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Victor or victim? Foregrounding the independent escort experience outside of the polarised debate

Rae Story and Glen Jankowski

ABSTRACT: The sex worker as a sociocultural ‘phenomenon’ occupies a liminal space, simultaneously absent from sociopolitical acceptability yet ever present in often inflammatory, ‘condemn/celebrate’ discourses. In this paper we aim to contribute to a destabilising of the dichotomisation of these representations by referring to the lived experience of independent escorts. In addition we attempt to contextualize the sex worker in consumer capitalism through which notions of choice and exploitation, that arise from both sides of the ‘condemn’/‘celebrate’ debate, are rendered oblique. We draw upon the author’s own experience of being an escort as well as accounts from a popular escort internet forum¹ to illustrate the issues escorts share with women as a wider social demographic, including violence and abuse, appearance pressures, and economic hardship. By situating escorting as a form of self-employment labour, within the practical reality of neo-liberal, consumer capitalism, we aid in the nuancing of the debate, foregrounding the escort experience over prior, moral ideologies. We also promote the merging of the academic debate surrounding the sex work industry, with the grassroots debate that forum member escorts have on a daily basis. We conclude it is important to demystify and destigmatise escorts so they are not regarded as ‘victims or victors’ or other grotesque parodies, but a real, diverse people and members of a labour force.

KEYWORDS: Sex work; Escorts; Liminality; Escort forum; Capitalism



One of the primary goals of this paper is to contribute to the demystification of escorts as mythic, liminal beings held up by various ideologies (be they factions of feminism, conservatism, or other) as either 'High Class' courtesans, destitute victims, or even decadent social pariahs (Ahearne, 2013; Hulusjö, 2013; McLaughlin, 1991; Pheterson, 1990). Whether it is the well-meaning desire to resituate escorts as 'empowered' victors of contemporary femininity, or victims of a brutal patriarchy or social inequity, convoluting visions of the escort into social archetypes does a great disservice to the complexity of the escort experience. It also serves to delegitimise the multiplicity of varying sex worker voices, so diverse as to never coherently be speaking in any specific direction, and whose lives cannot be assimilated as beacons of any particular world view.

It is difficult to ascertain just how many independent escorts there are in the UK at any one time (Vandepitte et al., 2006). It is even more difficult to demarcate sex workers in general into distinct 'categories', such as agency workers, brothel workers and indies (independent indoor sex workers; Sanders, 2006). One of the most popular advertising outlets for independent sex workers has a forum space dedicated to discussing escorting issues. On this website, the amount of listed female escorts, at the time of writing is 24,979. This is a significant number given it is estimated that there are only between 50,000 – 80,000 women in the UK who work as sex workers (Balfour and Allen 2014) though it is difficult to ascertain how many of this number are actually independent, and are not in some way pimped, trafficked or operating with the third party agencies. It is also difficult to ascertain how many of these profiles are full time escorts, occasional or part time escorts or of women no longer actively working. There is potential also, for even non escorts to use such sites, to sell 'content' such as pornographic photographs, either of themselves or even pilfered from other places on the internet, thereby skewing the overall numbers (Extra Lunch Money 2012; Trowbridge 2008). Nonetheless, it does demonstrate the increased prevalence and visibility of the independent escort within the wider industry, and the importance of modern media in that cultural gestation (Sanders, 2006).

The increased visibility of the independent escort is one of the reasons why the authors of this paper have chosen to focus on them. Aligned with this, one of the authors' own experience as an independent escort has helped to frame the debate in a different way than to the traditional 'outside-in' approach of other writings

on the subject. The independent escort is differentiated from other forms of sex worker, firstly by her direct sexual and social contact with her clientele, secondly by her general manifestation as an organiser of her own working space (be it a hotel room, a long term lease, or intermittent room rentals), her own marketer, often using the cheap and available means provided by the internet, and the sole communicant between her and her clients. However, the authors are also aware that many independent escorts, the author included, may not always and absolutely be so, and that the continued availability of licensed massage parlours, brothels and agencies may mean that the working conditions of sex workers may undergo many configurations throughout their occupational lives. The writers also do not wish to be seen to disregard the experiences of male and transgendered demographics; indeed escort forums are available and may be used by all sex workers. However, not only do cis females make up the largest independent escort demographic, the debate is also framed using theories surrounding feminism, gendered poverty and consumption, and as such it is (generally) the cis, female experience that is detailed. Added to this, the authors are also aware that much of the debate could be applied in differing ways to male and transgendered workers.

By now drawing upon posts from an escort forum, the authors hope to highlight not only the specific concerns of independent escorts, but also how these concerns are often the same issues (as shown by feminist research) that affect women in general, such as economic problems, the threat of violence and the pressure to be commercially 'beautiful'. As this forum is publicly accessible (i.e., does not require a login) and all quotes used have been anonymized, the usual ethical issues of deception and informed consent in research are minimal (Bassett and O'Riordan 2002; Walther 2002).

Selling excess: The context of late, consumer, capitalism

Contemporary capitalism allures its inhabitants into consumption through a robust and ubiquitous doctrine that seeks to convince the potential consumer that beauty, success and popularity (i.e., the 'Good Life') will only be one more product purchase away (Dittmar, 2007; Kasser et al., 2014). Any number of advertisements will no longer detail the practical usages of the product, but rather how the prod-

uct is an essential accoutrement of the 'Good Life'. The paradox of capitalism is that, as every item seems 'essential' to lifestyle, it is also equally disposable. Products may no longer be flogged on the merits of their durability or longevity, but on their fresh, updatedness, on their fashionability and trend. This is planned obsolescence, and in the blurring of boundaries between corporations and cultural life and the promotion of consumption as a lifestyle, the advertising of 'must have purchases' renders consumption mindless, endless and normative (Klein, 2002).

Unfortunately, little recourse is paid to consumption's toll on individual, public or environmental wellbeing. Neoliberalism is also added to this cultural milieu, a concept wherein the individual is held wholly culpable for their own health, happiness and success. Any structural barriers surrounding ethnicity, gender, class or otherwise, are erased. The consequences of this mean there is a powerful pressure for individuals to better themselves through a consumer lifestyle, irrespective of how accessible that lifestyle actually is.

In bitter contrast, a global economic recession and successive right wing or centrist governments have meant welfare benefits have been slashed, the cost of living has sharply increased and wages have stagnated (Karamessini and Rubery, 2013). Women are the largest recipients of welfare, low incomes and bearers of unpaid labour, meaning such actions disproportionately affect them (Karamessini and Rubery, 2013). Thus, the many women who do work long hours and who are on low incomes are left not only unable to make a basic living or support their families, but also unable to realise the more 'rounded' existence that our contemporary cultural ostensibly offers (i.e., the 'Good Life'). This consumerist lifestyle extends to more than just beauty and fashion products, but restaurants and leisure activities, cultural entertainments such as cinema and theatres, foreign travel and even, with the spike in University fees, a higher education. Many or all of these aspects of the 'Good Life' are either mostly or totally unavailable to many low wage earners or benefit recipients.

Sex work as a viable option

With this context in mind, where there are 'billions of losers for every handful of winners' (Greer, 2007: 4), the escort industry, with its flexible hours, perceived high financial rewards (though these can differ greatly) and (perceived) openness to

those of any education, background or otherwise, could be seen as a route to financial stability and sociocultural furtherance. Indeed, the promise of instant, high earning potential for time-flexible work can be highly seductive when compared to other low-paid forms of labour. An example of this is provided by Elizabeth Pisani (2008) in her book: *The Wisdom of Whores*. She describes her moment of disillusionment with her work when she attempted to persuade Thai sex workers to leave their jobs (in her role as a HIV preventionist). One Thai sex worker asked Pisani whether she herself would leave a relatively well paid job only to spend endless hours toiling in the local sweat shop factory for a fraction of her wage. It is indeed the case, that whatever the real or perceived consequences that the selling of sex may entail, low paid, long hour, 'unskilled' occupations are understandably not real alternatives for many sex workers. As Sydney Barrows and William Novak observe 'a prostitute is simply a woman who hates poverty more than she hates [sex work]' (Barrows and Novak, 1987: 130). However, the fact still remains that despite accessibility and flexibility, that even during periods of high unemployment, many women still do not become sex workers. Despite all structural circumstances, sex work is still subject to the notion of choice, rendered through the personal prism of individual moralities and experiences. Of course, what choices women make depends on the number of options available, but given even an insignificant number of options (for the vast majority of women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds) what choices women make depends on how those choices are perceived, by themselves or by others. It is important, then, to consider sex work from within both a socioeconomic, but also sociopolitical context.

The dichotomisation of the escort

Radical feminist Gail Dines claimed in 2012, with regards to her anti-porn stance, that there is 'no study, argument, or theory that will persuade [me] otherwise' (Dines, 2012; Parreira, 2014). As Weitzer (2005: 934) further notes:

In no area of the social sciences has ideology contaminated knowledge more pervasively than in writings on the sex industry. Too often in this area, the canons of scientific inquiry are suspended and research deliberately skewed to serve a particular political agenda. Much of this work has been done by writers

who regard the sex industry as a despicable institution and who are active in campaigns to abolish it.

But even when evidence is collected in the debate, it can often be flawed. Research on sex work may be carried out by the very same organizations that provide support to those in the industry (e.g., Bindel and Atkins, 2008). Whilst understandable considering the scant resources available to the third sector, this can mean that the sample researched may be those women² who face specific problems that the organization caters for (e.g., addiction, violence etc.) rather than a diverse pool of women that at least can begin to represent sex workers in all their variety. If evidence is based upon the women who are only accessible to the organization, such as intravenous drug users or those who need the support of crisis centres, then it stands to reason that this would create a 'sex worker equals vulnerable victim' bias. Indeed, a growing number of escorts who work independently from home have often been ignored in research (Hubbard and Prior, 2013).

Added to the inadequacy of the generalisation of this research, the debate often homogenises sex workers, with proponents of specific belief systems attempting to coordinate the beliefs and behaviours of escorts in order to further their specific political aims. In reality, the sex work industry is hyperdiverse, complex and not easily categorized. Weitzer (2005: 946) is rightly critical then, not only of the radical feminist stance that sometimes depicts sex workers as war victims (e.g., Burchill 1986), but also of works that celebrate and romanticize sex work:

Studies [that] marshal the 'best available examples'—typically upscale call girls and escort agency workers—to argue that prostitution is or can be empowering and lucrative. For some workers, this is indeed the case, but these 'best examples' are no closer to the norm in prostitution than the worst examples.

The concept that individual sex worker's trajectories through the trade are as straightforwardly categorical as 'High Class, Happy Hooker' or its bleaker, abused street walking alternative is indeed disputable. The membranes of the industry are various, complex, and permeable; independent sex workers, escort agencies, small brothels, licensed massage parlours, 'grey area' sex work such as 'sugar daddy' relationships, all intermingle with secondary sex work practices such as phone

chat and webcam services, as well as the expansive panoply of internet pornography (Sanders, 2006). Indeed, because of the proliferation of the internet, and its utilization as a tool for sex entertainment practices, there is a great deal of cross fertilisation in the daily lives of the workers. So commercial porn performers may supplement their incomes with escort work (using their status as a 'draw' and an opportunity to charge higher fees), escort workers may sell home video clips and photographs, massage parlour workers can moonlight as phone chat providers, and so on. The 'High Class/Low Class' dichotomy may in fact be an archaic concept that does not fit into the current context, wherein the price charged for a sex act has more to do with visibility rather than mystery, and pornographic availability rather than exclusivity, within the wider topography of a burgeoning digital arena.

It is therefore likely that the pressure for escorts to come down as victor or victim means any nuance or ambiguity of experience is not acknowledged. More study on the experiences (and more cultural awareness) of the sex worker across her career, the variations in the payment she receives for differing practices and the alterations in her lifestyle and work, are needed. A demystification of the mythological sex worker, who resides within the cultural fantasy as either ceaselessly sensual or pitifully profane needs to be replaced by a pragmatic resituating of the sex worker within her complex reality. This is most important, because as will be demonstrated, ideology has often led to changes in legislation and thus the lived experience and even safety, of escorts and sex workers may have been compromised.

The criminalisation and politicisation of the sex worker

When I heard Mary Honeyball talking on LBC a week ago, I felt so angry she was talking pure lies and to people who do not work in our industry I can imagine them believing what she says. I will be complaining to my MEP and voicing my opinion on this, I think we all need to voice our opinion to make sure people like Honeyball don't get their way, if we all stay quiet they might eventually win (Forum poster, 2014a).

As the above forum user warns, the exclusion of escort voices to the contemporary sex work debate may carry severe repercussions. Legal changes may occur

without escorts being consulted, which regardless of intention, can lead to greater dangers for escorts, such as deterring only those clients who do not commit physical violence or stopping escorts from organizing together for safety. To ignore the wishes of escorts, with regards to legislation is to infantilise them and deem them incapable of understanding their own industry and what changes would make safe their lives and circumstances.

[The Guardian article about trafficking] purport[s] to be about criminalisation, goes off on the usual tack of pimping, trafficking, etc. A rather depressing read which just seems to airbrush Independents (and agency girls) out of the debate altogether. It gave me this chilling feeling of a deliberate agenda somewhere whereby we just don't exist. So that makes it a whole lot easier to bring laws like this into effect, as its always argued to be helping street girls/trafficking victims etc. (Forum poster, 2014d).

Whatever personal ideologies may be held, it is imperative to work from the point of accepting escorts 'as they are' within their occupational decisions, however restricted they were in making it and whatever existential ideals we have about the nature of choice in general. Rather than dichotomising escorts into either empowered women operating under a banner of modern sexual freedom or powerless victims of repeated abuse (with a view that the sex negotiation is inherently abusive) we should be understanding escorting within a two tiered framework.

Firstly, there is an inequitable capitalism at work that few of us have any immediate power or easy influence over, and that cements inequalities and creates greater divisions between the rich and the poor. However, the problem of inequality and cemented hierarchies (where the 'leaders' have access to privilege at the expense of the Other) should be approached holistically, without denigrating and singling out specific activities, such as sex work, as greater representations of, for example, gendered inequalities in other institutions and labours, such as marriage, domesticity, childcare and so on.

The second tier of our understanding, therefore, is in relating escorting to this 'bigger picture', whilst recognising the right of escorts to wellness, safety and self-determination as much as is possible for any human worker within that picture. Calling all sex work: 'violence against women', picketing lap dancing clubs, refusing to review legislation that does not permit women to work together for safety

and companionship, and attempting to criminalise the worker's clients, does not help escorts. If, for example, criminalising clients further threatens the safety of escorts – by frightening off non-violent, otherwise law abiding clients, and resulting in escorts taking more risks with who they see – then the wider, perhaps well intentioned aim of cutting off demand to diminish supply, is short sighted.

One of the primary purposes of this article is to further help nuance the debates around the sex industry. Whatever our political aims, it is paramount to remember that sex workers have to exist within the walls of these debates and often have to live with their existences detailed via academic and journalistic forums; mythologised as victims of repeated rape, abusive pimping and fuelled by the internal chaos of addiction and mental illness. Even worse, the inflammatory nature of the debate, even at some ostensibly feminist ends, has occasionally spilled over into hatred, as the oft quoted Julie Burchill stance demonstrates: 'when the sex war is won prostitutes should be shot as collaborators for their terrible betrayal of all women' (Burchill, 1987: 9). As Hannah Betts suggests:

[There is] a cohort of feminist critics who, in abhorring the activity, choose to hate the perpetrator. This is evident not only in Julie Burchill's string 'em up stance, but the notion that, as all prostitution is rape, sex workers cannot know their own minds, or be in control of their bodies, and thus consent. The upshot is a curious coalition with streetwalker-hounding religious extremists who are unhappy not merely with the low-hanging fruit of selling sex, but with women having sex at all (Betts, 2013, para. 4).

The ideologies surrounding escorting, particularly feminist and socialist, are in most cases intent upon trying to secure a better, less oppressed future for women and the lower socioeconomic demographics, and rightly point to the failures of neoliberalism and unregulated capitalism in this respect.

As such then, it is easy to see why a valid argument against the frameworks from which sex work arrives becomes concentrated onto the workers themselves, to the detriment of the overall debate. Without intending to then, the picketed lap dancing club becomes an attack on those who embody the lap dancing club: the lap dancer rather than the club, the society or the culture. Despite the protest, patriarchy still holds fast, capitalism thrives, and neoliberalism continues to foist culpability on individuals rather than on corporate or governmental institutions⁴.

Arguably, political ‘adversaries’ such as feminists and socialists, are tantamount to the escort as they are both in some senses ‘Other’, the former two political and the latter social. In fact, the idea that feminists and sex workers are diametrically in opposition ignores some sex worker’s own feminism. Indeed, that feminism itself may be diverse. Discussion on the escort forum demonstrates that for some escorts, the over-arching belief in women’s choices and right to safety and self-determination, does not eradicate issues of misogyny, sexism and objectification from within their work. As one poster writes;

I’m definitely a feminist and don’t think sex work and feminism are incompatible at all. I think that everyone should be equal regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, skin colour etc. and everyone should be free to make their own choices in life. Sex work is a job, one that I’m forced to do because of capitalism because I need to be able to support myself. I don’t feel the need to justify how I make money to anyone. That said, I do find it hard to deal with the sexism within this form of work. Having clients tell me about past affairs, cheating, how they can’t find any attractive women to fuck them etc. and their views on women in general really makes me want to give them a sharp kick at times. I can’t hold myself responsible for their opinions though, if they objectify women that’s on them, not me. Also having to conform as much as possible to society’s definition of attractive (i.e. long hair, skinny, big boobs, feminine) is something I find difficult as it makes me feel less like my real self... But ultimately I choose to dress this way and act this way when I’m working (even if I don’t like it). Feminism is about having choices and freedom without being oppressed for those choices. I don’t see this job as oppressive, it’s something I don’t particularly like doing but then I never liked my minimum wage job much either (Forum poster, 2015).

In essence, the poster summarises the awkward relationship between issues surrounding feminism and sex work, within an economically hierarchical environment. As has been stated, how much anyone chooses the life that they live is dependent on the variation of options available. That we ought to not criminalise sex workers, that we ought to respect their decisions, and value and validate their voices, does not mean that we invalidate any critique of the varying forms of economic or cultural inequity.

‘Slow at the minute or is it just me?’

Independent escorts will charge a wide variety of prices for their labour. With the minimum wage for ages twenty one and over at a pitiful £6.50 it is easy to see why an independent escort charging over £100 an hour or more, might help paint the picture that escorts are high earners. However it is not that simple, as a long running and popular thread on the escort forum details (Forum poster, 2008). The thread has organically gestated into a sounding board for escorts who are concerned about their earning potential, who feel unable to make enough money to pay their bills and debts, or who are trying to understand why they might not be making as much money as they did in previous years. Despite high earnings per hour, a seeming drought in bookings has catapulted many of the users into a position of having to worry about their basic, economic needs. As two forum posters complain:

Things are so slow for me at the moment, I'm in a small town & I've had no bookings today whatsoever. The only inquiry was from a previous client saying he "might" want to come down and see me tomorrow and if he did then he'd let me know ASAP, he hasn't gotten back to me so I take it he's not coming. I've just paid my rent, so I'm absolutely broke now so I'm really hoping next week will be better. I've been quite worried as of late, that the way things are going I might fall behind on my rent which isn't an option because my landlord would kick me out right away, he's said as much (Forum poster, 2014g).

I've earned a grand total of...wait for it...70 quid in the last two weeks. In the whole of [month], I'm not even close to a grand in total. I'm really in the shit right now, I don't know what's gone wrong. I've been on [this forum] all month as well as agency work & I have had 0 bookings from that. Worried and stressed doesn't even begin to explain (Forum poster, 2014h).

Much of the thread content precedes and proceeds in a similar vein. Though some escorts counter with their own experiences of relative economic success, a running current of feeling that the economic situation for independent escorts has weakened, predominates. Primary to this, is a strong feeling from many escorts

that the recession, fee stagnation, increased competition from migrant workers and higher levels of customer expectation, are to blame. As one poster suggests:

The [sex provider] scene has become saturated with thousands of [sex workers] flooding the market. Every other profile on [this forum] is [Eastern European]... As I see it there is no way back to the good old days, instead of 100's of [sex workers], clients now have the choice of 1000's and supply has well outstripped demand. I have seen the hourly rates in [UK city] tumble because sex workers are competing with each other for clients. £55 per hour is now not unusual (Forum poster, 2014i).

The evidence taken from such threads does not, of course, automatically mean that all or even many independent escorts are struggling financially, but its presence as a popular and long running thread on such a prevalent forum for escorts, does support recent evidence that the economic prosperity of many escorts has diminished in recent years (The Economist, 2014). As opposed to more abstract concerns, such as the moral dubiousness of men paying for sexual services³, it is the specific and pragmatic concerns of economic validity that many sex workers contend with. Indeed, for escorts the pressure to keep afloat, can add to wider pressures on idealised femininity and commercialised attractiveness, as the next section demonstrates.

Sex workers in the beauty marketplace

A primary 'selling point' of an independent escort, and indeed any other sex worker, is her appearance. Thus the pressure to 'look good', which women experience as a general rule, as an escort is heightened. As one forum user demonstrates:

[Recently] I am having what I can only describe as a crisis of confidence across the board in life. With how I look – I am [in my forties] now so I have lines, wrinkles and quite right too – I am not vain but I have lost confidence in my appearance (Forum poster, 2013a).

This quote reflects an uncomfortable anxiety about their appearance that many escorts experience when business is far from 'booming'. Like many women and

men, the escort can readily attribute ‘failure’ due to her own perceived unattractiveness rather than any other external factor beyond her control (e.g., economic recession, local competition or otherwise).

Of course these concerns are not specific to escorting and research has, for decades, shown that women’s shame about their appearances is normative (Matthiasdottir, Jonsson, and Kristjansson, 2010; Rodin, Silberstein, and Striegel-Moore, 1984). Pressure to be commercially beautiful is not limited to the sex industry, as the mass media, fashion, beauty and weight loss industries profit from this as well (Jankowski, Fawkner, Slater, and Tiggemann, 2014; Kilbourne, 2010; Wolf, 1991). As one forum user succinctly highlights, there is a heavy financial, mental and cognitive cost to appearance pressures, but as she also notes, this does not relate specifically to escorts but to the culture imposed on women (and to a lesser extent, men) more generally:

I hate to sound like a tedious feminist but the amount of money women spend on beautifying (with half the things making no difference to anyone else at all) is really quite bewildering! Probably taking £1000s a year away from a potential travelling fund or property purchase or pension etc. I have been experimenting with seeing how simple I can make my personal care routines and how much money I can save for a couple of years now, and it’s mainly good cos it’s just a huge weight off my mind. After all, I have a house to buy this year (Forum poster, 2014f).

Social isolation and marginalisation

Choosing this job means you have to isolate yourself and by doing so you will definitely be lonely. We are all lonely and isolated but you tend to get used to it as time goes by. I only make an effort to see friends and family once in a while mostly in the summer but otherwise can’t be bothered in the winter. It’s very normal to be lonely and isolated if you don’t want the whole world to know what you are up to (Forum poster, 2013b).

The escort forum has a section offering the chance for escorts to look for ‘security buddies’, ‘touring partners’ or just simply casual acquaintances or friends. Because of the liminality of the escort role (which can result in having to hide their job from

friends and family) many escorts on the site detail loneliness and marginalisation as negative aspects of their occupation.

The taboo surrounding the industry may also mean that an escort may not engage in romantic relationships, as another forum user writes: 'I'm not in a relationship because I don't want to have to tell anyone *or* lie to them' (Forum poster, 2011a). However, this may not be the experience of all workers. Whilst wishing to break social taboos that prevent escorts from seeking social engagement, we must be careful not to fall into the trap of tarring them with the cliché of the loneliness of the 'promiscuous woman', rather than satisfaction of the 'happily married wife'. Romantic relationships in particular do not necessarily provide women with greater levels of wellbeing and there is research to suggest that women are in fact happier after they have disposed of unsatisfying marriages (Clark and Georgellis, 2013). In fact, the reasons that women stay in marriages may be similar to the reasons women continue to conduct sex work. In speaking about the research Professor Yannis Georgellis explains that: 'We took into account the fact that divorce can sometimes have a negative financial impact on women, but despite that it still makes them much happier than men' (Georgellis, 2013). Therefore, due to women's often more vulnerable socioeconomic situation, escorting may not be the only activity some women do to bolster their financial security, whatever the effects might be on their personal contentment.

Violence and abuse

A preliminary reading of one of the forum's rooms regarding clients to avoid, seems to suggest that reoccurring problems that are reported amongst independent escorts are verbal abuse, appearance 'put downs', threats of exposure, stalking and pressure to practice unsafe sex.

He returned for second booking tonight and went around blowing some of candles out until she insisted on keeping some of them lit, she noticed he was more 'full on' this time at the start and when she went to check condom just before penetration it was ripped (client had been wanking his cock just before this). She gave him the benefit of the doubt and put another condom on and when he was ready to finish he asked for doggy – she checked the condom again and it was fine but noticed afterwards he was 'wriggling about' behind her trying to

get comfortable and when he had finished the condom was ripped again and he had come inside her (Forum poster, 2014c).

That is not to say that other forms of violence do not occur, but as is the case for women generally, and as even a cursory look at the Every Day Sexism Project details, it is not simply the threat of horrific violence, but the regularly ‘minutiae’ of sexism that escorts, as a largely female group, face.

Whilst violence and the threat of violence are real, particularly for street sex workers, and should not be minimized (Lowman, 2000; Sanders and Campbell, 2007) it should also be contextualized within a more general culture of sexism and misogyny. Violence against women is increasingly recognized as an epidemic and a serious violation of women’s human rights (Krantz and Garcia-Moreno, 2005). The reason escorts may be at the forefront of this debate is because they are more privately ‘accessible’ to a wider variety of men than other women, but the reason they are abused and killed is not because they are sex workers but because the perpetrators are violent misogynists. Forensic psychologist David Canter explains:

From the reports we’re getting from these women, the people who are violent are not an unusual sample of the population of customers... these people are in their 30s, and seem to be local individuals, often reasonably well dressed [...] Frequently, our studies report a huge range of abuses in the family – beating their wives and assaults against their children. If these men find the opportunity to indulge in that violence and get away with it against strangers [...] then these opportunities will be acted on (O’Kane, 2002, para. 27).

If we are to fight back against the abuse of women, we must recognise that escorts suffer sexism, violence and abuse precisely because women suffer sexism, violence and abuse. If escorts or other sex workers experience more abuse, then it is arguably because of a belief by the perpetrators that they will be no retribution for their acts (Browne, 1993; The White House Council on Women and Girls, 2014). Again as Maggie O’Kane argues this is often due to police and state negligence:

The vast majority of murder cases are solved, yet in a third of all prostitute murders, the killer is never found [...] They are shite, killed by shite; who gives a

shite?’ one police officer reportedly told the Sunday Times after a prostitute murder in 1995 (O’Kane, 2002, para. 28).

If we are to bring down the disproportionate rates of violence against escorts we must, firstly, view it from within the scheme of generalised social misogyny that views female bodies as ‘up for grabs’, whether is a murdered streetwalker or an inebriated college student forcibly, digitally penetrated by her peers. Secondly, we must not get side tracked by arguments that suggests sex for pay is an inherent violence, and attempt to legislate as so. Rather, feminists should collectivise with sex workers to draw attention to the poor rates of conviction for those who abuse both sex workers and women more generally. Rather than criminalising all those who pay for sex, our resources should be combined and concentrated on calling out those who conduct measurable harm, and on scrutinising those whose job it is to defend and protect the safety of escorts.

Conclusion

Nowhere can sex workers’ position of liminality be greater seen in the tendency to refer to sex work as the ‘selling of the body’. The implication is that the escort’s greatest and most abundant commodity is her sexuality, and if she sells it she ‘sells herself’ (McNeil, 2011). The phrase further implies whatever intelligence, experience and life the escort has is redundant; that once she has engaged in paid for sexual activity, she falls down some never ending rabbit hole, wherein her selfhood must flummox through the vagaries of ideology and moral crusade. Wherein her image of herself must be contorted to fit the convex or concave of a political, circus mirror. It does not make any sense to talk about those who are involved in sex work, as though they were somehow outside of a commodification culture, wherein almost anything is up for sale or rent, whether it is hair (Khaleeli, 2012), organs (Scheper-Hughes, 2014) or even the rent of one’s womb for surrogacy (Twine, 2012).

This paper has sought to be a part of a conversation that wishes to take the rigidity of moral purpose out of the debate on sex work, how its operation should be written into legislation and how its workers’ rights can be protected. Do the authors feel that the selling of sexual services is the apex of human achievement,

particularly in regards to its gendered, racial and classed manifestations? Perhaps not. But that is nonetheless an arbitrary and often philosophical debate to have, and one that should not preside over legislation in place of more immediate, pragmatic concerns. It also must not speak above those collectives of sex workers whose concerns over their safety, their economic stability and their political rights trump more metaphysical ones. To support and listen to them would help to diminish the inflammatory dichotomisation of the debate, and the unhelpful, and untrue, dichotomisation of the sex worker as a victim or a victor. She may be both. Or frequently, neither.

Endnotes

- ¹ The authors have anonymized the escort forum, accompanying website and all forum posts references in order to reduce the risk of any escort being identified from the posts and potentially further stigmatized.
- ² The authors are circumspect about the use of the terminology sex worker in reference to the most vulnerable women involved in the general industry, such as street walkers, pimped or trafficked women and intravenous drug users. The authors feel that whilst it is fair to want to legitimize women who are working of their own volition, it is dangerous territory to use the same language in reference to these vulnerable women as it potentially whitewashes the abuses they suffer and the lack of real measurable choice in their lives.
- ³ During the author's ten years in the industry, she regularly encountered women working as escorts or in brothels who were unhappy about their situation, not just because of the social stigma surrounding the sex industry but because of the great discomfort experienced when being with men they were not attracted to, even repulsed by, due to economic need. Though there are other escorts who don't experience such discomfort, and are happy with the work they are doing, the client himself is not always able to make this differentiation when purchasing sexual services. Even if he adopts what he may view as a form of motive utilitarianism (by selecting the escort whose advertisement most suggests volition) he is still in the moral quandary of opting to purchase sexual services from, potentially, a woman who experiences great discomfort at the activity. The authors further note, that this discomfort is amplified by the fact that the service is a physically intimate one. The author recalls many conversations with varying women who expressed particular unease, even sickness, at engaging in particularly 'intimate' activities, such as kissing and cunnilingus, but feeling the pressure to do so as a result of fierce industry competition. Therefore, the authors defend the assertion that paying for sex, though it ought not be a criminal activity, is certainly a morally dubious one.

- ⁴ Cultural neoliberalism is a concept that holds individuals as responsible for their lives including their success, health and longevity at the expense of any acknowledgement of the influence of wider macro-structures (e.g., racism, sexism; Martinez and Garcia 1996).

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