



## Designing out vulnerability, building in respect: violence, safety and sex work policy

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### Abstract

One recent finding about the prostitution market is the differences in the extent and nature of violence experienced between women who work on the street and those who work from indoor sex work venues. This paper brings together extensive qualitative fieldwork from two cities in the UK to unpack the intricacies in relation to violence and safety for indoor workers. Firstly, we document the types of violence women experience in indoor venues noting how the vulnerabilities surrounding work-based hazards are dependent on the environment in which sex is sold. Secondly, we highlight the protection strategies that indoor workers and management develop to maintain safety and order in the establishment. Thirdly, we use these empirical findings to suggest that violence should be a high priority on the policy agenda. Here we contend that the organizational and cultural conditions that seem to offer some protection from violence in indoor settings could be useful for informing the management of street sex work. Finally, drawing on the crime prevention literature, we argue that it is possible to go a considerable way to designing out vulnerability in sex work, but not only through physical and organizational change but building in respect for sex workers rights by developing policies that promote the employment/human rights and citizenship for sex workers. This argument is made in light of the *Coordinated Prostitution Strategy*.

**Keywords:** Sex work; prostitution; violence; safety; rights; protection

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### Introduction: the complexities of the prostitution market and differential experiences of violence

There has been a global interest in the nature and extent of violence against sex workers, resulting in research throughout the world describing how between 50–100 per cent of street sex worker samples experience physical, sexual and economic violence in their job (Kurtz et al. 2004; Lowman 2000;

Miller and Schwartz 1995; Pauw and Brener 2003; Pyett and Warr 1997). Other studies highlight how a high proportion of street sex workers also experience violence in their private lives and from the community (see Nixon et al. 2002; Riberio and Sacramento 2005), leading Surratt et al. (2004) to argue that street sex workers experience a 'cycle of violence' from childhood, adult private relationships and work. In the UK, street workers have reported multiple incidents of violence (Campbell and Kinnell 2001; Church et al. 2001; Day and Ward 2001; May, Edmunds and Hough 1999; McKeganey and Barnard 1996; Phoenix 2000) and links have been made by Kinnell (2001) between high profile anti-prostitution campaigns led by residents and levels of violence directed towards street workers. Kinnell (2006) reports that over the past decade 86 sex workers have been murdered, confirming that street sex workers in the UK are twelve times more likely to die from violence at work than women their own age (Ward, Day and Weber 1999).

Although it has taken a long time for this gender-based violence to be empirically documented, concentrating only on the street market skews any realistic picture of the types of prostitution in the UK and the relationships between violence, safety and working environments. Focusing only on the street market highlights the most visible type of prostitution as problematic which consequently fuels discourses in the media, politics and amongst certain academics (see Farley 2004; Raymond 1999) that prostitution is inherently violent and therefore in need of eradication. As Weitzer (2005) argues, the radical anti-prostitution feminist standpoint that claims prostitution is inherently violent presents an argument that is unscientific, methodologically flawed and generalizes the worse case scenario to all types of sex work. In addition, the academic gaze on the street demonizes men who buy sex as aggressive, misogynistic deviants rather than ordinary, respectable members of the community. Monto's (2004) extensive work with men who buy sex, found that on the whole they reject rape myths or justifications of violence towards sex workers. Such results suggest that most customers are not violent in the commercial sexual exchange.

The theoretical and political background of these differing views stems from the divisions between feminists and other writers on the 'rights and wrongs' of prostitution. To simplify for reasons of brevity, the perspectives fall broadly between the abolitionists who seek to eradicate prostitution and those that believe that selling sex can be a form of labour. The former contends that prostitution is always oppressive, perpetuating male patriarchal privilege and subjugating women to suffering and victimization (Dworkin 1996; Pateman 1988). Amongst the abolitionists, solutions to policies are based on 'zero tolerance' with the aim of ridding society of the 'evil' of prostitution. In contrast, other scholars have moved beyond the victim perspective arguing that abolitionism denies the agency that women have to make choices about entering the sex industry. Building on this, activists and academics have argued that

selling sex can be considered as work in certain circumstances (Brewis and Linstead 2000; Chapkis 1997). The prostitution rights movement has campaigned for equal rights for sex workers, the end to unequal and unfair treatment (by the courts for instance) and the ability to work legitimately as a sex worker (Lopes 2006; West 2000). At this juncture we will state our own position. We are not arguing that sex work is violence against women. We recognize that there is diversity in the routes into prostitution and the conditions of work but that women have self-determination to work in the sex industry. In this paper we take the stance that in the UK, the legal and social position that sex workers experience encourages their status as a vulnerable sexual minority and does not enable sex workers equal rights to protection.

One recent trend from a plethora of work on the sex trade documents the differences in the extent and nature of violence experienced between women who work on the street and those who work from indoor sex work venues. In the UK, Church et al. (2001) investigated violence amongst a sample of 125 indoor sex workers in Leeds and Edinburgh and found that there was a low incidence of violence amongst women who worked in parlours, although women reported poor working conditions with no recourse against exploitative managers or practices. Whittaker and Hart (1996) reported a low incidence of violence from women who worked in flats in London, although there was the risk of robbery and a climate of fear because of potential violence. These distinct differences in the levels of violence indoors are accompanied by the consistent reporting of the limited levels of Class A drug use in indoor sex venues (Barnard, Hart and Church 2002; May, Edmunds and Hough 1999; Sanders 2005: 15–16). These empirical findings support the shared opinion amongst theorists and practitioners that there is a historical, cultural endurance of intolerance and hostility towards street workers fostered by a general culture of distaste and disrespect towards women who sell sex. However, the literature does not make explicit the reality that the majority of transactions go without incident where there is no violation of the contract through physical or sexual violence, non-payment or other abusive behaviour. While there have been no investigations amongst men who buy sex regarding whether their behaviour is more regulated since the introduction of stronger kerb-crawling legislation in 1985, there is evidence that amongst the men who use indoor establishments, there is generally an adherence to the rules of engagement such as condom use, paying the fee before the service and etiquette in the room (Sanders 2005: 178).

Moving beyond the UK, evidence from studies of violence against sex workers in different regulatory regimes suggests that the methods of regulation have an impact on the levels of violence. Where there are state controlled or regulated sex markets there is evidence of less violence. For example, Brents and Hausbeck (2005) interviewed sex workers, brothel owners and policy makers in the legalized brothels of Nevada, Las Vegas to examine the

relationship between violence, prostitution policy and safety. They found that only 1 of the 40 sex workers interviewed reported violence at work, concluding that 'the legalisation of prostitution brings a level of public scrutiny, official regulation and bureaucratization to brothels that decreases violence' (Brents and Hausbeck 2005: 270). In Victoria Australia, where licensed brothels have been legal since 1994, Sullivan and Jeffreys (2002) argue that the objective of harm minimization has not been achieved as issues such as trafficking of women and children and child exploitation have increased. The authors fail to take account that these changes are most probably not attributable to the legalized system, but to wider global changes in the sex industry and by their own admission, a failure in the bureaucratic administration system to monitor licensed premises.

There is strong evidence from European systems of managed street sex work zones that such regulatory provision reduces violence and insecurity. Kersch (2004) reports that in Cologne, Germany, the zone system has produced a near total reduction of violence against sex workers by pimps or clients. Similarly, the managed zone in Utrecht, The Netherlands, where sex workers can solicit clients under the protection of the police, has an exemplary safety record: there have been no murders of sex workers whilst working in the zones (Van Doorninck and Campbell 2006). In addition the zones enable the police to target exploitation in the street sex work scene (Schumacher 2004). Although there have been some problems in the Dutch zones, these are attributable to wider changes in the sex industry, such as global migration and do not justify a call to abandon the zone as safety continues to be maintained.

Where there is zero tolerance style policing and policies against sex workers and men who buy sex, it can be shown that violence increases. The case of the 'non-harassment' zone for street sex workers in Leith, Edinburgh that operated for two decades is an example of how different regulatory regimes affects violence against sex workers. The zone was overwhelmingly successful in terms of minimizing the impact of HIV, high rates of sexual health promotion, minimizing underage girls and criminal fractions. Most notably the zone produced an unparalleled reduction in violence on the streets; incidents fell to as little as 11 attacks in one year, whereas other cities in the UK were experiencing this number each week (SCOT-PEP 2003). When the zone was ended in 2001 (as a result of community protest and a weak legal position to continue the zone), there were several dramatic and negative consequences. Street prostitution was dispersed to a neighbouring city as well as within Edinburgh; contacts with sexual health services decreased; and there was a sharp increase in the number of attacks on street workers from one to six per month.

Reports from outreach health care projects from the USA (Ditmore 2001), Canada, (Cler-Cunningham and Christenson 2001), and Germany (Munk 2001) illustrate how prohibition laws promote risks amongst sex workers, and intense policing and crackdowns only increase women's vulnerabilities. From

the northwestern US city of Portland, Sanchez (2004: 870) reports how the introduction of a Prostitution-free Zone Ordinance in 1995, an exclusionary law for those found in areas of high vice, increased the risk taking of street sex workers and their exposure to violence. Promoting the most radical abolitionist stance across Europe, the Swedish government defined prostitution itself as violence against women and sort to protect the 'weaker party' by criminalizing men who buy sex through the Violence Against Women Act, 1999 (Svanstrom 2004). Although there has been some reports of a decrease in the number of women working in street prostitution and a reduction in trafficking (Ekberg 2004), newspapers describe how the violence against sex workers continues and prostitution returning to previous levels (Kaarman 2000).

The remainder of the paper sets out the UK studies, findings on the types of violence women experienced and the safety mechanisms they adopted to reduce violence. In the discussion we draw on the crime prevention literature to look critically at how and why indoor work is safer than the street, recognizing that sex workers are held responsible for avoiding sexual danger. We provide solutions using the situational crime prevention evidence to design out violence through a pragmatic and legal policy focus to address vulnerable working conditions and the cultural constructions of the role of sex workers and that of male clients in contemporary culture.

## **The studies**

This paper brings together extensive qualitative fieldwork (interviews), and draws to a lesser extent on some quantitative survey data, from two cities in the UK. The first study (RC) conducted in Merseyside, was carried out as part of a wider evaluation and needs assessment of a sexual health promotion project executed between June 2000 and June 2002. The research methodology involved a self completion survey of 90 indoor sex workers, operating in parlours in Sefton and Liverpool and 27 taped in-depth unstructured interviews including: 12 parlour sex workers, 4 parlour sex workers/owners (all female), 4 owners (1 female, 3 male), 1 former sex worker and 7 receptionists (all female, including 4 former sex workers). The survey was designed to gather quantitative data from indoor sex workers about their involvement in the sex industry, sexual health knowledge, use of sexual health services and views about the outreach project. Interviews were carried out to collect more detailed information about the indoor sex industry and explore in more depth people's experience of the sector.

The second study draws on a ten month ethnography in Birmingham during 2000–1, involving over a 1,000 hours of observations in licensed massage parlours and illegal brothels, with women who worked independently from flats, as well as with those who worked as escorts (Sanders 2005). During the

study informal interviews took place with 300 sex workers as well as owners, managers, receptionists and those who worked on the periphery of the industry such as web designers, photographers and security personnel. Formal taped interviews were completed with 55 respondents (45 indoor sex workers, 5 street workers, 3 parlour owners, and 2 receptionists). The aims of this study were to assess the types of personal and occupational risks sex workers experienced, and to evaluate ways in which they managed these risks. Both studies ensured that informed consent was verbally obtained from those interviewed, which included consent to use their verbatim comments. The quotations used in the paper are taken from the in-depth interviews conducted in both studies. The analyses for the interviews were conducted using a grounded theory approach whilst the survey was analysed using SPSS.

The reasons we have combined our studies and findings is to make a stronger case for generalizations about the nature and organization of the indoor sex markets in the UK and in particular the operation of massage parlours. The studies are compatible in several ways. First, in both studies, access was gained through a sexual health project that acted as gatekeeper by providing an introduction to sex work venues and individual workers. Second, samples were taken from the same types of sex work markets. Third, the studies operated over the same time-frame and are therefore comparing like with like in terms of the characteristics of the ever-changing sex industry. For instance, if the research was conducted now the fieldwork sites may be different due to the increase in the numbers of women from overseas who have found work in the British sex trade. However, the numbers of migrant or trafficked women involved in sex work is geographical variable in the UK (TAMPEP 2002). Fourth, there is evidence to argue against atypicality amongst these types of sex work venues and to make strong cross-contextual generalities that can feed into the policy debates. Despite the studies reflecting a geographically specific context, combining our findings and drawing parallels about the experience of violence and how this is managed highlights the similarities between sex workers experiences. This paper constitutes the first joint published account of the findings.

The socio-demographic characteristics of interviewees in both studies goes some way to illustrating the varied types of people that are involved in the sex industry. The age range in both studies was broad – 18–52 years. The starting age for involvement in the sex industry was higher for these groups of indoor workers compared to their street based counterparts. Although the educational attainment level was low, most respondents had employment histories in the mainstream labour market. A small number of participants had a high level of educational attainment where some had gained professional qualifications (e.g. nursing/teaching) with others working towards vocational, and in three cases, degree qualifications at the time of interview. Amongst our samples there was less evidence of markers of social exclusion which are usually

evident in street samples e.g. lower levels of homelessness, care backgrounds and problematic drug misuse. Most of the women were mothers (usually single parents) and many attributed family commitments as one of the main reason for selling sex. Other reasons included decisions about the relatively lucrative nature of the work in the light of other labour market options and the flexibility of shifts and hours. Many women had experience of more than one type of sex market and the length of involvement in Birmingham averaged nine years. The samples were mainly white British born women although in the Birmingham study there were six Asian and four African Caribbean women that reflected the geographical area. Amongst the Merseyside sex workers, the majority was white with one black British woman, one black Jamaican woman and a woman of British Chinese identity.

### **Types of violence and ‘nuisance’**

Amongst the 90 respondents to the survey in Merseyside over three-quarters (71/90) said they had not experienced violence from clients in the course of their work. From the interviews in Birmingham 34 of the 45 indoor sex workers had not experienced physical or sexual violence at work. Initially this suggests that whilst client violence is a risk, conventional forms of violence were not the normal experience of day to day work in the parlours. However, looking behind these figures is important because in the interviews sex workers, receptionists and managers explained that there were various types of nuisances and violations experienced from clients because of the precarious nature of the environment as a clandestine and unregulated industry. This section probes further into the types of threats, nuisance and violence that indoor sex workers did report, despite this being infrequent.

#### *Robbery*

Robbery was something that concerned indoor sex workers. Often rumours of break-ins at other premises scared workers and made them aware of their vulnerability because of the general assumption that large amounts of money were kept on the premises and that the parlours were mainly staffed by women. Some sex workers had experienced robbery. The degree of violence accompanying robbery varied, as did the extent to which the incidents were part of organised groups targeting parlours. One woman reported the only two violent incidents she had experienced whilst working were robberies experienced at an establishment in South London:

I worked there for two years and never ever had a problem and then all of a sudden it happened [robbery] once and then two months after. . . . I went



into the room to do something and he came in behind me. He said very calmly: 'I've got something for you' and he pulled out the knife and said I want your money and that was it. And then on another occasion I was with a punter and you know right in the middle of everything, and I heard a woman screaming. So I opened the door and there was four guys out there, she's on the ground . . . another man came in with the can where we used to keep the money. But what they didn't know was that what we'd do, we put the shift money and the money off each customer in another place. . . . I'd been working non-stop for 2 weeks I had £1,500 under the bed. They got away with nothing. (Merseyside Sex Worker, 35)

### *Non-negotiated sex acts*

Day (1994) noted the problem and seriousness of non-negotiated sex acts that some clients take advantage of after the original service (or contract) has been negotiated and paid for. The following interchange highlights the violations felt when sex acts are not negotiated:

Do you know, I wish it [sex work] was legalised because one night I had this problem. I was with Tracey (receptionist) and I had this fella and he kept trying to stick his fingers in my fanny. I was like please don't do it. It got to like the third or fourth time and I said I'm leaving the room. 'Why, I've paid my money right and I can do what I want to you?'. And its like I said to him no that's not the case. You paid your money you can do what I say you can. Anything over and above that is assault. And you know if it was legal that's what it would be. You could go to the police. . . . But you know at the moment you can't. (Merseyside Sex Worker, 37)

### *Attempts to or removal of the condom*

Many women reported encounters with men who either attempted to or were successful in removing the condom. This was considered a clear violation of the contractual agreement and was a violation of one of the important barriers sex workers used to distinguish sex as a commercial act from sex in a personal, loving relationship. A former sex worker (who had stopped working two months previously and was now working as a manager) demonstrates women's strong feelings about such violations:

This one he was on top of me and he took it [condom] off and it was in his hand. So I heard something rustling and I thought what is that? Pulled his hand up and there is the condom in his hand. So I pushed him off me, slapped him across the face and basically come running in here [lounge] to get the girl [receptionist] to tell her what he'd done. He denied doing it when



she went in the room but it was just the disgust. I don't do nothing without and I really felt like he'd raped me, he'd defiled me. (Manager/Former Sex Worker Merseyside, 37)

*Offensive language, rudeness and disruptive behaviour*

Sex workers reported that although they did not consider this type of behaviour to be violence, the disrespectful treatment through language and attitude added to their stigma and negative feelings about the job. A comment from one sex worker in Merseyside refers to a number of behaviours she experienced as offensive and unacceptable because the client knew there was no recourse to management:

Some managers don't understand how much of a pain they [clients] can be sometimes you know? And they'll know that as a working girl you'll do your utmost to keep them [clients] pleased. Its only if anyone's so rude, especially if they're really nasty you'll come out of the room and go 'I can't do it'. (Merseyside Sex Worker, 28)

*Financially ripped off*

In both studies sex workers expressed their anger when clients tried not to pay the full amount or get extra time for no extra money. Although there was a standard system of the money being taken before the service, there were still instances where men came to the parlour and then attempted to pay less than agreed or take some advantage financially:

He said 'Well I don't want a personal service, I just want a massage'. And I said well you can't just have a massage I need to make my money, you know the score here don't act so ignorant. He said well it says in the paper "massage". I said well it says in the paper, brand spanking new car for sale but when you get there it isn't that, so don't believe what you read in the paper. So he said I want my money back and I said you can't. He said well I'll phone the police, so I fetched him the phone and started dialling the number for him. He got dressed and left. (Birmingham Sex Worker, 39).

Sex workers complained of men who were time-wasters or voyeurs. On the telephone, men would call just to hear the descriptions of the women who were working and then hang up, or men would send emails to sex workers with graphic pornographic descriptions of sexual fantasies. In the parlours sex workers resented men who came in just to ogle at their semi-naked bodies before leaving, claiming they were not attracted to any of the women:

The worst is the blokes that come in with no intention for a service just to look. They are the sick perverts who come in all sheepish then leave after a

few minutes. We have started to charge on the door straight away so that doesn't happen as that makes us feel like pieces of meat. (Birmingham Sex Worker, 27)

## **Safety Strategies**

Building on reports of safety strategies amongst street sex workers (Barnard 1993; Hart and Barnard 2003), our research reports on how women who work indoors also employ a range of safety strategies to prevent and manage violence by describing three types of safety strategies: 'managing the environment'; 'individual protection mechanisms' and 'collective control'.

### *Managing the environment*

The differences in the ability to develop and implement physical safety strategies between the street and indoor premises have a significant affect on the psychological feelings of safety and control. One interviewee who had worked in various indoor premises over twenty years describes how the very nature of the indoor environment fosters a sense of control and 'territory'. The use of technology as a deterrent was a popular method of increasing safety. One woman from a Birmingham sauna explained how she did not feel that she was in jeopardy of an attack because of the security introduced by the parlour management: 'We have security cameras here all round the building and they [the clients] are video-ed'. Parlour owners were usually concerned about the safety of the premises and saw it as their responsibility to maintain the building to a high standard of security. A Merseyside sex worker refers to some of the physical features that made her feel safe in the parlour environment and pointed to the receptionist role: 'We've got Sharon (receptionist). We've got a camera so you can see who's at the door. We've got a very secure door at the top of the stairs with lots of bolts. It's a steel door and it's always locked, there's a hatch to see through. This is the safest parlour I've seen'.

### *Individual protection mechanisms*

The minutia of the commercial interaction is key to ensuring the transaction goes without incident and that the client does not break the contract by non-payment or acting outside the boundaries of agreement. To achieve this, sex workers perfect their interpersonal skills alongside sticking to the rules of engagement such as not wearing jewellery, keeping on footwear and limiting sexual contact and sexual positions (see Sanders 2005: 75–80). Interpersonal skills include the use of humour to jolly along the transaction and turn tense and nervous moments into jovial banter (see Sanders 2004). As reported

elsewhere (O'Neill and Barbaret 2000: 133), sex workers consciously adopt a verbal technique known as 'gentling', that aims to reduce any anxiety in the client, and if there is confrontation, their verbal skills are used to calm the situation. Receptionists also described skills to diffuse conflict: 'I would talk him round to leaving in a nice way. I would not put myself or the girls in a position of danger. Most of the time I am aware of that and you can diffuse the situation' (Merseyside Receptionist, 29). Sex workers become highly sensitive to the manner of client interaction and are constantly looking and listening for potential triggers to problems: 'If a punter starts asking questions, you make out you've got a bouncer upstairs' (Merseyside Sex Worker, 28). In the parlours visited in both cities, although there were obvious tensions due to the competitive nature of the business, overwhelmingly, safety was considered a collective responsibility that is embedded in the everyday culture and organization of the parlour.

### *Collective control*

A frequently reported element of safety in both the survey and interviews was the collective nature of the indoor venues. The nature of parlours is that there are always several workers and a receptionist or manager who controls the ebb and flow of customers. As reported by Whittaker and Hart (1996), the receptionist role is as important for safety as it is managing the everyday interactions of the business. One receptionist in Merseyside described why she thought receptionists were a vital security mechanism for screening clients on the door:

Well it is because we're the first ones to see the punter. I've always said that when you've done this business for so many years you sort of get a gut feeling about a punter when they come to the door. If they're acting suspicious or something doesn't feel right, well I won't open the door. (Merseyside Receptionist/former Sex Worker, 46).

The receptionist applies a range of 'house rules' to assess the client. Hygiene and intoxication are characteristics that are checked, as well as age and in a minority of parlours ethnicity is a deciding factor as to whether someone is allowed entry (see Sanders 2005: 59). However, many clients are 'regulars' who return repeatedly to the same venue and often the same sex worker, adding additional security.

The evidence presented above illustrates that some of the risk factors that street sex workers have to manage are immediately removed when women work indoors in massage parlours. For example, working alone, having sex in isolated places, and the pressure to avoid the police are absent for those women who work indoors. The physical environment and material resources available in parlours provides increased physical security as well as psychological confidence. Personal safety is addressed at an individual level through

interpersonal skills and working practices to make the encounter as safe as possible, alongside the everyday culture of the collective working environment that promotes a certain degree of altruism in a competitive business.

### **Crime prevention strategies: designing out violence against sex workers**

To explain why the indoor markets are relatively safer than the conditions on the street, we need to look no further than the crime prevention literature. A community based understanding of crime prevention is evident amongst the sex work community. This community, made up of sex workers, receptionists, managers, owners, health outreach projects and male clients, has taken security seriously in the indoor markets and has proactively introduced measures to prevent crime. This has worked more successfully and consistently indoors because of the presence of informal controls and to a lesser extent formal agents of control (in some cases the police who survey activities and licensing authorities who permit venues to sell 'massage'). The presence of formal and informal controls is not evident to the same extent in the street sex work scene. Lupton (1999) refers specifically to the case of prostitution when pointing out that dangers are not necessarily inherent in the activity of prostitution but are determined by access to material resources. Therefore, those women who experience the most vulnerable social and economic status are least likely to have recall to physical safety strategies and are therefore more exposed to violence.

The strategies of safety described above are evidence that the responsibility for keeping safe and avoiding danger is placed entirely with the sex workers. There are two problems with this. First, as Stanko (1990) and other feminist criminologists have repeatedly argued, locating the responsibility of risk avoidance with women is locating the cause of the crime with the victim (female) rather than the perpetrator (usually male). One example of how sex workers are expected to take responsibility for their own safety is the Ugly Mug schemes prevalent in most health outreach projects. These schemes collect descriptions of attacks on sex workers and disseminate descriptions on a weekly basis to warn women to be vigilant. There has been some excellent inter-agency work between outreach projects and the police to effectively implement these schemes to tackle violence resulting in the Ugly Mug system heralded as a significant measure in intelligence gathering (Penfold 2004 et al.). Building on the local Ugly Mug schemes, the *Coordinated Prostitution Strategy* announced by the Home Office (2006) sets out a new safety initiative to encourage sex workers to report attacks to a dedicated service set up with Crimestoppers. This reactive approach to violence against women reinforces the absence of proactive preventative strategies to protect sex workers despite a Home Office report highlighting the extreme violence directed at sex

workers resulting in this group of women being the most vulnerable to homicide across social groups (Brookman and Maguire 2003). While the Ugly Mug schemes are not to be undermined, this victim-centred approach to crime prevention highlights how sex workers are expected to reduce their own opportunities of becoming a victim because the state does not take responsibility for reducing the dangerous conditions in which sex workers work. There are no initiatives to check the behaviours of men who seek out sex workers, or any attempt to make a legal contract between the sex worker and client that is legally binding and subject to recourse (this has been done in New Zealand). By making sex workers (and all women) responsible for risk avoidance, and in particular avoiding sexual danger, women are blamed for putting themselves in a position to be attacked, rather than the cause and subsequently the prevention of violence located with the perpetrator.

The second problem arising from placing responsibility for safety with sex workers is that in the UK sex workers cannot legally work together, they are prevented from setting up a legitimate sex provider's business, and have suffered unfair treatment by the criminal justice system (Kennedy 1993). The Home Office (2006: 61) announced proposals to amend the law that prevents two or three women working together because the law contravenes safety advice (there is scepticism about whether this will happen). Yet there is a complete rejection of any scheme for licensed premises and brothel keeping laws are proactively being enforced, with up to seven years imprisonment if convicted. Expecting individual sex workers to be responsible for crime prevention in a system that disallows formal regulatory measures and legal mechanisms to promote safety only encourages sexual victimhood, underground activities, and opportunistic exploitation. The structural gender inequalities within the criminal justice system, and particularly the judiciary, are clear when we consider that convictions for serious sexual assaults have decreased dramatically over recent decades (Kelly, Lovett and Regan 2005).

Making sex workers responsible for their own safety may have more legitimacy within a legal system that enables equal rights to protection, labour rights and full citizenship. In countries where toleration zones have been initiated, governments have clearly stated the role of law is to improve the position of sex workers. Outshoorn (2004: 185) reports on the government in the Netherlands that states the law should intervene only to 'set standards on working conditions' and create an industry that is 'healthy, safe, transparent and cleansed from criminal side effects' (quote from Minister of Justice, 1999). The structural systems within which sex work operates determines the extent to which sex workers are given the legal support, environmental conditions and social status that protects them from sexual victimhood and sets out expectations for those who seek out sexual services.

Although the victim-centred approach to crime prevention can be heavily criticized, it is the crime prevention literature that provides solutions to

reducing violence amongst sex workers, and particularly those on the street. Environment-centred crime prevention strategies could be a key element to designing out the vulnerable status of sex workers. Clarke and Mayhew (1980) describe situational crime prevention as directing a prevention strategy at specific crimes which involves manipulating or managing the environment where crime occurs, and systematically applying the measures to achieve an overall reduction in the opportunities for the particular crime to take place. Ordinarily this has included 'target hardening' to improve the security of buildings and increased surveillance through CCTV. These measures have been successful in reducing burglary and car crime (Clarke 1992). To reduce and prevent violence against sex workers, where the cause of the crime is self-evident, tried and tested situational crime prevention strategies that focus on the environment would manage prostitution and the risks women face more effectively. Environment-centred crime prevention measures need to be applied sensitively in a way that accounts and responds to the varied dynamics of the different sex work markets.

The growing recognition that indoor work (if well managed) is safer than street work often leads to calls for legalization of indoor sex work with an assumption that women on the street will be directed towards working indoors. This assumption misunderstands the dynamics of street sex work including the advantages it has for some people (e.g. the lack of time and routine restrictions) and the attraction of street sexual services for a section of men who pay for sex. Legalizing indoor establishments as a 'solution' to street work ignores the current organization of the off street sector which generally discourages drug use on the premises or the employment of drug dependent women. What perhaps is useful to ask is how can the mechanisms that reduce violence against indoor sex workers (i.e. managing the environment, individual protection and collective control) inform policies to improve the safety of street sex workers?

If there was a strategy to manage both street and off street sex work, this would provide a legal and pragmatic framework for all parties to take responsibility for working without causing nuisance to others. For example, owners of indoor establishments could be facilitated to invest in premises and their staff by improving security, working conditions, employment rights and training in safety. A managed area on the street for instance would provide the presence of others (support services and agencies policing sex workers' safety) to ensure physical safety and environmental security without perpetuating victim blaming. A managed area would reduce the characteristics of street sex work that currently makes it so hostile and vulnerable. For example, there would be areas where sexual services are performed so women do not have to go to isolated places. In addition, there would be clearer rules and etiquette for both sex workers and clients, including an unambiguous zero tolerance of violence against street sex workers and proactive policing to respond to any violence by

encouraging reporting and investigation. Although there has been an official dismissal of managed zones in the UK by the Association of Chief Police Officers (2004) and the Home Office (2006), Matthews (2005) notes there is growing acceptance of the existence of zoning in some cities and towns. Matthews supplies examples from Northampton, Preston and Plymouth where police are operating informal zones to contain prostitution, reduce community complaints and manage crime related to prostitution. These examples provide evidence that the zoning principle can work effectively in the UK for all parties concerned.

### **Building in respect**

This paper has pointed to the potential for environmental and organizational conditions to facilitate sex work safety. Yet in the absence of further cultural changes to attitudes towards those involved in the sex industry (sex workers, their clients, owners and managers) such a strategy would only have limited effectiveness. If the ultimate aim is to reduce violence against sex workers policy needs to address perceptions of prostitution and attitudes associated with the women who sell sex. While we can account for environmental differences between street and off street work there are more complex cultural characteristics that define street sex workers in a way that increases their status as a vulnerable sexual minority. Lowman (2000) points to a 'discourse of disposability' surrounding media and public opinion on street sex work. Kinnell (2006) has illustrated the presence of this same discourse in media and policy debates in the UK, linking this to the high levels of violence and murder rates amongst street sex workers. The government's consultation document *Paying the Price* (Home Office 2004) that signals the first review of the prostitution laws in fifty years has been heavily criticized for defining 'the problem of sex work' (Cusick and Berney 2005; Soothill and Sanders 2004). The outcomes of the consultation process are presented in the new *Coordinated Prostitution Strategy* (Home Office 2006) which reinforces the cultural message that street sex work is unacceptable and 'is not an activity that we can tolerate in our towns and cities', justifying why street work remains criminal (Home Office 2006: 1). The cultural message about women who work on the street is that they will not be missed, as they are not valid citizens. In media, policy and amongst men who buy sex, off street sex workers are not to the same extent constructed as desperate, dirty, addicted individuals conforming to the 'junkie whore' stereotype.

Those designing policy need to take into account the nature of the men who buy sex and the growing client community. Specific sexual scripts and expectations of commercial engagement inform the interactions between sex workers and clients. This has recently been noted through chat rooms and



messages boards organized by men who buy sex who engage in discussions about how to and not to behave in parlours (Soothill and Sanders 2005). There is a consensus amongst some clients that sex workers are experts in their work and like other services, prices and rules should be respected (Soothill and Sanders 2005). This does not mean that there are not areas of contention amongst clients (such as always using condoms) but it indicates a collective responsible environment where cultural constructions are positively formed around sex work as work. As Manning (1978: 97) states 'the more power and authority a profession has, the better able it is to gain and maintain control over the symbolic meanings with which it is associated in the public's mind'. Unless the 'sex as work' agenda is given credence for some women as a 'rights' discourse in the UK, as it has in some other European cities, then safer working conditions will remain arbitrary.

Where policy has decided to approach paying for sex as wrong and shameful behaviour (e.g. kerb-crawler rehabilitation programmes and increased kerb-crawler legislation), concerns have been expressed that this reinforces negative attitudes and violence towards sex workers (Campbell and Storr 2001). Kinnell (2006) has made strong arguments that criminalization and demonization of those who buy sex has an adverse affect on those selling sex. With Labour MP Denis MacShane expressing views that men who buy sex are essentially rapists, likening all aspects of the sex industry to the slave trade (*Daily Telegraph*, 03.01.06), there appears to be limited understanding of the dynamics of the diverse sex industry in the UK amongst policymakers. A policy that builds on the existing ethical codes and etiquette between sex workers and clients moves away from this moralistic, judgmental approach to all clients. The way that some clients approach sex workers who operate indoors affords women more legitimacy as rational agents who have made choices to sell sexual services as a money making strategy, it is seen as a job. The discourse of 'choice' and 'work' that some men speak of about the indoor sex workers can act as a protective factor against violence rather than the 'discourse of disposability' that incites violence and disrespect.

The murders of five women involved in street sex work in Ipswich in 2006 is a sad reminder of the continued vulnerability of street sex workers in the UK and of the urgent need for policy changes which lead to reduced risks in sex work. Whilst it is impossible to say that a different policy framework would have prevented these murders, the events in Ipswich bring into sharp focus arguments that street sex workers do not have safe places to solicit and sell sexual services. While any holistic provision of services needs to include programmes for 'exiting, responsible authorities and policy makers cannot shy away from the fact that whilst people are involved in street sex work they need places where they can work more safely: managed areas provide such an possibility. Local and national authorities need to send a clear unambiguous message that street sex workers themselves are full citizens with the full

protection of the law. This is difficult to do when legislation such as the soliciting legislation criminalizes street sex workers and their clients.

The *Coordinated Prostitution Strategy* (Home Office 2006) which is set to shape the management of sex work in the UK, ignores female voluntary sex work. Equally, men who buy sex are only present as exploiters and transmitters of disease who are to be tackled through criminalization and 'rehabilitation'. Although 'ensuring justice' is a central theme of the Strategy, preventing violence through environmental measures is rejected with no consideration of piloting managed zones or licensing premises. There is no acknowledgement of sex worker-led networks and unions forming in the UK and across Europe (Lopes 2006) or of labour rights. The evidence we have presented in this paper regarding safety and sex work stands in direct opposition to the current policy direction. Until the government and local authorities take responsibility for managing sex work and put in place law and processes that balance the rights and responsibilities of all stakeholders, vulnerability, violence and murder will persist against sex workers in the absence of full citizenship.

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