

SECTION 4: MALE SEX WORK

4.1 Invisibility of Male Sex Work

The majority of early research into male prostitution is largely based on street workers*. This is reflected in *Paying the Price*. Indeed, while the document does state in the introduction (section 1,4) that the term prostitute, used throughout the document “*should be taken to mean both men and women unless otherwise specified*”, there is no substantive analysis of the issues for male sex workers, or distinction regarding how these issues may be different (or similar) to those of female sex workers. Male sex workers are mostly ‘invisible’ within the consultation document.

*(Allen 1980; Barnard 1993; Davies & Feldman 1991; Deischer et al 1969; Harris 1973; Hoek et al 1991; Luckenbill 1985; McKeganey et al 1990; McMullen 1987; Robinson 1989; Simon et al 1994; Visano 1991).

4.2 Routes In and Informed Choice

Most of the consultation document focuses on the stereotypical perception of sex workers as ‘victims of abuse’ who have been coerced into sex work (Introduction, 1.3.1, 1.3.2). The reality for male sex workers is that, whilst there are significant numbers of individuals across the UK who have become involved in the selling of sex due to social disadvantage and problematic family histories, on the whole research conducted by the Working Men’s Project (WMP) and the experience of other projects in our network, such as the Armistead Project, is that many men make an informed choice about selling sex within a range of available options.

Whilst for many, as identified within *Paying the Price*, this is often motivated by acute financial crisis (personal debt, unexpected life events such as redundancy, further education fees, or immigration status restricting more legitimate forms of work), the decision to sell sex is made from an informed perspective, within a range of options. The majority of men selling sex in the UK are not coerced or trafficked, do not have pimps or inappropriate relationships with other individuals who ‘control’ their movements. They may be ‘managed’ in a loose sense of the word, by brothel owners or escort agency managers, who may require a commitment to working agreed hours/shifts, etc, but the individual sex worker chooses when to work and how to work (e.g. what sexual activities will be engaged in). N.B. This is not to deny the cases of younger men, for example in care situations, who are coerced by their peers or exploitative adults into selling sex. Some projects in our network support such individuals.

4.3 Invisibility and Diversity of Male Sex Work

In contrast to female sex work which has a visible street sector, male sex work rarely comes to the attention of the police, as it is mainly off-street and does not (in general) have the same issues regarding drug use or coercion. There is a significant focus within *Paying the Price* on female street based sex work, and its associated problems. This was also the focus of the majority of early research into male sex work. However Hickson et al (1994) suggests that the world of male prostitution is more diverse, and that many men are involved in off-street work, in pubs, saunas and escort agencies.

4.4 Key Issues Identified in Paying the Price

Chapter 2 of *Paying the Price* identifies the key issues to prostitution as being:

- abuse through involvement in prostitution for the individual sex worker
- housing and homelessness
- criminality related to theft, soliciting and drugs
- violence and physical abuse
- nuisance to neighbourhoods from sex work related issues
- abuse of young people
- trafficking
- stigmatisation

4.5 Abuse and Vulnerability

The reality of male sex work in relation to abuse and vulnerability needs to be considered along a continuum. There are those men who have been coerced, who have been 'damaged' by their involvement in the selling of sex, who are at one end of that continuum. Young men selling sex are often perceived as "delinquent" rather than vulnerable, so younger men selling sex and their service needs remain largely unseen. The exploitation of young males is often ignored because society often fails to recognize that young men are vulnerable.

Equally, there are a small number of men who have received fame (and fortune) from their public declaration of involvement in the selling of sex (Aidan Shaw for example). However, as with any line of distribution within a population, the majority sit somewhere in the middle, just normal men who make a choice to sell sex. Most do it for a short-term period, and most work in an off-street capacity. They would not consider themselves victims or abused.

Some projects report one of the reasons men may becoming involved in selling sex is linked to issues of rejection from family and society due to their sexual identify. It is important to recognize these complex issues that shape some men's experience of sex work.

"Many of the men we work in Merseyside are very much in control of their own activities yet there are number of men, who as far as we know are the minority, who are controlled by others, usually using emotional manipulation. There are bigger issues also. Homophobia and rejection from sections of the straight community. Also the gay community itself, can react negatively and aggressively to men who sell sex. I think this needs to be looked at more." (Manager, Gay Men's Project, Merseyside)

4.6 Homelessness

Homeless is a problem for a number of younger men that sell sex from the street. For example SW5 identified that a proportion of their clients are homeless or inadequately housed; many of them are staying on friends floors or couches, others are staying with punters and some are street homeless. They identified such clients as needing a lot of support to maintain tenancies. They identified gaps in crisis housing/hostel accommodation for young men selling sex and generally not enough suitable housing provision for lesbians and gay people and even less for trans people.

But for most men involved in the selling of sex, working off-street through brothels, the Internet or from adverts in the gay press, their difficulties with finding accommodation are no more or less than other young men in the general population.

A significant number of male sex workers are homosexually identified (78% of those registered with the WMP identify as gay), and often it is their sexuality, rather than their involvement in sex work which can present difficulties with finding safe and secure long-term accommodation.

4.7 Criminality and Trafficking

It is interesting to note that in the last 10 years, only one London based male brothel has been closed by the police and the owners successfully prosecuted. Yet, even in this case, the charges on which the owners were given custodial sentences pertained to unpaid tax (from the brothel) rather than the running of a male brothel.

In the experience of member projects in the UKNSWP, organised crime in relation to adult male sex work appears to be extremely rare and one expressed the view that it was "non existent". Brothels (which front as 'unlicensed massage parlours') are well run, organised, and the men working in them do so voluntarily, they have not been trafficked and are not coerced. Whilst there is no doubt that an 'underground' crime scene exists in relation to young people (children), which includes young boys, and by assumption would include trafficked boys, it is not something condoned by the adult commercial male sex scene. One project working with male sex workers a part of a wider group of clients, men who have sex with men, felt that links to organised crime were rare. But they did not dismiss the possibility that some links may exist, particularly outside of the identified commercial gay sex work scene.

"We need to always ask ourselves, is something not there because it's not visible. We shouldn't dismiss the possibility if we haven't proactively looked for it, but we do have to keep balanced" (Manager, Gay Men's Project)

Some concerns were expressed about coercive drug dealers exerting pressure on younger men.

The UKNSWP welcomes and supports changes to legislation to address abuse of children through prostitution, but cautions that the same approach is not appropriate in relation to adult sex workers making informed choices.

4.8 Drug Use and Male Sex work

It is acknowledged that an element of street working men as well as women use drugs, solvents and alcohol, and experience the related street criminality that links to that drug culture (Connell & Hart, 2003).

Some projects report that a section of men who are selling sex, like some female street sex workers are selling sex to earn money to support their drug use or exchanging sex for drugs. Problematic drug use patterns reported by some projects are somewhat different from female street sex workers, with projects reporting the use of stimulant drugs such as cocaine and ecstasy and GHB as prevalent.

The Armistead Project in Merseyside reported that this pattern of problematic drug use, and the need to exchange or sell sex for drugs, is currently an issue amongst some young gay and bisexual men (up to 25) selling sex who they are working with. This group of men do not necessarily identify themselves as sex workers. The Merseyside project also reports having worked with heterosexually identified men who sell sex to support their heroin use.

The UKNSWP welcomes the proposals within *Paying the Price* to assist and respond appropriately to the needs of these young men through the provision of timely and appropriate drug rehabilitation initiatives. However, there is a need for increased funding to support such initiatives, and these responses need to be timely – the young persons who has made the decision to enter rehab, articulated to an outreach worker on a street corner at 2am, needs access there and then to an appropriate assessment and treatment service, not to come back at 9am when services open, by then the moment has passed.

4.9 Violence

Violence against men selling sex is rarely reported. Some projects felt that violence could be unreported because male sex workers may be reluctant to disclose their sex working and/or the stigma of men reporting any sexual crime.

As identified in *Paying the Price*, the role of the 'pimp' can be a source of violence for some female sex workers, yet in the experience of established projects this role does not exist in the same way within the male context. One northern project reported a number of cases where men have an emotional attachment, which is part of an abusive relationship, which may be exploited by their partners in relation to commercial sex.

Violence from clients is very rare with off-street male sex workers. Nevertheless, the murder of a male masseur in London earlier in 2004 suggests that they may share some of the vulnerabilities of female sex workers when operating alone. As one male sex workers states;

"the major advantage working as an escort at an agency is the safety issue. Many boys feel a sense of security working in a house, where as boys working privately or working out calls tend to feel unsafe. Boys that work as escorts find it is an opportunity to make quick and easy money though sometimes they are at risk by others."*

**[generic 'industry' term for male sex worker, does not refer to an individual under 18yrs old]*

Violence for street working men is a reality, often though this is related to their problematic drug or alcohol use or homelessness, rather than their involvement in the selling of sex. (Connell & Hart, 2003)

4.10 Nuisance

Male sex work is mainly invisible within mainstream UK society. Even well established street scenes (young men selling sex in Piccadilly Circle were chronicled in the works of Dickens and later Wilde), yet even in such environments it is often not obvious to the casual passer by. Mostly, sex is sold by men (to other men), off-street and behind closed doors. The most 'visible' element of the commercial male scene is the advertisements for escorts in the gay media, but even this is contained within publications which are not accessed by mainstream society, and known to have a high degree of adult sexual content. Brothels tend to be well managed, discreet and orderly, and located in neighbourhoods where they 'blend in' to a busy street scene, so a stream of workers or clients entering and leaving the premises throughout the day will pass largely unnoticed. Projects in some cities report that there may be some police attention when men working, sometimes opportunistically, within the cottaging scene, are identified as part of wider policing operations.

4.11 Young men and exploitation

Most of the published research relating to male sex work demonstrates that many men first started to sell sex before the age of 18 years of age (Connell & Hart, 2003), yet many also admit to engaging in consensual non-paid sex before the age of 16 years (as it the case for the majority of the population), however it would be untrue to claim that the majority of the population had been 'sexually abused or exploited'.

The organised commercial scene is self-regulating around the protection of young people. Brothels often seek clarification in the form of documentation (birth certificates, passports) to confirm the age of new men wanting to work at the premises. Magazines and Internet sites that host photographs and advertisements or listing also have similar checks and will want to confirm the pictures are genuine (e.g. of the person placing the advert or listing).

Indeed, it has been the experience of projects in the UKNSWP that men selling sex independently often raise concerns to appropriate authorities (social services, etc), if

they have contact with a young person thinking of or involved in selling sex, or a customer requesting access to a young boy. Male sex workers report being contacted (from their adverts) by young men considering escort work, and often counsel them about their misconceptions in relation to the work (such as having lots of 'nice' sex with cute guys). Such counsel can result in the young man rethinking his choices.

This is something ignored within *Paying the Price* and peer mentoring or support schemes are not considered. Older sex workers are often the best advocates for dissuading young people from choosing sex work as an option, or where they do, ensuring they develop survival skills to work safely and maintain appropriate boundaries with paying partners, including emotional boundaries (Ziersch et al, 2000, McKinney & Gaffney, 2000).

A study by de Graaf et al (1994) in of 27 male sex workers, nine of whom worked from home and two from brothels (the rest being street based), found that issues relating to the workers sexuality, familiarity with clients and ethnic background, were relevant when it came to practising unsafe sex during paid encounters.

4.12 Stigmatisation and Isolation

Male sex workers are most at risk from isolation. This isolation is often three fold:

- **sexuality** – the majority of adult males selling sex in the UK identify as gay, and even where they identify as hetero or bisexual, because most sell sex to other men, they can face discrimination from society and homophobia.
- **immigration status** – projects report that many male sex workers *in London* are from outside the UK. For many English is a second language, and their visa status may be a contributing factor towards their decision to sell sex. A significant number of the Latino and southern European men selling sex come from small urban or rural communities in their country of origin, with traditional Catholic values, where their identity as a homosexual male would ostracise them from their family and render them a social outcast. They arrive in the UK, to study on a student visa, or to tour on a holiday visa, and find an established gay scene in a relatively tolerant society – then they will do anything to stay, including selling sex. Yet 'sexual orientation' is not a recognised grounds for claiming asylum.
- **involvement in sex work** – apart from being gay and being foreign, many male sex workers also face the stigma documented in *Paying the Price* by those involved in sex work.

These factors combined increase the invisibility of male sex workers, often making it necessary for them to live a 'double life' – student, boyfriend, companion, employee by day, and sex worker by night. This leads to increased vulnerability, difficulty in accessing appropriate health and social services, under reporting of crime (on the rare occasions they are victims of crime), and increased sexual risk taking behaviour, as de Graaf (1994) states:

"working in relative isolation, have little or no contact with their colleagues, and the resulting absence of social support and control may discourage condom use."

Recommendations: R.9

During the consultation period for *Paying the Price* the WMP consulted widely with service users and men selling sex. The issues from a focus group run with male sex workers concluded:

- legalising off-street sex work will provide a sense of security and stability for male sex workers
- legalising sex work will also allow the paying partner of the escort to feel at ease, as it would allow standards for the industry to be developed and a legitimate trading framework
- escorts feel almost invisible when it comes to being a sex worker, it is not acceptable, and therefore, apart from the few limited existing services, there is no-one to turn to for support
- there should be a national help-line for sex workers, free to call and 24hrs with emergency information. Some local gay men's services have general help lines.
- access to sexual health screening should remain free and confidential: sex workers should have the freedom to choose to access care. Providing more sex worker specific services would assist in widening access to healthcare.

The UKNSWP supports these views