An Invisible Workforce: An Investigation into the Support Needs of Online Sex Workers

June 2017

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Acknowledgements:

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

This report has been commissioned by Manchester Action on Street Health (MASH). Its aim is to explore and identify the wellbeing needs of female online sex workers. Online sex work is varied and can involve non-interactional work, for example through the use of web cams; or it can be used as a site to advertise and promote the physical sexual contact services offered by an individual. In the current research, it is the latter that is primarily the focus of attention. In exploring the support needs of this group of workers, the research team has performed an online audit of adult sites from which to gain a better understanding of the working environment of online sex workers. It has also examined the existing online support structures in place for female sex workers. Following this, the research team, in collaboration with MASH, developed and administered an online survey exploring the needs and experiences of online sex workers; 22 survey responses were received from women working online. Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 4 women with experience of working in the sex industry, both online and in real-time. These interviews provided a deeper understanding about the support needs of women working in the sex industry, along with identifying the gaps in provision.

The key findings of the research are as follows:

- The growth in online sex work means that a radical rethink is required with regard to the support of sex workers, particularly those who are working online. It cannot be assumed that sex workers are equipped with the necessary skill level to safely function online or have sufficient social capital to protect them from the social isolation associated with homeworking.

- The risks associated with online sex work have been both underestimated and misrepresented. Online sex work is not without risk, although it is acknowledged that the risks faced by online versus street sex work are quite different. The risk for online sex work results from workers' invisibility to organisations, the need for appropriate support; and the risk of having a visible/recognisable online presence which has led to some sex workers being recognised outside of their work role.

- A dominant theme of independence and control (of the working environment) is evident throughout the data and the women provide positive accounts about their working environments. The flip side to this is how this can lead to feelings of social isolation and alienation, as a result of the stigma still associated with sex work, along with governmental policy that prohibits online sex workers from sharing premises. Women responding to the survey and at interview voiced their concern over the difficulties in building support networks, which further compounds the issue of social isolation for those working online.

- The results from this research point to a complex array of support needs of online sex workers. These range from having someone from the same profession to talk to in

times of need, making friends and from receiving technical support about how to stay safe when using online sites such as AdultWork. Currently these needs are not consistently being met for three key reasons. The first reason is the inability to discuss work issues with family and friends, the second reason is that sex workers more often than not work alone; and finally, sex workers are frequently unaware of what support is available online.

- Online support is currently available through National Ugly Mugs and SAAFE.info. However, while these organisations provide invaluable support, the model used cannot be proactive, meaning the women have to make first contact. Many in the current research were not aware of one or both of these organisations, which quite simply means that they were not routinely being utilised. The provision of support therefore requires a proactive approach on the part of organisations committed to supporting sex workers.

- The results from this research clearly show a need for online and/or telephone support with the majority of respondents stating they would use such support if available.

- An important characteristic of minority groups is their ability to develop socially supportive network structures. Online sex workers are no exception. The degree of support offered by others in the industry provided some with the necessary skills to stay safe while working. In many respects, this was implemented by the workers developing Communities of Practice, where key skills and training were shared with others in the industry.

Recommendations:

- MASH should consider providing safety advice to those working online, specifically to show how to stay safe when working online.

- MASH has a unique understanding about the needs of sex workers especially around their sexual health. It would be beneficial if they could offer training to mainstream sexual health services so that they too can better support the needs of sex workers who attend mainstream clinics.

- MASH should recruit a net outreach (netreach) worker to support those engaged in online sex work. It will be necessary to find a way to do this which is within the law, and ethically. However, there is a demonstrable need for support for both existing workers, and those new to online sex work. Those new to this line of work are potentially at greater risk due to their inexperience and speed at which they need to

learn to navigate the online sex work terrain. A netreach worker could proactively make contact and provide support about how to stay safe online, and when giving out personal information. The same support could be offered to those who have been working longer but who still might not fully understand the possible risks of their online presence.

- MASH should look to provide online and telephone support to online sex workers. By offering a friendly and professional 'ear', this could also result in MASH being considered as part of the online sex workers' socially supportive networks, resulting in their other wellbeing needs being met. Building up this level of trust, MASH can begin to learn more about the needs of these clients and begin to tailor packages of support accordingly, for instance, promoting their sexual health clinic.

1. Introduction

The research has been completed by Manchester Metropolitan University on behalf of Manchester Action on Street Health (MASH), a sex work charity based in the heart of Manchester. It is the mission of MASH to support and empower women engaged in sex work through understanding their complex needs (MASH, 2017). Though female sex work is a well-documented phenomenon, much of the focus has been on street forms of sex work at a time when we are seeing a growth in online sex work brought about by the ease and accessibility of the Internet. This poses a problem in that working online is not without risk. There needs to be a better understanding of such risks so that the wellbeing and safety needs of women working online can be appropriately met. For example, there is a perception that online sex work is less risky, leading to an unfounded assumption that it is without risk. However, as there has been little empirical research that investigates this, we caution against such conjecture. The primary aim of this report is therefore to increase our understanding of the wellbeing and support needs of online sex workers who in this instance, are based in and around Manchester. This is achieved by, firstly, collecting a variety of data from a website where sex workers are able to advertise their services; secondly an online survey; and finally through semi-structured interviews.

2. Literature Review

Due to advances in technology, there are now many opportunities for sex workers to provide services online, with an interaction between host and client and a wide variety of sex-based services and products being offered. Research into sex work has however, tended to give primacy to offline outdoor and street based sex work at a time when there is evidence for a growth in engagement of sex workers who use the Internet (Levitt and Venkatesh 2007; Castle and Lee, 2008; Goldring, Cain and Westall 2016). This change in access to sex work is argued as leading to a pattern of decline and displacement in all manner of offline street-based sex work (Gaffney, 2003; Matthews, 2008; McLean, 2015). In particular, online female sex work is considered today as a highly pervasive and expanding industry and potentially much more lucrative than offline sex work (Castle and Lee, 2008; Cunningham and Kendall, 2011a,b).

It is likely that 'online' sex workers are quite different to offline 'street', or 'sauna' workers. With the focus of the latter being on their immediate 'need' and possibly feeding a drug habit (Ditmore, 2013); by comparison, online sex work appears more organised and structured. Working from home could be considered to be more business-like, with savvy, educated and entrepreneurial workers viewing it as a career choice and many use online technologies as a tool to advertise services and run their own business (Bernstein, 2007). When considering sex work more generally, Chapkis et al. (1997) takes this point further, arguing that many female sex workers, both online and offline see themselves as independent, free and *in control*. This growth in online sex work industry, on one level at least, suggests that those engaged in such home working are little different to those 'sole traders' selling their wares online, as reported by Luckman (2015). The key difference however is the stigma still associated with sex work which could leave such workers vulnerable to social isolation and alienation due to their inability to tell those in their supportive social networks about their line of work (Brents and Sanders, 2010; Koken, 2012; Goldring, Cain and Westall 2016).

For sex workers, the use of new media, like mobile devices, has made sex work 'placeless' and plays a crucial role in the mainstreaming of commercial sex by removing some of the stigma widely associated with localised street based sex work in inner city areas (Hubbard, 2011). It has therefore become increasingly important to build a breadth of knowledge on these changes and to document how they affect those who are directly involved in online sex work. However, recent decades have met with changing mainstream perceptions to the sex industry more widely. This reaction, according to Weitzer (2010) is more one of ambivalence and contradiction. For example, the legitimising of sex work suggests economic inclusivity and acceptance, whereas the reality socially is that the industry remains stigmatised and exclusionary (Brents and Sanders, 2010). The current research focuses on female sex work although some of the findings will be equally applicable to male online sex work. The context for the research is the growth of Manchester's online sex work industry and the needs of women who run their business online rather than through third parties or on the street.

The changing needs of sex workers

The growth of online sex work presents a danger, through the perception that the work environment is safer than working on the street and therefore without risk (Harcourt et al., 2001, Roxburgh et al., 2005; Goldring, Cain and Westall 2016). However, online sex work has different types of risks to that of street sex work and therefore different types of support are needed for those who work in this sector of the industry. For example, Sanders and Campbell (2007) discuss that some 'indoor' sex workers, defined as sex workers that generate work from their own home, have very little or no contact with outreach projects. This can result in social isolation, with sex workers having little or no access to formal advice (such as legal or health) or peer support structures (from others in the industry). However, it could be argued that the stigma still associated with this line of work means that sex workers actually need more legal and social support that protects them from sexual victimization and other forms of potential harm from those who seek out sexual services (see Sanders and Campbell 2007). The reality is however, they have little if any legal protection as workers may be too afraid or too untrusting to utilise formal structures, such as the police, should the need arise (Goldring, Cain and Westall 2016).

The growth in online sex work has also seen a different discourse emerging around what it is to be a sex worker. No longer are sex work practitioners seen as the stereotyped, marginalised and a desperate majority. The newer framing of sex workers is one that does not solely see sex work as 'on the streets', or operating through other agencies, such as brothels and pimps, though admittedly for some this is still very much the case. However what is often overlooked, or perhaps not accepted, is the sole agency of many sex workers (Weitzer, 2012), with the result that they regularly fall victim to societal stigmatisation and what is seen as an exploitative industry. There is little acknowledgement of the choice or decision-making of sex workers themselves (ibid). However, advocates of sex work argue for the acceptance of sex work and paid sexual contact being regarded as a paid job like any other (Sullivan, 2010). As the New Statesmen reported recently, 'Sex work is work' (Newstatesmen.com, 2014). Based on governmental figures there are an estimated 72,800 sex workers in the UK, who on average have 25 clients per week and who also earn in the region of £78 per meet (Parliament.uk, 2016). However, the report does offer a caveat about the reported figures due to the absence of many hard facts available in the UK.

Statistically, sex workers are at high risk from aspects of criminal activity, primarily exploitation, with an estimated 1,139 sex workers recorded as victims of exploitation in 2014. The report also states that there was an average 10 sex workers a year being murdered between 1990 to 2015(ibid); although it is not made clear if these are street sex workers or those who use online media to promote their business. With acts of violence towards indoor home-based sex workers most often being committed by their clients, it is noted that these

acts are rarely reported to the police or other authorities (Benoit and Millar, 2001; Goldring, Cain and Westall 2016). Having to conceal their work from those around them further results in online sex workers often feeling lonely and socially isolated (Koken 2012).

The alienation and social isolation outline above appears rooted in governmental policy arising from the need of sex workers to work alone or run the risk of criminalisation if choosing to share a house from which to work (Dodsworth, Sorensen and Larsson 2014). Of course, this is dependent on the type of sex work that is being carried out. For instance, a sex worker who does not meet their client face-to-face, but only via webcam, is not breaking the law by working with others in the same room. This is not the case for sex workers who meet their client as the law pushes them to work alone or run the risk of criminalisation.

In a 2004 Home Office report, 'Paying the Price', the message was one of 'managing' indoor sex work where the 'public good' was given priority over the safety of women, largely ignoring the potential risks endured by sex workers (Phoenix, 2009). The current view adopted at the institutional level is one of seeking to disempower and criminalise those who engage in sex work (Cussik and Berney, 2005). Outlining further structural disparity on how crimes against sex workers are handled, a 2015 House of Commons symposium on sex work found that differences in sex workers' reporting of violence towards them was dependent on the policing policy for that particular area. The more liberal the policing, the greater the likelihood that the sex worker would report such acts against them. There is clearly an absence of societal understanding and sympathy towards sex workers leaving them increasingly vulnerable and marginalised. In this current egalitarian age, it does seem that they are not receiving the same recognition and legal protection as is provided to other minority groups.

The growth of online sex work is still in its infancy and the infrastructure needed to support such women still have some way to go to catch up with these recent changes. The cuts in funding seen throughout the UK since 2010 have meant that third sector organisations have been expected to do more with less and less funding (NCVO, 2016). This has left gaps in provision while third sector organisations firstly establish what the support needs of online sex workers are, before they can even begin to look for innovative ways that such needs can be met (Goldring, Cain and Westall 2016). As it stands, support structures currently need to be restructured to facilitate a more proactive view of online sex work that highlights the potential risks, requirements and needs of people working in this high growth industry.

There are a small number of sex work websites that aim to provide a safe zone for online workers. These sites seek to provide support to sex workers by helping to address the various aspects of a dangerous and stigmatised industry, handling online presence of the marginalized (and in many respects, criminalised), by addressing the illegitimacies of working in the sex trade (Sanders 2005a). The most prominent of these is the national online support site 'National Ugly Mugs' (NUM), which was set up as way for sex workers to report violence and 'dodgy punters'. Other forum-based sites, such as SAAFE.info, use their service as an

open advice forum where there is ongoing discussion between sex workers on a number of related topics that include staying safe, paying tax and how to apply for a mortgage. While these supportive services are noteworthy in their work, the difficulty arises in that they cannot be proactive in their support, meaning that people working online have to know about them in the first instance.

The questions then arises, if these online sex workers are unable to gain support from the police, family or friends, or from their co-workers, then who can they turn to in times of greatest need? The needs of <u>street</u> sex workers are likely being met by third sector organisations, such as MASH. For those 'in the know' there are online support structures. However, what is currently absent from the support system is one that proactively supports those women working online.

Aims and objectives

The aim of the research was to explore and identify the wellbeing needs of female online sex workers. The objectives were to:

- Perform an online audit of adult sites from which to gain a better understanding of the working environment of online sex workers;

- Examine what online support already exists for female sex workers;

- Develop and deliver an online survey exploring the needs and experiences of online sex workers;

- Conduct semi-structured interviews with sex workers who have experience of working online from which to provide a deeper understanding about the support needs of women in the sex work industry and any potential gaps in provision.

3. Methodology

Approach

A mixed methods approach was used to collect and analyse data (Johnson and Onwugbuzie, 2004). Developing a mixed methods approach allowed the narrative of online sex work to emerge from three different areas and provided possibilities to analyse the data quantitatively and qualitatively. Data was collected through the process of 'web scraping'; an audit of relevant online resources such as support websites, and advertising websites; an online survey; and semi-structured interviews. The following subsections will outline how the data was gathered and analysed.

Online Web Scraping

Web scraping is a technique used to extract data from websites and format it so it can be analysed in Excel or another statistical package. The main website for online sex worker advertisement is AdultWork. This website is publically accessible but does change daily as new sex workers register a profile or when existing users amend theirs. Web scraping took place between 4th May 2017 and 30th May 2017. The HTML code for each profile was copied and pasted into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet where a formula could then take the specific data needed. There are difficulties with this approach in that some of the relevant detail is embedded within the web page and as such, it is not possible to separate the material for analysis. This included, for instance, how much the sex worker charged, their telephone number, etc. For the data that could be extracted, univariate analysis was conducted.

A total of 566 profiles from adultwork.com were used for the final profile analysis. Not all questions are compulsory when filling out a profile, resulting in some questions being left unanswered. When creating a profile it is possible to enter multiple locations as an area of work making it impossible to tell exactly where the individuals worked from. For example, some only stated they were from Greater Manchester, one stated that their location was a 'clean safe district', while another stated her location as Manchester, Liverpool, Salford, Trafford, Stockport. Each one of the ten districts from Manchester were represented in some way (Stockport, Tameside, Manchester, Trafford, Wigan, Bolton, Rochdale, Oldham, Bury and Salford) (n=533). It was also possible to collect nationality. However, as this was an optional field, not all users had completed this section. One section that was completed by all users was sexual orientation.

Online Survey

A survey was developed from the literature review, and in consultation with representatives from MASH, to ensure that the information sought was the most appropriate, and worded in the most effective way. Once this was completed, an online version of the survey was

created on 'Qualtrics', and again this was approved and piloted by MASH prior to its distribution.

The survey contained 31 different questions relating to their experiences of working online, and their support needs. The data was analyzed at a Univariate level, and where appropriate, has been analysed alongside the qualitative data; the results of which can be seen in the following chapter.

Access and recruitment

The survey link was distributed and promoted by MASH, and was also promoted by other agencies working to support online sex workers, including National Ugly Mugs, via social media. The survey ran from 28th April to 28th May 207. Any non-completed surveys were deleted from the dataset if they held no useable information. 22 participated answered the surveys. Only one participant did not identify as female, and their age ranged from 25 to 53 years old. After completing the online survey, respondents were asked if they would like to participate in a follow-up interview, which would take place either by phone or by email.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Two semi-structured phone interviews were conducted by a senior female member of the research team. Interview questions were developed from both the literature review and the survey questions, and as with the survey, were confirmed by MASH prior to any interviews taking place. To add further depth to the findings, two further email interviews were conducted. All interviews consisted of a discussion of participants' experiences of working online, and their support needs. Interview data was analyzed using thematic analysis, and was linked to the themes which emerged from the online survey responses.

Analysis

The analysis will take the form of univariate analyses using descriptive statistics gained from the Web Scraping and the Online Survey. Due to the need for selective sampling, it was not possible to carry out inferential or parametric statistics. A thematic analysis was conducted on the transcripts from the semi-structured interview data. The analysis will develop a narrative taken from all three aspects of the research.

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from Manchester Metropolitan University's ethics committee. In line with this, all data collected was anonymised. As such IP addresses were not collected through the online survey, and respondents' names have been changed to ensure anonymity. Participants in both the online survey and follow-up interviews gave informed consent before taking part in the research. All quotes used in the final report have been checked and deemed appropriate by the participants. Finally, the profiles and data extracted were from

websites that did not have controlled access, and were publicly available; only non-identifying data was extracted. All of the data for this project has been stored on encrypted computers, and in accordance with data protection legislation.

Biography of Phone Interview Participants

Hannah got into sex work after being made redundant from her work. In the first instance, she worked for an agency but this was not a satisfactory arrangement as she did not have full control over who she saw. After discussing this with a colleague she worked with when a lap dancer, she was informed of AdultWork, an online sex work portal where she could advertise herself and keep control about who she would offer her services too. She was very successful as a sex worker and was able to buy her ex-partner out of the house they had both bought. She no longer works in the industry.

Michelle is a Dominatrix and as such does not have sex with her clients. The non-sexual contact means that she is able to work with other women. By doing this, they are able to offer instrumental and emotional support to each other. The main attraction to sex work for Michelle was the money and that it was easy to do. She did, however, start to become jaded so took time away from her job. She also worked full time in another job. She prefers to work in real time, but does have a profile on AdultWork.

Biography of Email Interview Participants

Nicola is based in Greater Manchester, and has been working independently as an online sex worker for over 6 years. She provides both sexual physical and non-physical contact services.

Sarah is from outside the Greater Manchester area, and works both independently and through an agency. She has been working online for more than 10 years, and provides physical contact services.

4. Results

The results section has three main parts. The first section examines material that is available online and used to advertise the services of sex workers. The second part looks at data arising from the online survey. The last part is an exploration of the semi-structured interviews.

AdultWork profiles

Information from 566 profiles were collected. Of these, 533 explicitly stated they worked in Greater Manchester. Some of the information provided on the profile included sexual orientation with 44.3% reporting themselves as bi-sexual, 25.3% starting they were bi-curious while 30.4% indicated they were straight (see table 1). It should be noted here however, that sexual orientation here relates to their work, and not necessarily their sexual identity outside of work.

Table 1: Reported sexuality of AdultWork Manchester workers

Sexual Orientation	Per cent and count
Bi-Curious	25.3% (n143)
Bi-Sexual	44.3% (n251)
Straight	30.4% (n172)
Total	(n566)

Looking at the nationality, 61% of the AdultWork profiles reported their nationality. The highest number reported were British at 47%; 6.5% were Romanian; 1.6% Polish; 1.4% Other 5.5% (see table 2). 39% did not report their nationality.

Table 2: Reported nationality of AdultWork Manchester workers

Country of Origin	Per cent and count
British	47% (n268)
Polish	2% (n9)
Romanian	7% (n37)
Other	5% (n31)
Unknown	39% (n221)
Total	(n566)

Online survey

The survey received 22 responses, although some of these were only partially completed. The total number therefore varies according to the number of respondents who answered the question.

Duration of working online: Of the respondents who answered the survey question, 50% had been working online between 2 and 5 years (see Table 3). Interestingly, 10% had been working online more than 10 years, suggesting that perhaps this is online working not quite the 'recent' phenomenon that it is purported to be.

Table 3 - How long have you been working as an online sex worker?

Answer	%	Count
Less than a Year	5%	1
1 year	15%	3
2 to 5 years	50%	10
6 to 10 years	20%	4
More than 10 years	10%	2
Total	100%	20

Type of services offered: Participants were asked what type of services were provided. Here, they could answer in more than one category. Their responses show that 77% of the respondents offer sexual physical contact. 32% offer non-sexual contact services, for example Dominatrix, whilst 41% offering sexual services that involved no physical contact services at all such as web cam. These results are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4 - What best describes the adult services you offer? Please tick all that apply.

Answer	%	Count
No physical contact (e.g. Webcam)	41%	9
Sexual physical contact	77%	17
Non-sexual contact (e.g. Dominatrix)	32%	7
Total	100%	22

Choosing to work online: Participants were asked to state their main reason for choosing to work online (and could select more than one answer). The top three reasons were independence (63%); followed by feeling in control (58%); and safety and reduced risks (53%). See Table 5 for further details. As noted earlier, the notion of risk is not the same for the sex workers who meet with their clients versus those who do not interact face-to-face. In addition, some individuals meet with their clients but do not engage with sexual activity (see table 4 above), and it is also important to understand the distinct risks faced by this group. This is interesting when exploring the data below. Drilling down into the 'Safety and reduced risks' question with the different types of services offered, we find that, of the 10 respondents who stated they felt safer working online, 70% (n7) met with their clients face-to-face and engaged with sexual activity (see table 6).

Table 5 - What is your main reason for choosing to work online? Please tick all that apply.

Answer	%	Count
Anonymity	32%	6
I feel in control	58%	11
Safety and reduced risks	53%	10
Wider advertisement	32%	6
Better pay	42%	8
Independence	63%	12
Empowerment	26%	5
Accessibility	47%	9
Other (not stated)	11%	2

Table 6 - Safety and reduced risk with type of services offered

Type of services offered	No Physical Contact	Sexual physical contact	Non-sexual physical contact
Safety and reduced risk	50%	70%	50%

The results suggest then that it is those providing sexual physical contact who feel safest working online where it might be less of an issue for the other two groups.

Perceptions of online sex work: When asked how they feel about sex work, 'independence' received the highest response (68%). Interestingly, in the next highest responses, respondents reported that they felt socially isolated (37%), unaccepted (32%) and anonymous (32%). See Table 7 for further details.

Table 7 - Which one of these best describes how you feel about sex work? Please select all that apply

Answer	%	Count
Empowered	26%	5
Socially isolated	**37%**	**7**
Safe	11%	2
Unaccepted	**32%**	**6**
Liberated	11%	2
Fearful	11%	2
Anonymous	**32%**	**6**
Trapped	16%	3
Independent	**68%**	**13**
Other	32%	6

Knowledge and use of online support: A key factor of using support is knowing how and where it can be accessed. However, nearly 50% of respondents were not aware of support for online sex workers (see Table 8).

Table 8 - Are you aware of any online support for sex workers?

Answer	%	Count
Yes	52%	11
No	**48%**	**10**
Total	100%	21

Of those who were aware of online support groups, National Ugly Mugs and SAAFE were the most prevalent answers, mentioned 4 times each.

When asked if they felt they needed support, the overwhelming response (64%) stated that they did (see Table 9).

Table 9 - As an online sex worker, do you need support? If yes, please specify what kind of support.

Answer	%	Count
Yes	32%	6
Yes sometimes	32%	6
No	21%	4
Not sure	16%	3
Total	100%	19

When asked what types of support they would consider using, the top answers ranged from Safety (76%); Health Services (67%); Problem clients (57%); making friends (52%); Web and Technology support (38%). Clearly, online sex workers have a complex range of support needs some of which are already available. However, as indicated earlier, this necessitates that the sex workers know of the services that are available to them, such as health services, and support with problem clients.

Table 10 - Would you consider using support services tailored for sex work in any of the following areas? Please tick all that apply.

Answer	%	Count
Safety	76%	16
Health services	67%	14
Web and technology support	38%	8
Professional emotional support	62%	13
Financial issues	33%	7
Making friends / Support from other industry workers	52%	11
Housing	24%	5
Problem clients	57%	12
Relationship advice	19%	4
Finding tailored accountancy	33%	7
Other	5%	1

It is interesting to see that around a third of participants stated they needed support with web and technology.

Three questions asked what type of support service they would most likely use if available. This included anonymous online chat services, anonymous telephone services and an anonymous face-to-face service. There seems to be less need for face-to-face interactions with just 28% stating they would definitely use the service. This compares to 76% and 52% stating they would use anonymous online or telephone service respectively.

Table 11: Would you consider using support services.

	Anonymous online Chat	Anonymous Telephone	Face-to-face
Definitely yes	38% (n8)	29% (n6)	14% (n3)
Probably yes	38% (n8)	24% (n5)	14% (n3)
Might or might not	14% (n3)	33% (n7)	48% (n10)
Probably not	9% (n2)	14% (n3)	19% (n4)
Definitely not	0% (n0)	0% (n0)	5% (n1)
Total	100%	100%	100%

It might be that face-to-face interactions where viewed as less important as it would require the sex worker to meet up with the service provider which would then have implications for anonymity.

Qualitative analysis

Control

Control is a key reason behind the choice to work online: 58% of survey respondents (n11) stated that they feel in control by working online, whilst 63% (n12) reported that working online gives them independence. Interview participants confirmed this view. Both Michelle and Nicola discussed how they felt 'safer' working online:

> If you are in a real time session with somebody and they start to get a little bit funny, it's very difficult then to diffuse the situation, *whereas* when you are online you can just hang up with the press of a button (Michelle).

> Having my do's and don'ts clearly set out hopefully stops guys after services I don't offer. The most important aspect of working online is that it gives me a chance to turn guys away without the risk of danger and is generally easier. I personally am not always comfortable turning services down when face-to-face with clients (Nicola).

For Nicola, a key benefit of working online was the ability to turn down potential clients with reduced risk to her personal safety, whereas this was more difficult in a face-to-face situation with clients. Hannah was also very clear that her reason for working online because she 'wanted to have more control over it myself', and as such she 'insisted' that she spoke to clients prior to meeting them. Importantly, she stated how she would never meet anybody 'who didn't have any previous positive feedback'. In this way, Hannah had control over who she would, and would not see. This is in contrast to her experience of working for an agency, where she had little control or autonomy. Having reported a 'client who wasn't a nice client' to the agency, and told them that she would not meet him again, the agency ignored her:

> They basically threatened…they wanted me to still pay the fee [for not having met the client] plus they wanted me to pay, like for him not being a satisfied customer (Hannah).

Working online therefore gave her a sense of independence and an ability to choose which clients she would meet. This seems to be reflected in the survey responses, and suggests that control is therefore a key factor in the choice of business methodology for people working online.

Working online: the need for knowledge and safety

The need for knowledge, and of the need to be 'computer savvy' (Michelle) was highlighted by participants. Both Nicola and Hannah consider themselves to be 'quite capable at general technical stuff' (Nicola). In contrast, Michelle, by her own admission, is not 'massively tech-savvy', and relies on peers, and one friend in particular, who she describes as her 'go-to', to help her with any issues, technical or otherwise, that she may face when working online. It was with her friend's support that she began working online, and was advised about 'setting

up a profile…what you do when you're on cam'. Hannah also acted as a mentor, providing technical support:

> …friends who started doing sex work…I basically showed them how to use the site (Hannah).

Both participants noted that AdultWork 'isn't very clear and that it requires a certain level of technical knowledge to know how to use it effectively' (Hannah). Hannah discussed the time she spent learning how to use AdultWork, and understanding how to work safely online: part of this was learning about which clients had multiple profiles:

> You could also see if [clients had] created multiple profiles…you could click on that and see obviously if they'd had a lot of negative feedback in the past and that they'd closed their account and started a new one, because it's all linked to your IP address on your computer (Hannah).

> Being able to check feedback on a guy, see if his profile mentions bareback and having a non-face-to-face conversation (to see if he is a boundary pusher) is useful information that helps me decide whether to meet a guy or not (Nicola).

For Hannah, the reason the site was useful was 'because I understood how to use that site.' For those who do not have this level of technical ability, those new to the industry, and potentially those without peers who they are able to ask for support, there is a gap in knowledge, which creates additional risks for those working online. This was echoed by Sarah, who feels that working online comes with a risk that isn't easily identified. Support structures, such as resources or information sheets for people who work online, could therefore be particularly useful to help them to work more safely. Michelle noted that this would something she would benefit from:

> If there's things that people can tell me that I've not even thought about doing, then for people like me that don't really know their way around the whole internet and security and all that, then that would be beneficial to me (Michelle).

The perceived benefit to working online is the potential for increased safety. However, without a clear understanding of how to protect their identity, there is a risk to individuals. This was highlighted by Nicola, who felt that support is needed in terms of 'making people aware that pictures, videos, [and] webcam broadcasts can be copied and spread to other sites.' This was further discussed by Michelle, who has been identified by people who have seen her both online and in her 'vanilla job':

> I've had occasions when people have messaged me and said 'are you from (name of area)?' and you know that's it's somebody who has seen you. I had one that said 'do you work in (shop) in (name of place)' which is where I used to work, and I was like 'well yeah I do', so I know that one of the customers that's in there has seen me or maybe spoken to me online, and then has seen me in my vanilla job, so that's a bit unnerving…you don't have a clue who they are (Michelle).

Her response to this was to give no response. However, this is perhaps an area of support that MASH could provide to those sex workers early on in their career, and still learning how to operate safely. As Michelle points out:

> I suppose I'm lucky in the respect of the people that I've got, but if you've haven't got that sort of support network around you I suppose that would be good to have a service in which you could use, whether it be online chat, over the phone where you could actually chat to someone about it (Michelle).

By contrast, Hannah discussed her system of working, designed to help ensure her safety. As noted above, she would only meet up with someone if they had received positive feedback on AdultWork. However, she also stored their number, which she marked with a star if she did not want to meet up with them again, and therefore would not answer their call if they rang her. Moreover, Hannah had a 'safe person' in her best friend, so that prior to meeting a client, she would provide her best friend with the details that she had received:

> so I'd know what room number it is, what hotel it is, and I'd send his telephone number that I'd always had contact with him on, so that if there was anything that went wrong, say my booking was 9-10 at night, if she hadn't heard from me by 11 o'clock and I hadn't told her that I was staying there longer, she knew that if I hadn't contacted her, she could contact like the police or whatever (Hannah).

Hannah recommended the development of a service which, for a fee, allows workers to 'check in with them at the end of your booking so they know you're safe'. This is something which MASH could consider developing.

Isolation and the need for support

One of the main issues about being a sex worker is the associated stigma of this line of work which makes it is difficult to tell family and friends. Whilst Hannah told her best friend, and Michelle told friends and family, there were limits for all participants in terms of who they felt they could speak to about this work. When Nicola has a difficult time at work, she stated that she speaks to other sex workers via the SAAFE online forum or parlour colleagues. Although able to speak to friends, she noted that she feels constrained, because 'if I complain too much they say I should stop working, which is annoying.' Importantly, in spite of having a number of source of support, Nicola also stated that 'some stuff I keep to myself cos it's embarrassing.' For Michelle, although her parents knew the industry she was in, they did not talk about it. Similarly, she did not tell her partner's parents:

> There's certain people that I wouldn't discuss it with, for example my partner's family, my mum and dad know what I do but I don't think they particularly want to hear about it, so I wouldn't discuss it with them, and grandparents, other family members (Michelle).

The risk of stigma means that sex workers are able to tell some people, presumably those that they trust, about their work, but that it is not always possible to tell everyone:

> Because a lot of people won't tell their families, like I wasn't in a position where my family, they wouldn't have understood or approved of what I was doing so I didn't feel there was anybody for me to turn to (Hannah).

None of the participants' responses from the survey stated that they could go to their family to seek support, questioning therefore whether the sex worker had told their family members or not. The stigma associated with sex work also resulted in 76%, (n16) of participants not feeling able to tell their doctor the industry they were in. Alarmingly, 43% (n=9) did not feel able to tell their mainstream sexual health workers (non-MASH sexual health worker), which could then limit the type of tests made available to them.

The experience of isolation and the need for support is found throughout the survey, particularly the need for understanding from those who know and potentially work in the industry, to provide insight, assistance and support in areas of safety 76% (n16), health 67% (n14), professional or emotional support 62% (n13) or reporting problems 57% (n12).

By contrast, Michelle has a good network of other sex workers around her who she is able to talk to. Her line of work means she only works with other women and as such, they are a socially supportive group:

> …we all know each other, some that do online work, some that don't, in general they're a good group of girls. If you do have anything you want to talk about, if it's an unusual person that's come through or somebody that you're a bit unsure of, you can normally talk, and if obviously they've had any experience as well (Michelle).

It is important to note the benefit that comes from being able to share issues and check people out when necessary. However, in this instance, it is because she has non-sexual contact with their clients, which means that she can work with other women and as such, develop supportive relationships with others. What this highlights is that different types of sex workers require different types of support.

When working online, however, this support can be missing, particularly for people working with webcams. Michelle pointed out that this work can be 'boring' as:

> You're just sat there waiting for the laptop to ring and you've got other things to be getting on with (Michelle).

This is a factor which can also lead to social isolation, a point which was highlighted by one of the survey respondents, who called for support services to help 'break social isolation involved on cam girl work.' This respondent continued:

> Hours are long and anti social. Very hard to maintain life outside cam. Can lead to depression. Not being able to discuss the difficult aspects of this type of sex work with anyone is extremely hard. *(36 year old in Greater Manchester listed as an independent worker offering no physical sexual contact).*

Another survey respondent, when asked what her support needs were stated:

> Emotionally, mentally, physically. Encouragement when slow./hard understanding. Friendship. Social isolation. Mental health *(35 year old based in Greater Manchester listed as an independent worker providing a range of online sexual services).*

In Michelle's interview, she talked about the way in which she had withdrawn from online work as it started to 'get too much'. She has now returned to doing 'bits online' but noted that this will probably increase because:

> the more you do the more you keep doing … the money is so attractive, the more you're doing it, every time you're going online and you see the money going up, the more you want to do it (Michelle).

This highlights a support need for women who are doing webcam work, and this may be something that MASH could usefully consider developing.

There appears to be a lack of knowledge about the support that is available. Both interview participants had little knowledge of support services, and 48%, (n10) stated that they were not aware of any support online. In terms of developing awareness, one of the participants noted that she had received emails via her AdultWork profile, which informed her of a support service; in this instance the support related to sexual health. This may be something that MASH could build on; proactively contacting people working online via their AdultWork profile to signpost key MASH resources that they may benefit from. This may be, for example, an online forum where people are able to talk about their work in an open, and confidential manner, with others who work in the industry. This could also be a space where support materials and resources are available. Importantly, both interview participants stated that they would have benefitted from this resource. Michelle, for example, stated that:

> had I had support and help from the start, I don't think it would have got to that stage [where I had to stop online work] (Michelle).

One survey respondent called for 'a place online to discuss issues with others', whilst 64% (n16) of survey respondents would use an anonymous online chat support service. Sarah also identified the need for 'peer support networks that are sex work positive'.

Communities of Practice

A Community of Practice (Wenger 1998), where people from the same profession assist others, is an important resource for individuals in this study. As highlighted previously, knowledge of resources and support was often missing, and in these instances individuals reported feeling isolated and in need of support. Where this was available, peer support and support from professional organisations made respondents feel safer, and created networks which reduced feelings of social isolation. The use of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) meant that Hannah found out about working online:

> One of the managers in the lap-dancing club told me about it. So he basically said "why are you working for an agency as well, you could do it yourself" (Hannah).

Hannah also discussed how she had supported friends who had begun to work in the industry, sharing her practice with them to help them work safely. Similarly, Michelle discussed the support she receives from work colleagues, whether this is technical or relating to a concern about a client:

> We all know each other, some that do online work, some don't…they're a good group of girls (Michelle).

Communities of practice are important here in that there is a specific level of technical knowledge, and a high level of detail needed; for instance, knowing that IP addresses are stored and can help informally identify clients with multiple accounts. At the same time, however, the stigma associated with working in the industry means that any learning that needs to take place is unlikely to come from outside the industry. As indicated above, individuals may teach themselves such skills, as in Hannah's case, who spent a great deal of time learning about how to effectively use AdultWork. By comparison, others find this is not possible due to a lack of confidence in using computers, as is the case with Michelle, and it is these workers who are likely to find themselves in a potentially more vulnerable situation as a result.

There is therefore a specific need for support services within the industry to provide such resources, and to support this learning. Indeed, 76% of survey respondents (n16) would like more support with safety when working online, and 62% (n13) need professional emotional support. 38% (n8) specified that they need web and technology support. Furthermore, one of the survey respondents stated that there is a need for a 'women's specialist in this area' *(29 year-old based outside Greater Manchester, listed as an independent worker providing sexual physical contact).* It is therefore suggested that a strategy of supporting people new to sex work is implemented with the provision of basic safety measures. This could be accompanied by wellbeing, safety and other practical business-related issues, which might also represent a significant positive benefit. The issue is how to deliver them: as Hannah stated in her interview, it would be naive to think women would call into MASH to have training:

> I don't think people would show up. Because when you're an independent worker, the chances of people knowing what you're doing are very very slim. So…you'd be scared of bumping into other people (Hannah).

The benefit of being online is that it allows the sex worker to be in control, and ensures the maintenance of their autonomy. An online portal would provide a safe space in which sex workers might be able to build up trust with support workers incrementally. Once a reciprocal, trusting relationship had been established, this could lead to sex workers accepting face-to-face support. It should be noted that to offer support requires a relationship to be established in the first instance. A proactive approach could be explored

whereby net outreach (netreach) support extends the offer of support or assistance to sex workers early in their career and offer a non-judgemental ear, albeit online if needed, and access to useful details about how to work safely online and face-to-face where necessary. It will however be necessary to explore how to do this both legally and ethically.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

It is society's duty to provide protection to marginalised and vulnerable groups. This is not happening for sex workers, leaving them at increased risk of exploitation and harm. Third sector organisations and charities such as MASH do provide support for street sex workers but the growth of online sex work means there needs to be a radical review of how such workers can be supported. The appeal of online sex work arises from the higher level of control, independence and autonomy; but it is not without risk. In addition to the risks that come from sexual exploitation and violence reported by the Parliamentary report (2016), there is also risks arising from feelings of social isolation and alienation due to the stigma that continues to be associated to such work. These risks are intensified to those who are either new to the career and/or do not know the necessary technical areas of working online. As lone workers, there is a steep learning curve where advice and support from others in the industry or who run support groups would greatly ease this journey. The notion of *career* and *communities of practice* are important here in that it acknowledges the fact that sex workers will be at different stages of their career, and how those with more experience have a good deal to offer those we could term 'novice'. What is needed here are trusted organisations who can proactively reach out to online sex workers, and provide a safe space (be it online or face-to-face) from which to mediate the development of online supportive networks.

Recommendations:

- MASH should consider providing safety advice to those working online, specifically to show how to stay safe when working online.

- MASH has a unique understanding about the needs of sex workers especially around their sexual health. It would be beneficial if they could offer training to mainstream sexual health services so that they too can better support the needs of sex workers who attend mainstream clinics.

- MASH should recruit a net outreach (netreach) worker to support those engaged in online sex work. It will be necessary to find a way to do this which is within the law, and ethical. However, there is a demonstrable need for support for both existing workers and those new to online sex work. Those new to this line of work are potentially at greater risk due to their inexperience and speed at which they need to learn to navigate the online sex work terrain. A netreach worker could proactively make contact and provide support about how to stay safe online, and when giving out personal information. The same support could be offered to those who have been working longer but who still might not fully understand the possible risks of their online presence.

- MASH should look to provide online and telephone support to online sex workers. By offering a friendly and professional 'ear', this could also result in MASH being considered as part of the online sex workers' socially supportive networks, resulting in their other wellbeing needs being met. Building up this level of trust, MASH can begin to learn more about the needs of these clients and begin to tailor packages of support accordingly, for instance, promoting their sexual health clinic.

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