

# IN WHOSE NAME?

Migration and Trafficking in the UK Sex Industry: delivering social interventions between myths and reality

31 October 2011

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**ESRC Festival of Social Sciences 2011**

**In Whose Name? Migration,  
Sex Work and Trafficking**

**Presentation of the findings of the  
'Migrant Workers in the UK Sex  
Industry'.**

The event and the research are funded by the  
Economic and Social Science Research Council (ESRC)  
RES-062-23-1066 and RES-622-26-367

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# In Whose Name? Migration, Sex Work and Trafficking

## Introduction

The relationship between migration, the sex industry and exploitation is a highly topical issue and one of concern for policymakers, the government, the third sector and the general public alike in the UK. There is a perception that commercial sex is connected to international organised crime and irregular immigration raising social alarms about the extent of trafficking within the UK sex industry. This is magnified in the run up to the 2012 London Olympics by speculation of an increase in trafficking to satisfy the demand for cheap sex supposedly generated by large sporting events, contrary to existing evidence (GAATW 2009). In recent years, estimates of the size of the sex industry and the number of migrant sex workers in the UK have frequently been manipulated by political actors and anti-sex work lobbyists into a moral panic situation in which the majority of migrant sex workers are presented as trafficked (Cusick et al. 2009; Davies 2009). In the process, the real experiences and vulnerability of migrant sex workers are obscured for the political and fundraising purposes of different social actors (Carline 2010). Most importantly, the real livelihoods of migrants working in the sex industry, most of who are not trafficked, are disrupted and their rights and vulnerabilities remain ignored and unattended.

Contrary to prevailing public perceptions, a minority of migrant sex workers are coerced and exploited in the sex industry (ACPO 2010; Mai 2009, Platt et al. 2011). The current public outcry about the extent of trafficking in the UK sex industry coincides with the adoption of a criminalising and law enforcement approach towards sex work, through the introduction of the Policing and Crime Act (2009), which impacted very negatively on the lives and rights of migrants working in the sex industry (x:talk 2010). Recent research findings suggest that a small minority of migrants working in the sex industry feel coerced and exploited and they show that criminalisation and migration law enforcement-based approaches towards sex work increase both migrant and non-migrant sex workers' risk of physical and sexual violence in London (Platt et al. 2011). In many cases, anti-trafficking initiatives resulted in a number of arrests, convictions and deportations of sex workers for prostitution and immigration crimes (x:talk 2010).

The criminalisation and law enforcement approach adopted by anti-trafficking initiatives undermines their main aim because it has resulted in a relatively low number of convictions for trafficking as well as a failure to adequately identify and support victims of trafficking (Arocha 2011). The new coalition government has recently outlined strategies to fight trafficking and address prostitution which are even more focused on a criminalisation and law enforcement approach (Home Office 2011). Therefore, it is topical that the findings of recent and relevant research are communicated effectively and in a timely way to policymakers, the third sector and the general. This is particularly urgent, given the attention that the issue of trafficking has received in the run up to the 2012 Olympics, coinciding with an intensification of anti-trafficking interventions in the London Olympic boroughs and beyond.

The aim of the 'In Whose Name? Migration, Sex Work and Trafficking' event is to bring the evidence gathered by the ESRC funded 'Migrant Workers in the UK Sex Industry' research project as well as other recent and relevant research findings (Platt et al. 2011; x:talk 2010) to the centre of current debates and policymaking on trafficking and the sex industry.

## Summary: Migrant Workers in the UK Sex Industry

The main aim of the 'Migrant Workers in the UK Sex Industry' project is to improve understanding of the links between the sex industry and migration in the UK. This is predominantly addressed in current public debates in terms of trafficking and exploitation. Interviews with 100 migrant women, men and transgender people working in all of the main jobs available within the sex industry, and from the most relevant areas of origin (South America, Eastern Europe, EU and South East Asia), suggest that although some migrants are subject to coercion and exploitation, a majority are not. The research reveals a great variety of experiences and trajectories within the sex industry, influenced by a number of key factors:

- social-economic background,
- family history,
- educational aspirations and achievements,
- immigration status and policy,
- professional and language skills,
- gender and sexuality,
- individual emotional history.

The research underlines that the current emphasis on trafficking and exploitation obscures the variety of migrants' trajectories into the UK sex industry and risks concealing their individual and shared vulnerabilities and strengths, an understanding of which could form the basis of more effective social interventions.

## Key points

- The majority of the migrant workers in the UK sex industry we interviewed were not forced or trafficked
- Immigration status is by far the single most important factor restricting their ability to exercise their rights in their professional and private lives
- Working in the sex industry is often a way for those interviewed to avoid the unrewarding and sometimes exploitative conditions they meet in non-sexual jobs
- By working in the sex industry, many interviewees are able to maintain dignified living standards in the UK while dramatically improving the living conditions of their families in the country of origin
- The stigmatisation of sex work is the main problem interviewees experienced while working in the sex industry and this impacts negatively on both their private and professional lives
- The combination of the stigmatisation of sex work and lack of legal immigration documentation makes interviewees more vulnerable to violence and abuse

- Relations between sex workers and clients are described as generally mutually consensual and respectful, although some reported problematic clients who were disrespectful, aggressive or abusive
- The impossibility of guaranteeing indefinite leave to remain to victims of trafficking undermines the efforts of the Police and other authorities against criminal organisations
- Most interviewees feel that the criminalisation of clients will not reduce demand or exploitation in the sex industry and that it will be pushed underground, making it more difficult for migrants working in the UK sex industry to assert their rights in relation to both clients and employers
- All interviewees thought that legalising sex work and the people involved and making it easier for all migrants to become and remain documented would improve their living and working conditions and enable them to exercise their rights more fully

## Reasons for Migrating

Migrants working in the UK sex industry migrate for a variety of interrelated reasons, including: taking up a job opportunity; improving their and their families' living conditions; completing their studies in the UK; learning English; living in a country associated with freedom, prosperity and opportunities; paying off debts contracted at home; escaping war, homophobia or patriarchal oppression; living more rewarding and pleasurable lifestyles; seeking new experiences away from home; and joining their British partners or their relatives and friends living in the UK. The UK was often seen as a place offering opportunities for economic, social and cultural self-advancement and this perception was usually based on accounts of returning migrants and the media, the latter particularly for younger people.

## Socio-economic Background of Interviewees

The research shows a great heterogeneity of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds amongst interviewees, ranging from situations of relative privilege to individual and social circumstances marked by extreme poverty and hardship. For the majority, the decision to migrate was a way of re-starting a project of social mobility which became unviable at home, because of the limitations or decline of shared or individual economic circumstances; lack of opportunities for self-advancement; gender, sexual or racial/ethnic discrimination; or as a consequence of individual circumstance and/or social events, such as the outbreak of war; the end of a romantic relationship; or the death of a parent. For a minority, migration was a way to escape extreme situations of poverty, marginalisation and oppression.

## The Role of Networks

The research findings highlight the importance of the role of networks of friends, family and partners in obtaining information about the occupational opportunities available in the UK and in providing the information and the economic support to obtain documents and transport. In a minority of cases interviewees were able to save the money they needed to migrate while working at home. The possibility of accessing a support network, usually through a partner, a friend or an extended family member, determines the first steps toward finding places to live and work once in the UK and this initial network affiliation

often remains a crucial reference for the migrant well after the initial moment. A minority of migrants resorted to the services of agencies and illegal organisations and responded to job adverts (au pairs, masseuses, etc.) in order to find employment abroad. The latter was the most common experience in the few cases of exploitation and coercion that we encountered during the research, sometimes originating from within networks involving partners, relatives and friends.

## Immigration Documentation and Sex Work Stigma

Most interviewees were technically documented, but the conditions they had to meet in order to be and remain documented determined their ability to exert their rights in their working and private lives. Interviewees whose documentation had to be renewed or who did not correspond to the intended duration and/or to the purpose of their stay in the UK had to accept personal and professional circumstances that made them more vulnerable to emotional and other forms of labour exploitation. The research shows that there is a clear link between the degree of difficulty in obtaining and maintaining documentation and the vulnerability of interviewees to exploitation, including trafficking, whether they work in the sex or in other industries and whether they are female, male or transgender, as the following extract from an interview with a 31 year-old Brazilian man shows:

*The tourist visa expired after 3 months and I had no money, so I worked in a packaging firm outside London... in Kent... night shifts of 12 hours...and we had to pay £12 each for the transport they arranged. Then eventually I learnt about the student visa and I got a regular 20 hours job at a gay sauna...*

The stigma associated with sex work often undermined important emotional relationships as most interviewees felt they could not be open about their work with their partners, families and friends, both in the UK and at home. For many interviewees it was difficult to reconcile working in the sex industry, particularly if selling sex, with their and their partners' understanding of the requirements of a romantic relationship, which were often under considerable strain, as the following interview with a 29 year-old Brazilian woman shows:

*If I told him he'd leave me. I feel I'm cheating on him. Even if I never do it with men for pleasure, I'm still giving them my body. I actually want to forget about this work, but on the financial side it's good...*

The perceived need to lead a double life in order to hide working in the sex industry from friends, families and partners caused suffering for many interviewees, while others appreciated this division as it allowed them to maintain clear boundaries between their professional and private lives.

The stigmatisation of sex work was the main problem interviewees experienced while working in the sex industry and it impacted on them differently according

to their gender and their job in the sex industry. Male and transgendered interviewees experienced less stigmatisation than their female colleagues, because of the relatively higher degree of acceptance of sex workers within the gay community. However, some transgendered interviewees reported being under a higher degree of abuse from clients when working as transgendered than when working as males as they felt that some clients had unresolved issues with their own (homo)sexuality. In general, female interviewees working as strippers experienced less stigmatisation than flat workers or escorts. Finally, cultural and individual understandings of privacy and shame in relation to sex work stigma influenced interviewees' choice of work within the sex industry. Some female and male interviewees preferred selling penetrative sex indoors to stripping in public, as they felt it would allow them to preserve their anonymity and privacy. Regardless of their gender and job differentiation, many interviewees felt that the combination of the stigmatisation of sex work and lack of documentation made them more vulnerable to violence and abuse while at work.

## Sex and Other Work Experiences

The pre-migration working experiences of interviewees ranged from no experience to having had multiple and skilled positions. Most interviewees had several non-sexual jobs, sometimes concurrently with sexual ones. For a minority, sex work was the only job they had ever had. Many interviewees had skilled jobs in their countries of origin and were unable to capitalise on their skills in the UK because of their immigration legal status. At the same time, some interviewees underlined the skilled nature of their sexual jobs, which was predicated on their abilities to manage the emotional implications of relations with their clients, as the following excerpt from an interview with a 30 year-old Brazilian woman shows:

*It's very quick money, but not easy. You have to have strong psychological skills. We get all sorts of clients with problems.*

Most interviewees did not come to the UK with the intention of working in the sex industry, but chose to do so in order to avoid the less rewarding and sometimes exploitative conditions they met in non sexual jobs, both at home and in the UK. Perception of exploitation and advantage are highly relative, as the following excerpt from an interview with a 42 year-old Ukrainian woman shows:

*This job [selling sex in a flat] is better; the money is good and quick. The cleaner job was really hard work and no good money. I still say I'm a cleaner, I have to lie, but I don't want to be one.*

The majority of interviewees were introduced to the possibility of working in the sex industry by friends and colleagues they met through non-sexual jobs. In some cases, it was the very friends and, more rarely, extended family members who enabled them to come to the UK who were involved in (and introduced them to) the sex industry.

Many interviewees had already had sexual jobs at home or in other countries and came to the UK with the intention of working in the sex industry or keeping this possibility open in case other plans did not work out. Most were satisfied with their experience of migration to the UK and of working in the sex industry. This included people who experienced exploitation, most of whom continued to work independently in the sex industry after having freed themselves from their exploiters, as the following excerpt from an interview with a 25 year old Lithuanian woman shows:

*The guy was not too bad, I mean, he only took 20 per cent and kept saying that he loved me and that he kept the money for us, but I was fed up so one day I told him that I wanted to work for myself and that he would not have seen a penny for me anymore, and that was it.*

When prompted to discuss what aspects they liked about working in the sex industry most interviewees mentioned: earning money quickly; managing time flexibly; having more opportunities to travel; being able to afford a dignified life and to help their families; meeting interesting people; and getting a unique insight into human sexual and non-sexual behaviour. Negative aspects included: the stigma attached to sex work; having sex with unattractive, unclean and/or aggressive clients; the difficulty in combining sex work with romantic relationships and private life more generally; the risk of STIs; and instances of violence (robberies) and abuse (rape) at the workplace. Overall, the majority of interviewees felt safe in their current jobs and described relations at work as friendly and respectful, including those with clients.

## The Intricacy of Exploitation and Consent

A minority of interviewees felt that they had been forced to sell sex and that they had been exploited. Only a very small minority of interviewees were deceived and forced into selling sex in circumstances within which they felt they had no share of control or consent. In the majority of the cases encountered, interviewees were aware that they would be selling sex, but not of the exploitative working conditions that they were required to endure, which led them to find ways to escape through the co-operation of clients, colleagues and, especially if documented or not intending to stay in the UK, the police. The following is an excerpt from an interview with a 30 year old Lithuanian woman:

*I mean, when I got there the guy told me that I had to work for a year... I only wanted to stay long enough to pay back the expenses and earn £3000! Then he kept all the money (...) When I got to this flat to work I felt safe... I then told the maid and she called the police immediately.*

Many interviewees indicated that one of the main factors underpinning exploitation were feelings of allegiance and loyalty embedded in romantic relationships. Socio-cultural and individual understandings of love were indicated as one of the main factors preventing many women from emancipating themselves from exploitation, as the following quotation from an interview with a 23 year old woman from Romania shows:

*It depends a lot on the girls, some believe anything the guy says 'for love'...they don't get it and they don't listen when I tell them to wise up... On the contrary they go back to the pimp and grass me off...and I have to deal with the threats of their pimps too!*

Almost all of the interviewees who felt that they had been exploited kept on working in the UK sex industry independently. All interviewees, including those with experiences of trafficking, drew clear distinctions between exploitative and non-exploitative practices in the sex industry and accepted it was possible for women to sell sex freely and consensually.

They all underlined how restrictive migration policies and the criminalisation of clients and (indirectly) of sex workers would make them more likely to have to take risks and accept undignified and dangerous conditions.

## Future Plans

The majority of interviewees were satisfied by their overall experience of migration and work in the UK sex industry. At the same time, most interviewees indicated that they wanted to leave the sex industry for a number of reasons. These included ageing and the way they felt it would impact on being desirable for clients in the future; the desire to form families in the future; and the fact that many felt intellectually unchallenged in their sexual jobs. Many migrants planned to save or had saved money in order to take up an independent economic activity, usually outside the sex industry, in the UK or in the country of origin. Interviewees with a precarious documented status wanted to make it permanent and aspired to obtain the right to live and work indefinitely in the UK.

## Conclusion

Contrary to the emphasis given in current public debates to cases of trafficking and exploitation, the evidence gathered during this project shows a great variety of trajectories within the sex industry, which were influenced by key factors such as: social-economic background; educational aspirations and achievements; immigration status; professional and language skills; gender and sexuality; family history; and individual emotional history. Amongst these factors, being able to maintain legal immigration status determines the possibility for migrant sex workers to assert their rights and counter stigmatisation and exploitation. At the same time, the research shows that most interviewees decided to work in the sex industry and that a small minority felt that they had been forced to. The research strongly suggests that vulnerability, particularly to trafficking and exploitation, results from migrants' socio-economic conditions, lack of information about their rights and entitlement to protection in the UK, their personal family and emotional circumstances, but, most of all, from their immigration legal status.

## Policy Implications

By engaging with the life histories of migrants working in the UK sex industry, the research highlighted a number of vulnerabilities and strengths that are obscured by the current emphasis on trafficking and exploitation in public debates and policy. An understanding of this more nuanced picture can inform more efficient and ethical policies of social intervention aimed at improving their living and working conditions. The research evidence strongly suggests that current attempts to curb trafficking and exploitation by criminalising clients and closing down commercial sex establishments will not stop the sex trade and that as a result the sex industry will be pushed further underground and people working in it will be further marginalised. This will discourage migrants and UK citizens working in the sex industry, as well as clients from co-operating with the police and sex work support projects in the fight against actual cases of trafficking and exploitation. The interviews informing this research support the view that the success of initiatives against trafficking and sexual exploitation could be greatly enhanced by provisions that would:

- make it easier for migrants to become and remain documented;
- allow the sex industry to operate legally, by de-criminalising it;
- guarantee victims of trafficking the certainty of obtaining undetermined leave to remain in the UK, regardless of their ability or choice to denounce their exploiters and to co-operate with the authorities; and
- provide victims of trafficking with adequate long-term support and protection to successfully integrate within UK society or, if they so wish, in their countries of origin.

## About the Project

The research team was led by Dr Nick Mai from the Institute for the Study of European Transformations, London Metropolitan University. London was chosen as the main site of the research (selected interviews were undertaken in Sheffield and Liverpool) because of the scale and diversity of its sex industry and of its migrant population, which offered a great potential to illustrate a variety of links between migration and the sex industry.

The research draws on 100 (67 women, 24 men, 9 transgender) in-depth semi-structured interviews with migrants working in all sectors of the sex industry and from the main areas of origin involved (South America, Eastern Europe, EU and South East Asia). The project adopted a participative ethical approach. The research team included people working in the sex industry and members of organisations representing sex workers. A monetary acknowledgement of subjects' participation in the research was given.

Interviewees were contacted through a combination of random and purposive criteria, in order to ensure that all the most relevant dimensions and experiences of migrants in the UK sex industry were included. For example, the fact that trafficking and exploitation were key issues to be investigated meant that the composition of the sample was purposely skewed to a relative over-representation of trafficked people. This means that the evidence gathered allows the research to produce scientific generalisations, albeit of a non-statistical nature, as the research is of a qualitative nature. The vast majority of interviewees were randomly approached through their commercial contact information, rather than through sex work support projects, in order to tap into different strata of migrant workers than those captured by existing research. In a second phase, we co-operated with the Police and selected sex work support projects in order to purposively interview a larger number of people with experiences of trafficking and exploitation than occurred through the random method. During the undertaking of the research we discovered that the vast majority of interviewees were using the services of sex work support projects, which means that our results can be compared with those of research using sex work projects as their unique or main access to interview subjects.

## About the Author

**Dr Nick Mai** is Reader in Migration Studies at ISET, the Institute for the Study of European Transformations at London Metropolitan University. His research analyses initiatives of social intervention addressing migrant groups that are constructed as vulnerable by policies as well as by academic and public debates. His research interests focus on negotiation of gender, sexuality and subjectivity through the migration process, with particular reference to international (female and male) sex work as a contested and ambivalent space of control and autonomy.

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**The final report of the 'Migrant Workers in the UK Sex Industry' research is available at this webpage:**

**<http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/research-units/iset/projects/esrc-migrant-workers.cfm>**

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## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all of the migrants working in the sex industry who participated in this research. Their contribution was invaluable and made this research possible.

For their essential advice and support a big thank you goes to the members of the Research Advisory Group :

**Rosie Campbell** (UKNSWP – UK Network of Sex Work Support Projects and PhD candidate at University of Durham)

**Dr Linda Cusick** ( University of the West of Scotland and UKNSWP)

**Justin Gaffney** (Metrosexual Health)

**Prof. Bill Jordan** (Plymouth University)

**Dr Maggie O'Neill** (University of Durham)

**Prof. Anthony Pryce** (City University)

**Catherine Stevens** (IUSW – International Union of Sex Workers)

We would also like to thank the project and the project researchers for their fundamental contribution to the project:

**Dr. Kate Hardy** (University of Leeds)

**P.G. Macioti**, PhD student, Open University and co-organiser of the X:talk project

**Thierry Schaffauser** (IUSW)

**Catherine Stephens** (IUSW)

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