Human Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation: Research on Demand

Using online reviews to study clients' perceptions of trafficking and exploitation

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Purpose

This paper provides a summary of research about demand for human trafficking for sexual exploitation in Scotland. The research explores how male purchasers of sex perceive trafficking and exploitation, by using reviews posted on sex-industry websites by purchasers.

The need for this research came from the growing emphasis on addressing demand for human trafficking. Addressing demand included in the international legal framework on human trafficking[2] and is a recommendation in the EHRC Inquiry into Human Trafficking in Scotland (2011). However, methods for addressing demand largely focus on demand for trafficked labour and there is little clarity about how this applies to trafficking for sexual exploitation.

It is also worth understanding clients' motivations and perceptions of exploitation in considering how clients should be treated. This is relevant given the current movement to criminalise the purchase of sex, and consequently, position clients as offenders.

Considering the role of clients is also relevant in the context of the new Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) 2015 legislation. The Act requires that the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Strategy includes activities to raise awareness of human trafficking. In light of this, it is worth considering the value of raising awareness amongst clients and treating them as potential sources of information to use in detecting trafficking or exploitation.

Key findings

- Clients hold extreme views of what trafficking and exploitation look like.

- Clients want to avoid 'bad punts'; 'bad punts' appear to align with exploitative conditions for sex-workers; in this way, clients may be inadvertently avoiding exploitative situations.

- Clients use a set of techniques for detecting 'bad punts' and, consequently, show some capability in avoiding exploitative situations.

- These findings suggest there is potential to raise awareness of human trafficking amongst online clients, and encourage them to report when they suspect a sex-worker is being exploited.

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[1] This paper is a summary of a Masters Dissertation. To access the full dissertation please email Bryony Cornforth-Camden at bryonycc@gmail.com.

[2] The CoE 2005 Trafficking Convention, the EU 2011 Trafficking Directive, and the UN Trafficking Protocol specify the need to tackle the demand for cheap and exploitable labour that encourages human trafficking.

- There was widespread acceptance of exploitative working conditions for Eastern European (in particular Romanian) sex-workers, on the online forums.

- This apparent tolerance for exploitation of certain groups allows trafficking and exploitation of migrant women to continue.

Research method

This research focused on men who buy sex as one aspect of demand for trafficked prostitution[3]. It involved analysing reviews about sex-workers, which clients had posted on sex-industry websites. These reviews were analysed qualitatively to explore how clients perceive human trafficking and exploitation of sex-workers. The analysis did not attempt to distinguish between clients who used trafficked and non-trafficked prostitution. Methodologically, there is no way to make this distinction and analysing all reviews captures other forms of harm that fall outside of the trafficking definition.

The data was sourced from three publicly accessible websites where clients could post reviews of sex-workers who were operating in Scotland. An initial scan indicated that these were the three main online forums used by clients in Scotland. Reviews posted in the last six months were analysed, resulting in a total of 318 reviews.

Using clients' online reviews as data presents certain limitations. It is unlikely that the online client community is representative of all clients in Scotland and, as the online forums provide anonymity, there is no way to ascertain if reviews are truthful or posted by genuine clients. Another limitation is that clients may not discuss exploitation in their reviews as the online forums are publicly accessible and can be monitored by Police, web-hosts, or third parties such as pimps. Despite these limitations, research has suggested that online forums are a valuable resource for understanding clients' motivations and are used to build group norms about what behaviour is acceptable and unacceptable (Sanders, 2008; Sharp & Earle, 2003).

Findings

Mentions of human trafficking and exploitation were almost entirely absent from client reviews. Where they were mentioned, it was clear that clients held extreme views of what constituted trafficking and exploitation. Where clients had suspected trafficking or coercion, it was when the sex-worker had bruises, seeing an aggressive pimp, or that the woman appearing unwilling. In most cases clients' concerns were easily dismissed when they saw that the woman showed no obvious signs of emotional distress.

Although there were few direct mentions of exploitation, it appeared that clients were encountering situations where sex-workers were being exploited. Rather than seeing these situations as harmful for sex-workers, clients interpreted them as 'bad punts' - a set of factors that made for a poor service. Clients spent much time discussing how to avoid 'bad punts'. 'Bad punts' included a lack of willingness from the sex worker, the presence of controlling pimps, sex-workers using drugs and alcohol and a lack of hygiene. As these 'bad punts' appear to align with exploitative working conditions, by avoiding them, clients may be inadvertently avoiding exploitative situations.

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[3] Research indicates that demand grows out of a complex mix of situational factors in countries of origin and social norms and state policy in destination countries. This research treats clients as a contributing factor to demand through the important role they play in maintaining the sex-industry in which trafficking takes place.

As well as being motivated to avoid 'bad punts', clients developed techniques for avoiding them and encouraged each other to use these techniques. Techniques include assessing sex-workers' online profile and pre-appointment communications. Clients were suspicious of language, pictures, phone numbers, and sex-workers who offer unprotected sex. They largely use these indicators to judge whether a sex-worker is operating independently or being organised by a pimp.

These findings suggest that clients are motivated and have some capability to detect and avoid situations where exploitation may be occurring. Furthermore, some clients commented that they wanted more information to help them avoid such situations.

The other main finding from the client reviews was the importance of sex-workers' ethnicity or nationality. There were frequent and extensive discussions about Eastern European and, in particular, Romanian sex-workers. Romanians were seen as particularly undesirable as they were associated with 'bad punts' - likely to be controlled by a pimp, run in a 'conveyor-belt' operation, and consequently pose a safety risk to clients, appear unwilling, and have poor hygiene.

As an outsider reading clients reviews, 'Romanians' appears to represent a group of migrant women working under extremely exploitative conditions and potentially being coerced. However, clients showed little awareness and little sympathy towards these women. The overwhelming response was to blame the sex-worker for the factors that they saw as violating their consumer expectations. As well as some reviews including blatantly racist language, there was a widespread tolerance for poor working conditions for Romanians and other Eastern European migrants. These working conditions appeared to be widely accepted and even expected in the online reviews.

Tolerance for poor working conditions for migrants was highlighted in the EHRC Inquiry (2011) as an important factor that facilitated all forms of trafficked labour in Scotland. This is reflected in the client reviews and indicates that clients' tolerance, along with derogatory views of Romanians, are sustaining exploitative working conditions for migrants and are likely to support trafficked prostitution.

This research drew on existing literature to better understand why clients held such derogatory views towards Romanians. Previous research indicates that it is likely that these views are influenced by media reports and political rhetoric about immigration and freedom of movement within EU countries. As recent EU member states, in Jan 2014, the restrictions on freedom of movement for Romanians and Bulgarians were lifted. Around this time there was much media hype about Romanian and Bulgarian immigrants, and there has been ongoing political debate about freedom of movement for EU citizens wanting to work in the UK (Ghimis, 2015).

Studies that reviewed the media coverage of Romania and Bulgaria in this time period found that tabloid newspapers presented migration from both countries as a threat, using language such as a 'flood' or 'invasion' (Vicol & William, 2014, p. 9; Fox et al., 2012, p. 7). Tabloid newspapers were found to link Romanians to crime and poverty - in particular they were linked to begging, theft, gangs, and prostitution (Macarie, 2014; Vicol & William, 2014; Fox et al., 2012). The same linkages were not found for Bulgarians (Vicol & William, 2014). These studies also found discussions of Roma and gypsies were linked to both Romanian immigration and to crime suggesting that long-standing sentiments towards Roma/Gypsies were being used to tie Romanian immigrants to crime, over any other nationality.

Similar portrayals of Romanian migrant workers were found in client reviews. Romanian sex-workers and pimps were often discussed as being thieves and scammers. There are also a small number of reviews that link Romanians to Gypsies/Roma and reflect the media portrayals of a foreign invasion.

These findings suggests that the political rhetoric on immigration combined with negative media portrayals of Romanians has contributed to clients' views.

Implications

This research provides a window into the motivations and views of the online client community and has implications that may be useful in strategies to raise awareness and facilitate detection. Firstly, clients hold extreme views of trafficking and exploitation. They show little awareness and easily dismiss suspicions when they do not fit with their preconceived ideas of trafficking and victimhood.

However, alongside these findings, the research also indicates that the online clients are keen to avoid 'bad punts', show ability in detecting them, and appear eager for more information to help them to be detected and avoided. Considering that 'bad punts' align with exploitative working conditions for sex-workers, this suggests there is potential to raise awareness of trafficking amongst the online client community and encourage clients to detect and avoid exploitative situations.

Tolerating and expecting exploitative conditions for Romanian women is likely to contribute to the maintenance of exploitation of migrants and human trafficking in Scotland. The EHRC Inquiry (2011) notes that trafficking flourishes in communities where people do not speak out. Given online clients' view of Romanian women, it seems unlikely that clients would speak out about exploitation.

Furthermore, clients' views of Romanians suggest that political rhetoric and media portrayals play some part in inspiring tolerance for poor working conditions for migrants. This is counter-intuitive and is likely to unbalance government attempts to prevent human trafficking. The policy implications of this are that actions taken by the state to protect and promote rights for migrant workers will likely support strategies for preventing and addressing trafficking.

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