% of respondents (n = 20) believe they have experienced violence because of working in a stigmatised job.
- When asked to provide written responses on what effects the stigmatisation of sex work has upon their lives, respondents noted that it is difficult to engage in ‘traditional’ romantic relationships, as they do not believe prospective partners would want to be involved with a sex worker. This view was epitomised by one respondent:

“I am single because men don’t want to date a prostitute, and those who do usually just want to get their sexual kicks. I usually get rejected out of hand when I am honest about what I do. Not one man has ever been empathetic and offered to help me change my life. To them I’m just a whore, which means [I’m] as worthless as a terrorist or paedophile”

- Another common response was that respondents felt that a victimising discourse was frequently applied to their work, in which friends and family construct them as lacking agency. This is exemplified in the following quote:

“My friends believe my husband made me enter my work... a complete falsehood”.

Experience of Crimes

- About half of respondents (47%) have been victims of crime during the course of their sex working. Most commonly this manifests in the form of threatening or harassing texts, calls and emails and verbal abuse, with 36% and 30% of respondents experiencing these forms of victimisation, respectively.
- As research evidence already suggests, indoor sex workers generally experience less violence compared to street based sex workers.
- Almost half of respondents (49%) were either 'unconfident' or 'very unconfident' that police would take their reports of crime seriously.
- When asked to provide a written response to the question 'What could improve the safety of sex workers in the UK?' 42% of respondents suggested that their safety could be improved through legalising or decriminalising the sex industry.

Support services

- The most common form of online support accessed by sex workers is National Ugly Mugs, with 73% of respondents using this provision. In general though, it is clear that sex workers are not frequently utilising other forms of online support. For example, only 7% of sex workers access online support from local support projects. This flags up specifically that service provision approaches and access to services has not kept up with the changes in the sex industry, with new technologies and social media being a key means of working now.
- The vast majority of respondents (70%) do not access a sex work support project.
- But most (70%; n = 167) do have contact with other sex workers, using this as a form of support.

Summary and recommendations

- Core working patterns suggest most escorts work 3-5 days a week and earn around £1500 a month; are likely to remain in sex work for the next year; have a varied work history; and are likely to also be working in the mainstream employment economy.
- Independent escorts have a high degree of control over their work and express mainly positive feelings about their working conditions. Job satisfaction is high.
- Relationships with clients are generally positive, although there are persistent complaints about time wasters and the amount of time spent filtering these out.
- Stigma is a daily encounter for many sex workers, affecting their personal lives and relationships.
- Societal attitudes need to change, in order to minimise the stigma underpinning sex work and consequently reduce the harm that prejudice and judgement has on sex workers.
- Half the sample felt unconfident about reporting crimes to the police.
- Policy with decriminalisation as its focus would work towards improving relationships with the police, by removing threats of enforcement and channelling resources into exploitative situations.
- The findings provide further evidence that a move towards the 'Swedish Model' – criminalising the purchase of sex – would be detrimental to sex worker's safety.
- We would recommend that sex workers be allowed to legally work together, as this is the main way in which they believe their safety will be enhanced.