



# Migrant Workers in the UK Sex Industry

## Final Policy-Relevant Report

Dr Nick Mai

Senior Research Fellow in Migrations and Immigrations

Institute for the Study of European Transformations  
London Metropolitan University

For more information about the research project please visit:

[www.londonmet.ac.uk/migrantworkers](http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/migrantworkers)



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**Advisory Board members** included (in alphabetical order, by surname):

Rosie Campbell, Chair of the UK Network of Sex Work Projects

Dr Linda Cusick, Reader in Substance Abuse at the University of West Scotland and UK Network of Sex Work Projects member in charge of ethics

Justin Gaffney - CEO/Clinical Director of SohoBoyz, not-for-profit social enterprise supporting male and transgender sex workers. <http://www.sohoboyz.org.uk>

Bill Jordan, Professor of Social policy, Plymouth University, and co-author (with Franck Düvell) of 'Irregular Migration: The Dilemmas of Transnational Mobility', Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2002.

James Mannion, Sex Work Advisor at Sohoboyz

Dr Maggie O'Neill, Senior Lecturer in Criminology and Social Policy, Loughborough University.

Prof. Anthony Pryce, Head of Department of Interdisciplinary Studies in Professional Practice, School of Community & Health Sciences, City University

Catherine Stephens, sex worker and activist with the IUSW

**Research Team** (in alphabetical order, by surname):

Kate Hardy, PhD student, Queen Mary, University of London

P.G. Maciotti, PhD student, Open University and co-organiser of the X:talk project (offering free English language classes to migrant sex workers) <http://www.xtalkproject.net>

Thierry Schaffauser, sex worker

Catherine Stephens, sex worker and activist with the IUSW

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## Executive Summary

The main aim of the project is to improve the understanding of the links between migration and the UK sex industry and migration in the UK, by drawing on the ways in which migrants themselves described their experiences and analysed their histories. The links between migration and the sex industry are predominantly addressed in current public debates in terms of trafficking and exploitation. Interviews with 100 migrant women, men and transgender people working in all of the main jobs available within the sex industry and from the most relevant areas of origin (South America, Eastern Europe, EU and South East Asia) indicate that approximately 13 per cent of female interviewees felt that they had been subject to different perceptions and experiences of exploitation, ranging from extreme cases of trafficking to relatively more consensual arrangements. Only a minority, amounting approximately to 6 per cent of female interviewees, felt that they had been deceived and forced into selling sex in circumstances within which they had no share of control or consent.

Contrary to the emphasis given in current public debates about cases of trafficking and exploitation, the evidence gathered in the context of this project shows a great variety of life and work trajectories within the sex industry, which were influenced by key factors such as: social-economic background; educational aspirations and achievements; immigration status; professional and language skills; gender and sexuality; family history; and individual emotional history. Interviewees were from privileged, average and underprivileged socio-economic backgrounds, from structured as well as problematic families and their experience of education varied between elementary to post-graduate. In the majority of cases, the decision to migrate is based on the perception of a lack of opportunities of personal and professional development at home, with particular reference to the field of education.

Most migrants did not work in the sex industry before coming to the UK and decided to do so after a long string of work experiences in other sectors, which were seen as comparatively less rewarding both in terms of remuneration and of the working conditions offered. The majority of interviewees were introduced to the possibility of working in the sex industry through friends and colleagues they met in other settings and decided to take up the opportunity after they saw positive examples in their everyday lives, both when they were home and in the country of origin.

The stigma associated with sex work was the main problem for almost all interviewees, who felt that it had negative implications for their private and professional lives. Most interviewees complained that they found it difficult to reconcile working in the sex industry and having stable romantic relationships and that having to lead a double life with their partners, families and friends impacted negatively on their wellbeing. A majority of interviewees also underlined the way the stigma associated with sex work was implicated in legitimating violence against sex workers from a small minority of clients and from petty criminals.

Almost all interviewees felt that the most advantageous aspects of their involvement in the sex industry were the possibility of earning considerably more money than in other sectors, the availability of time and the possibility of meeting interesting people, travelling and experiencing new and challenging

situations. In most cases by working in the sex industry migrants were able to bridge an important gap in their aspirations to social mobility and felt that they were able to enjoy better living and working conditions. Most interviewees underlined that they enjoyed respectful and friendly relations with colleagues and clients and that by working in the sex industry they had better working and living conditions than those they encountered in other sectors of employment (mainly in the hospitality and care sectors).

The research shows that most interviewees consciously decided to work in the sex industry and that only a minority felt that they had been forced to. The research findings strongly suggest that vulnerability, particularly to trafficking and exploitation, results from migrants' socio-economic conditions, lack of information about their rights and entitlement to protection in the UK, their personal family and emotional circumstances, but, most of all, from their immigration status in the UK.

## Key Findings

- The large majority of interviewed migrant workers in the UK sex industry are not forced nor trafficked
- Immigration status is by far the single most important factor restricting their ability to exercise their rights in their professional and private lives
- Working in the sex industry is often a way for migrants to avoid the unrewarding and sometimes exploitative conditions they meet in non-sexual jobs
- By working in the sex industry, many interviewees are able to maintain dignified living standards in the UK while dramatically improving the living conditions of their families in the country of origin.
- The stigmatisation of sex work is the main problem interviewees experienced while working in the sex industry and this impacted negatively on both their private and professional lives
- The combination of the stigmatisation of sex work and lack of legal immigration documentation makes interviewees more vulnerable to violence and crime
- Interviewees generally describe relations with their employers and clients as characterised by mutual consent and respect, although some reported problematic clients and employers, who were disrespectful, aggressive or abusive
- The impossibility of guaranteeing indefinite leave to remain to victims of trafficking undermines the efforts of the police and other authorities against criminal organisations
- Most interviewees feel that the criminalisation of clients will not stop the sex industry and that it would be pushed underground, making it more difficult for migrants working in the UK sex industry to assert their rights in relation to both clients and employers

- All interviewees thought that decriminalising sex work and the people involved and making it easier for all migrants to become and remain documented would improve their living and working conditions and enable them to exercise their rights more fully

## Key Policy Implications

The evidence gathered in the context of this project shows that the measures regarding prostitution and trafficking foreseen by the Policing and Crime Bill 2009 will be seen and experienced by migrant workers as criminalizing their livelihoods as they are not based on shared (between the sex working community and authorities) definitions of what constitutes exploitation in the specific context of the sex industry and of the livelihoods of sex workers. The new measures foreseen by the Policing and Crime Bill 2009 include:

- the criminalisation of those who pay for sexual services with a second person subject to exploitation (Clause 14);
- orders for sex workers convicted of soliciting (Clause 16);
- changes to offences of kerb-crawling and soliciting to obtain sexual services (Clause 18); and
- the closure of premises linked to sexual exploitation (Clause 21 and Schedule 2).

The research evidence strongly suggests that current attempts to curb trafficking and exploitation by criminalising clients and closing down commercial sex establishments will not be effective because as a result the sex industry will be pushed further underground and people working in it will be further marginalised and vulnerable to exploitation. This would discourage both migrants and UK citizens working in the sex industry, as well as clients, from co-operating with the police and sex work support projects in the fight against actual cases of trafficking and exploitation.

The interviews informing this research support the view that the success of initiatives against sexual exploitation and the general wellbeing of migrants working in the UK sex industry could be greatly enhanced by provisions that would:

- make it easier for migrants to become and remain documented and allow the sex industry to operate legally by decriminalising it, including the possibility of legally recruiting sex workers both in the national and in the global labour markets.
- decriminalise peer-based forms of work organisations, in which a small numbers of sex workers share a working space on an equal basis, along the lines of the 'mini-brothel' solution.
- guarantee victims of sexual exploitation the certainty of obtaining undetermined leave to remain in the UK, regardless of whether they are prepared to denounce their exploiters and to co-operate with criminal investigations.
- provide migrants who were exploited with adequate long-term support and protection to successfully integrate within the UK society or, if they so wish, in their countries of origin. This means: not imposing

the condition that migrants give up working in the sex industry in order to receive assistance and also providing recreational as well as educational opportunities to migrants assisted by integration programmes.

The research findings analysed in the report, also highlight the following possibilities for intervention:

- Supporting education and training as well as combating youth unemployment both in the countries of origin and in the UK, in order to offer migrants a wider range of skills and choice of employment opportunities, including in the sex industry, if they so wish.
- Offering free or subsidised language courses to help migrants negotiate better terms for themselves in their professional and personal lives, within and outside of the sex industry.
- Encouraging migrant sex workers to reflect on their understanding of love, advantage and exploitation, which could help them to renegotiate their emotional and professional relationships in more rewarding terms.
- Organising harm-reduction prevention campaigns in the UK and in countries of origin, targeting schools as well as the media and informal youth socialisation places, to make prospective migrants, including men, women and transgender people, more aware of the possibility and consequences of exploitation, as well as of their rights and of the instruments available to them.

While it is important to continue investing resources in the fight against the most extreme forms of exploitation which are present within the UK sex industry, the fact that these correspond to the experience of a minority of migrants means that more resources need to be invested in services and initiatives supporting the majority of the sex working population, including both migrant and UK workers. The findings of the research and the successful implementation of its participative approach reaffirm the importance of sex work support projects developing peer-based initiatives and networks, which have produced long-term relationships of trust between key services and people working in the sex industry. These relationships, if invested upon and safeguarded, could enable:

- the identification of shared minimum working standards and indicators of exploitation (O’Connell Davidson 2006: 19-20), which could be agreed on and used by practitioners, the police, and the sex working population and inform priorities and protocols of intervention at a national, regional and local level;
- more efficient forms of co-operation between migrant/UK workers, support projects and anti-trafficking initiatives and projects;
- participatory initiatives providing migrant/UK workers with a wider range of skills and employment opportunities within and outside of the sex industry.

## 1. Academic and Policy Background<sup>1</sup>

The perception that commercial sex is invading urban space and connected to international organised crime and illegal migration is currently provoking social conflict related to concerns about security in the UK and in the rest of Europe. In a global environment of increasing labour migration and restrictive migration policies migrants have come to form the majority of those who sell sex in the UK and in the rest of Europe. At the same time public debates are informed by anti-migrant discourse and by a focus on 'trafficking' as the paradigm addressing links between migration and the sex industry. Across Europe, traditional policy models addressing prostitution (abolitionism, prohibitionism, regulationism) have fluctuated (Outshoorn 2004) and presently vary from state to state. In the UK, both the Home Office and Scottish Executive have recently announced and introduced (in Scotland) new measures to deal with prostitution and 'trafficking', based on the criminalisation of clients and on the enforcement of more rapid closure orders for establishments suspected of being involved in exploitative dynamics. These new measures were being discussed in the UK Parliament and informed public debates while the research was carried out, which influenced both its findings and its impact. In this context, mapping sex businesses and females employed in London (Poppy Project 2004) and highlighting the incidence of exploitation in the UK sex industry became the main focus of research initiatives informed by an abolitionist ethos (Poppy Project 2008) and whose ethical and scientific standards were highly disputed by the academic community (UKNSWP 2008).

European studies of migrant labour largely omit work in commercial sex, while traditional studies of prostitution rarely address the migrant experience (Agustín 2006). Traditionally, AIDS-prevention research has focused on migrant 'risk behaviours' (eg, drug and condom use). Migrant women who sell sex also appear in studies of trafficking, but since this is commonly viewed as a crime against women, male victims are rarely recognised (Aggleton 2001). Although numerous authors have attempted to distinguish true abuse from more-or-less planned migrations (Pickup 1998; Ruggiero 1997; Salt 2000; Mai 2001; Agustín 2004), others conflate terms, insisting that migrants can never sell sex voluntarily (Barry 1995; Hughes 2002). The difficulty of such definitions has led researchers to ascribe diverse meanings that resist comparison and impede progress in the field (Kangaspunta 2003; Agustín 2005).

As far as the study of sex work is concerned, a large theoretical literature attempts to define the morality of prostitution, figured as a two-party exchange of money for oral and penetrative sex (eg, Sullivan 1995; Jeffreys 1997; Scambler and Scambler 1997; O'Connell Davidson 1998; O'Neill 2001). Empirical studies, many from the UK, focus primarily on street prostitutes (eg, McLeod 1982; Høigård and Finstad 1986; McKeganey and Barnard 1994; Butcher and Chapple 1996; Phoenix 1999; Hart 1999). A minority of studies examine workers in phone sex and stripping (eg, Weitzer 2000; Frank 2002; Bindel 2004), and a recent UK study considers massage-parlour workers (Sanders 2005), but the wide variety of sites and forms remained largely unresearched. The immense majority of studies focus on women, some centring on their agency and diversity (eg, Chapkis 1997; Nagle 1997; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998).

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<sup>1</sup> In order to maximize the impact of this 'Final Policy-Relevant Report' on public debates and on the policymaking process, references to academic literature were kept to a minimum and restricted to this introductory section.



Studies of men are few (eg, West and de Villiers 1993; Aggleton 2001; Mai 2009). Other literatures consider risk behaviours, health and violence for prostitutes/sexworkers (eg, Cusick, Martin and May 2003; Ward et al 2004; Kinnell 2008). There are, of course, many studies of commercial sex that do not centre workers but other issues, such as space (Hubbard 1999), law (Matthews 1986; Self 2003; Scoular 2004), organisation/time (Brewis and Linstead 1998), stigma (Pheterson 1996), service concepts (Agustín 2003) and clients (Campbell and Storr 2001; Brooks Gordon and Gelsthorpe 2003, Sanders 2008), the negotiation of the public/private divide (Day 2008) and a few have considered the proliferation of commercial-sex forms as a phenomenon of globalised capitalism (Altman 2001; Sanchez 2003; Bernstein 2007).

In the UK, recent public debates and scholarly analyses of migration have focused on the social inclusion and exclusion of asylum seekers and refugees (Koser 2000; Schuster 2002; Bloch 2004) and on the impact of new immigration on social cohesion (Hickman et al 2008; Markova and Black 2008) although a few studies focus on forced labour (Anderson and Rogaly 2004), undocumented migrants' access to the labour market (Jordan 1999 ESRC #R000236838, Jordan and Düvell 2002; Ram et al 2002); the specific experiences of inclusion in the labour market of post-2004 migrants from new EU Eastern European member states (Spencer et al 2007); the trajectories of 'illegally resident population' in the UK (Black et al 2005; and the opportunities posed by the regularization of irregular migrants (GLA 2009). Research addressing the relation between ethnic difference and access to the labour market has traditionally focused on established ethnic minorities (Modood et al 1997; Owen et al 2000; Saggat 2003). Some recent work concerns 'irregular' migration (Volmer 2008) and the intersection of informal-sector work and migrant networks (Vasta 2004). Although the manner of arriving and insertion of migrants into UK labour markets are currently key questions for policy-makers and researchers, no empirical research has so far addressed the sex industry as an important sector for migrant workers.

The project complemented existing studies on prostitution and migration by choosing the nexus between migration and the sex industry as its central research topic. It adopted a migration studies framework - an interdisciplinary field studying the economic, political, social and cultural causes and effects of population movements and incorporating diverse perspectives and theories (Massey et al 1993: 432).- to examine how migrants who sell sex decided to leave their home countries, how they travelled and entered the UK, how and why they got into the sex industry, what social resources are available to them and what they identify as their current problems and desires for the future. In this concern, the research was meant to provide cross-fertilisation with other public funded research, including an ESRC-funded project on employers' and clients' views on using migrant domestic and sexworker labour (Anderson-O'Connell Davidson #R000239794) and ongoing research based at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine on the effects of migration and social networks on the risk of sexually transmitted infections and HIV among Eastern European female migrant sex workers in London.

## 2. Sample and Methodology of the Research

The study was directed by Dr Nick Mai from the Institute for the Study of European Transformations, London Metropolitan University. London was chosen as the main site of the research because of the scale and diversity of its sex industry and the size of its migrant population, which offered a great potential to illustrate a variety of links between migration and the sex industry. While most of the broader dynamics and issues analysed here can be extended to the rest of the UK, it is important to underline that the majority of interviews were undertaken in central London. This means that the research findings reflect the specificity of the sex industry in central London, which is characterised by a strong prevalence of migrants, most of whom tend to work off-street.

The project adopted a participative ethical approach, characterised by the inclusion of people working in the sex industry or for organisations representing sex workers in the gathering and analysis of the interview material, by the monetary acknowledgement of subjects' participation in the research and by the adoption of a self-reflexive multi-sited ethnographic approach. The advisory board of the project included members of organisations representing sex workers' rights and leading UK academics working on strategic areas of expertise such as: the inclusion of migrants in the informal labour market, male and transgender sex work, the ethical and methodological implications of researching vulnerable populations, and the negotiation of gender and sexuality. The research adopted a subject-centred ethical approach, ensuring the wellbeing, anonymity and safety of interviewees and interviewers. Interviews were not recorded and were undertaken in places of choice of interviewees. A list of useful contacts was available to all interviewees who felt they needed help.

The sample was composed through a combination of random and purposive criteria, in order to achieve a high degree of representativeness while ensuring that all the most relevant dimensions and experiences were included. This means that the evidence gathered allows the research to produce scientific generalisations, albeit not of a strictly statistical nature. The vast majority of interviewees were randomly approached through their commercial contacts, rather than through sex work support projects, in order to make sure that we would contact them directly and not through gatekeepers, that we could maximise the representativeness of the research sample and to potentially tap into different strata than those captured by existing research. The combined linguistic skills of the Principal Investigator (PI) and of the four researchers meant that we were able to offer migrant workers the possibility of being interviewed in a variety of languages, including: Albanian, French, English, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish. During the undertaking of the research we discovered that the vast majority of interviewees were using NHS mainstream health services and those offered by sex work support projects, which means that our results can be compared with those of research using these services as their unique or main access to interview subjects. In a second phase, we co-operated with the police and selected sex work support projects in order to purposively interview a larger number of people with experiences of trafficking and exploitation than the one that naturally occurred through the random method. This means that the actual number of interviewees who feel that they have been exploited is

higher than the one which has occurred randomly (9%) and which would be closer to a statistical representation.

The resulting sample includes 67 women, 24 men and 9 transgender people. The main areas of origin of interviewees are Eastern Europe (46, including 32 from new EU access countries), Latin America (22), EU (18, pre-2004 EU member states), followed by Asia (8) and a few interviewees from Australia, Jamaica and the United States. This distribution matches the data presented by the police forces working on the sex industry in central London. Female interviewees tended to work as flat workers, independent escorts and strippers, while men and transgender people tended to work as independent escorts, with a minority of men working in flats. About 10 per cent of interviewees had jobs which were not directly related to the provision of sexual activities in exchange of money or favours; these included women working as maids and men working as card boys.

A first analysis of the research findings was summarised in a 'First Findings' short document and was presented at the end of project final event organised at the Graduate Centre of London Metropolitan University on 10 July 2009. The 'First Findings' short document, the video recorded presentation of the first findings and the present 'Final Policy-Relevant Report' are all available on the project webpage at the following internet address:

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

The format adopted by this report reflects its main aim to inform current policy and wider public debates on the nexus between migration and the sex industry in the UK. As a consequence, references to academic literature were kept to a minimum and restricted to the previous 'Academic and Policy Background Section'. The policy implications of the findings were discussed and commented upon in participative discussion groups organised in the context of the 10<sup>th</sup> July 2009 final event, which saw the participation of the main actors involved in the phenomenon under examination, including: individual sex workers and organisations representing their rights; established and junior academics; local and national governmental bodies, non-governmental and international organizations; the media and several police departments. Most importantly, the findings and policy implications of the research are grounded in and corroborated by excerpts from the voices of the protagonists of this debate: migrant workers in the UK sex industry.

### 3. Reasons for Migrating to the UK

Migrants working in the UK sex industry migrate for a variety of interrelated reasons, including: taking up a job opportunity; improving their and their families' living conditions; completing their studies in the UK; learning English; living in a country associated with freedom, prosperity and opportunities; paying off debts contracted at home; escaping war, homophobia or patriarchal oppression; living more rewarding and pleasurable lifestyles; making new experiences away from home; and joining their British partners or their relatives and friends living in the UK. These aspects are often enmeshed in interviewees' narratives. The following quote with a 32 year-old Ukrainian female flat worker shows the way in which the desire to improve her economic situation, escape patriarchal oppression and trying new experiences inform both her project and experience of migration.

Yes, my [migration) experience matched my expectations... Here there is freedom, safety, money... Women are treated very badly in Ukraine, it made me want to travel, to get out of there

In this second excerpt, a 29 year-old Brazilian man, working as a transgender escort in central London explains the way homophobia was implicated in his desire to migrate to the UK, as the prejudice against homosexuality prevented him from keeping a relatively privileged job back at home.

I had to leave the bank because I was gay, I found out later on that there were four gays at the bank and they were all fired, that is why I like London better...

Finally, in the quote that follows, a 30 year-old Latvian woman working in flats in London explains how she decided to leave home to work in the sex industry in Italy and Germany at first and then in the UK. This was because of economic needs, to get away from a problematic relationship and because she had a friend working in the UK sex industry.

*I finished studying in Latvia and I had no work so I went to Italy to do this job. In Latvia of course I couldn't do it. I was in Italy for 6 months, but I was illegal at the time, they arrested me on the street and deported me back to Latvia. Then I faked a passport and went to Germany, from where I was also deported three months later, they put me in prison for three months because of the fake passport, and then deported me. Then back to Latvia. There I met a Polish guy and went to live with him in Poland for 5 years and I wasn't working there. But we were always fighting and one day I went to visit my parents and a friend of mine told me she had a flat in London and told me to go and work for her there, and I did. That's why I came to England. Her parents were my parents' neighbours and she came to visit them at the same time as me, she used to work herself first and then opened her own flat. I knew I was going to do that job, I wanted to, I wasn't deceived! My friend helped me financially to come to London, she didn't want to use me though, she wanted to help me: she knew I needed help, I was poor. She helped me a lot and we are still friends now. She helped me with everything, I was even scared on the underground at the beginning!*

The UK was often seen as a place offering opportunities for economic, social and cultural self-advancement and this perception was usually based on accounts of returning migrants and the media, the latter particularly for younger people. The following excerpt from the interview with a 20 year-old American woman working as an escort in London shows how the combination of the desire to 'change the scene' with the idealisation of Britain's cultural heritage and education system played an important role in the decision to migrate.

*I wanted a change of scene. I thought the UK would probably give me a better experience and better education. Ever since I was a kid I idealised UK culture a lot and I felt claustrophobic about staying in the US.*

In most cases the UK was chosen as the preferred migration destination because of the possibility of finding work and earning better wages. However, in some cases migrating to the UK was a practical compromise between more ambitious destinations, in particular the US, and the availability of contacts, a support network and work opportunities in the UK and/or in other EU countries. The following excerpt is from the interview with a 32 year-old man from Brazil working in the sex industry in the UK and Italy as a male flat worker (UK) and transgendered escort (Italy). In the quote, he explains that he initially wanted to go to the US, but that the awareness of shortages in the Italian and French labour markets prompted him to take up the opportunity of visiting a friend in Italy. From there he then later migrated to the UK to study English and improve his professional skills.

*I did not want to go to Italy. I wanted to go the US. One day I was walking on the beach and I read an article on the newspaper saying that in Italy and in France there was a labour shortage. I bought a ticket and 5 days later I was in Milan. I knew nobody there, just the telephone number of a friend of a friend. I ended up staying in Italy for over 10 years and I got papers, a boyfriend... But I felt my life was not going anywhere as I could only get average jobs, I mean I used to work as a lawyer back in Brazil... And also my boyfriend gets to decide everything; I want to be independent and to live my own life. When I was in Milan I had already met the guy you saw at the flat here in London. So I already knew that we would have gone there together, he had already been. So right now I am studying English here for at least another year and I intend to continue selling sex as a way to have my own income. I have only been a month now, we'll see, but I decided to set up a profile, with the help of my friend R.*

This last excerpt, as well as the one from the interview with the woman from Latvia, both highlight the key role played by contacts, friendships and networks in providing opportunities to work in the sex industry and in other sectors, both in the country of origin and residence and in other migration destinations. This role will be the main topic of the next subsection.

**In short:**

Migrants working in the UK sex industry migrate for a variety of interrelated reasons, including: taking up a job opportunity; improving their and their families' living conditions; completing their studies in the UK; learning English; living in a country associated with freedom, prosperity and opportunities; paying off debts contracted at home; escaping war, homophobia or patriarchal oppression; living more rewarding and pleasurable lifestyles; making new experiences away from home; and joining their British partners or their relatives and friends living in the UK.

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#### 4. The Role of Networks

The research findings highlight the importance of the role of networks of friends, family and partners in obtaining information about the occupational opportunities available in the UK and in providing the information and the economic support to obtain documents and transport. In a minority of cases interviewees were able to save the money they needed to migrate while working at home. Most of them resorted to family and friends to put together the money they needed to organise their travel and work arrangements. In the excerpt that follows, a 29 year-old man from Poland, working in a flat in London, explains how his decision to come to the UK was prompted by the unavailability of rewarding work opportunities at home; the fact that many peers had already migrated to the UK; by an invitation by a friend in London; and by the desire to have new experiences. In order to come to the UK, he used his savings and borrowed money from his family. This mix of reasons and opportunities recurs across interviews with people of in all kinds of jobs in the UK sex industry, all genders and all areas of origin.

I kept on looking for a job and, as all my friends and classmates were either unemployed or they had emigrated to the UK, and after having sent CVs to all the possible editing and photography related firms, I gave up and after a year of unemployment I went to the UK. It was an opportunity to travel and work and a friend of mine invited me in November 2004... Many people were leaving for the UK in those times. If I look back now I honestly don't know why I came here, maybe I was not aware of all the possible consequences...in any case I was supported by my parents, I mean the trip, I got £120 altogether, between my savings, my parents, my grandma and my sister. I wanted to have more experiences...

The possibility of accessing a support network, usually through a partner, a friend or an extended family member, determines the first steps toward finding places to live and work once in the UK. This initial network affiliation often remains a crucial reference for the migrant well after the initial moment. Although most interviewees knew about sex work support projects available to them in London and used their services, friends and family based networks remain a key source of support and information throughout the migration process. The following excerpt from the interview with a 30 year-old female flat worker from Latvia shows how friends and sex work projects are equally relied upon sources of information about access to key services, including health, transport, employment, etc.

How do I get information about things I need? My friend helped me. Word of mouth is the best. Then they have translators at the clinic, some day Russian, some day Spanish and so on...

As the 'word of mouth' reference implies, in many cases, work within and outside the sex industry becomes a key arena of socialisation for migrants and the departing point for new networks accompanying their longer-term migratory projects. In the excerpt that follows, a 29 year-old transgender escort from Argentina shows how friends and clients are an important source of information and support in negotiating access to work, housing and banking.

When I need to know how to do something I usually ask my friend M...or clients. A client helped me open a bank account, find a flat to rent, etc. My friend P...we work together, she helped me too. At first I had problems with the language, I had studies but in the beginning it was hard. I could arrange work on my own, but I could not arrange things like the bank, the doctors, etc... Then I learnt.

Finally, in some cases, client-based networks become essential in building livelihood strategies outside of (and alternative to) the sex industry, particularly for men selling sex as escorts, as the following two excerpts from a 26 year-old Spanish man and from a 35 year-old Austrian man show:

I did it since I was 18... this is 8 years now... once you become 30 nobody wants you...time to move on... I want to use my brain... set up my own business... That's why I started considering the property management option... I am trying to get a job as a property manager, though contacts... you know... clients... I met while working as an escort.

I like to think that my involvement in sex work is only temporary. I would like to have my own 4x4 limousine car and run that service. I have already got the driving licence I need and I will slowly phase out in the next 2 to 3 months. There is a market and I also have very good contacts from my previous job as well as from sex work. From clients, I mean.

Besides highlighting the role of client-based networks in developing future and alternative work opportunities, particularly in the gay environment, these last two quotes also highlight the time pressure felt by most interviewees on their work and life trajectories. Most felt that their involvement in the sex industry could only be temporary because they would have lost their appeal to clients because of ageing and also because of the lack of opportunities to grow professionally in the sector. While the report will engage more thoroughly with these concerns in the subsection on 'Future Plans' of the broader chapter on 'Work Experiences in the UK', the following section will analyse the research evidence about the socio-economic backgrounds of interviewees and their work experience before they decided to come to the UK.

**In short:**

Networks of friends, family and partners play a key role in providing information about the occupational opportunities available in the UK, as well as the economic support to obtain documents and transport and access to the labour market.

The possibility of accessing a support network, usually through a partner, a friend or an extended family member, determines the first steps toward finding places to live and work once in the UK and this initial network affiliation often remains a crucial reference for the migrant well after the initial moment.

Work within and outside the sex industry becomes a key arena of socialisation for migrants and the departing point for new networks accompanying their longer-term migratory projects.

In some cases, client-based networks become essential in building livelihood strategies outside of (and alternative to) the sex industry.

## 5. Socio-Economic Background and Pre-Migration Working Lives

The two most important findings emerging from the analysis of the research evidence are the great variety of individual trajectories into the UK sex industry and the relatively homogeneous motives to migrate. On the one hand, the social, economic and cultural circumstances of interviewees ranged from relative privilege to poverty, while their family backgrounds varied from a minority of problematic to a majority of stable situations. On the other hand, for the majority of interviewees the decision to migrate was a way of re-starting a project of social mobility which became unviable at home, because of the limitations or decline of shared or individual economic conditions; lack of opportunities for self-advancement; gender, sexual or racial/ethnic discrimination; or as a consequence of individual circumstances and/or social events, such as the outbreak of war; the end of a romantic relationship; or the death of a parent. For most interviewees migrating was an opportunity to bridge a gap they felt had emerged in their desired and imagine social trajectories because of the convergence of a plurality of reasons, which transcend a rigid division between the economic, the social and the political dimensions. The desire to continue an education and social trajectory which was under strain at home was a particularly recurring motive for resorting to migration, as the following excerpt from the interview with a 35 year-old Moldovan flat worker who had to interrupt her studies because of economic constraints shows:

*My parents were both teachers while my sister studied chemistry at university and now works for a pharmaceutical company. I got my GCSE when I was 16... It was fine, I was a good student. After that I took a year off waiting to re-enroll for university. My first choice was pedagogy; I wanted to study foreign languages, but that year all places were taken... So I decided to wait. (...) Later, when I started studying I needed to work around the university schedule because I needed the money to support my studies. Then I started seeing that all of my cousins were in Ireland and they were doing ok... Then the political situation back in Moldova became unstable. People started not getting paid... My mother wanted me to have a better future, a better life and there was none of that over there at the time... Then... I suppose it was also the image of the UK, of London as place which was safe... its association with culture, education, the health system, order... You know, like you see in old movies... I would like to work in the sex industry a bit more until I manage to get into university, as my studies are not recognised here.*

Besides the limitations posed to the interviewee's aspirations to social mobility, this long excerpt also shows the way these aspirations, which in this case are also presented as part of the history and positioning of the family, motivate a resilient response to the challenges posed by a difficult socio-economic and political environment, by resorting to migration. In this perspective, working abroad, including in the sex industry, becomes part of a project of social mobility which informs the interviewee's sense of personal identity. In most of the narratives gathered in the context of the research, a desired life trajectory became unsustainable or undesirable and migrating became a way to reach out to new experiences and opportunities for social mobility. This 25 year-old Brazilian woman working in flats explains the mix of circumstances and the relatively privileged socio-economic contexts within which she decided to migrate and knowingly work in the sex industry.

I needed money, my family wasn't rich... I used to be a teacher of History of Art for 6/7 years. My second mother is the head of a school, so my sister and I were both teachers. I was studying and working at the same time. I taught children first, up to 12 years, then from 9 till 5 (evening school as well). I had £800 a month but it wasn't enough. Then I got depression and I decided to come here to get out of it... I came here because my cousin was already here, she helped me. It was my decision. My father didn't want, I talked to him, explained that I wasn't going to stay long, but needed to make money. They helped me, gave me some money. It was good for me. I had a job in Brazil but I wanted to have more opportunities. When I came I knew I was going to work in the sex industry, my cousin had told me it was difficult to get any other jobs, at the beginning.



The last excerpt and the following one show that the socio-economic and family backgrounds alone do not explain people's decision to migrate and work in the sex industry. Sometimes, the choice to leave home is motivated by the decision to join a foreign partner or to have new experiences after an important break up. The excerpt from the interview with a 44 year old woman from Latvia working in flats in London shows how the decision to migrate was not related to economic hardship, but to the perceived priority to try and change the power dynamics within a marriage.

My mother worked in a shop. I've got an older brother and a younger sister. We lived in a green area in the centre, a middle class area, a good area. My mother re-married when I was five. I had a good job; I worked as a food manager for a big company. But I had problems with my husband, he liked going to the pub, going out with friends. He was spending too much money and wouldn't help me pay the bills... So I decided to leave as I had enough and I had a friend here who said she would help me. But he found out and in the end he came with me and got a job before me! I was 4 months without working. After that I was reading the Russian paper looking for ads to work in flats. I called them and booked an appointment. I had been working before but my husband never knew and he still does not know.

This last excerpt shows that for the majority of interviewees the decision to leave home is the result of a global evaluation of their economic, social and emotional circumstances, which needs to be contextualized within their individual understandings of advantage, disadvantage and entitlement to social mobility.

The excerpts informing this subsection also show the variety of pre-migration working lives emerging from the analysis of the research evidence. These range from no experience to having had multiple and skilled positions. Most interviewees had several non-sexual jobs, sometimes combined with sexual ones. For a minority, sex work was the only job they ever had. The research evidence shows that working in the sex industry at home was not the last option for people who decided to do so. In many cases, interviewees decided to work in the sex industry in order to escape from exploitative dynamics they experienced in other sectors. The following excerpt from the interview with a 38 year-old woman from Brazil, shows how by working in the sex industry she could emancipate herself from being sexually abused while she was working as a domestic carer at her aunt's home.

We used to have a farm, back in Brazil, in the state of Sao Paolo. At 12 years old I left with my sister, we went to live in Sao Paolo, I gave up school as we could not afford to go anymore... My parents were farmers and my sisters and my two brothers, they were all older than me, were working a bit in the farm and then in textile industries around Sao Paolo. I was staying with my sister at first, but then as we could not afford it, I started working as a domestic for my godmother... I was abused by the three sons for two years, but I did not tell anybody as I was afraid that I would lose my job... When I was 15 I started working as a dancer, as a lap dancer. I was helped by friends of the daughters of my mother in law, they suggested I could do it... overall it was a good experience, it was my choice and I met nice people, relations at work were ok and clients were paying a lot of tips. I used to earn around £1000 per month, I was over the moon!!! I went from feeling neglected and poor to being surrounded by love, attention and money.

The last excerpt and its reference to the valorisation of the self the interviewee got from working in the UK sex industry highlight the way this can be experienced as empowering. It also shows the way individual perceptions of this empowerment are rooted in specific experiences of emotional and economic entitlement, which structure individual understandings of advantage, disadvantage and exploitation. The excerpt that follows similarly underlines the restrictions posed by socio-cultural

experiences of class, gender and, in this case, (homo)sexuality to individual choices regarding work and lifestyles.

I was a little girl, it's terrible when you feel gay when you are a little boy, hard in the family, hard at school, hard in the society, but I survived it... They treated me differently; they didn't support me, even though we lived in a middle class area. For Brazilian people if you are gay you are a prostitute...somebody who only asks for money and has nothing... So I went to university and worked to maintain myself...since I was 17! I used to have a very good job in Brazil...but then I was fired because I am gay. Here...I am doing this because I like it... When guys hear you are Brazilian they see you straight away as an escort. So I thought, if I have to be treated like that anyway I might as well charge for it. I don't think you would do this job if you totally hated it, you have to like it a bit.

The interviewee, a 29 year-old transgender escort from Brazil, talks about the pressures she had to endure growing up as a little girl in conservative heterosexist settings, within which homosexuality equals to an understanding of prostitution as dependency. These pressures pushed her to be self sufficient and high achieving at a very early age, but also caused to lose her job later in life. Once in the UK, the interviewee is again constructed as a 'prostitute' because of ethnic stereotypes, but this time an escort, a highly independent and economically rewarding position which she enjoys occupying.

These last two interview excerpts, both from Brazil, point to the necessity to contextualise people's experiences of advantage, disadvantage and exploitation within the complexity of their moral, socio-economic and cultural references. This is important, not in order to relativise their 'actual' empowerment against the limitations posed by their life circumstances, but in order to appreciate their efforts in negotiating a more rewarding social positioning for themselves against these circumstances and according their own priorities and needs. These complex subjective transactions and positioning were also mirrored in people's experience of working in the UK, which will be the main topic of the next subsection.

### **In Short**

The research evidence shows a great variety of individual trajectories into the UK sex industry, as the social, economic and cultural circumstances of interviewees range from relative privilege to poverty, their pre-migration working experience varied from no experience to having had multiple and skilled positions, while their family backgrounds ranged from a minority of problematic to a majority of stable situations.

The majority of interviewees migrated to re-start a project of social mobility which became unviable at home.

Interviewees decided to migrate and work in the sex industry in order to obtain a more rewarding social positioning for themselves and their families in relation to circumstances, priorities and needs which are embedded within their moral, socio-economic and cultural references.

## 6. Work Experiences in the UK

### 6.1 Routes into UK Sex Industry

The research evidence about interviewees' experience of settlement in the UK society highlights the central role of work as a space of economic survival and socialization and shows a great variety of individual trajectories into the sex industry. The possibility of working in the sex industry usually emerges and is taken up in the context of a long process of experimentation across a string of sexual and/or non sexual jobs in the country of origin, as we have seen in the previous section, and abroad. In most cases working in the sex industry is resorted to when compared with job opportunities which are seen as unfavourable in terms of time and payment. For many interviewees, the possibility of working in the sex industry became available in their everyday lives and was embedded within local peer and (much more rarely) family circumstances within which these activities were normalised as ways to make money. In the excerpt that follows, a 32 year-old Russian woman working in the London sex industry explains how the opportunity and decision to work in the sex industry came about because of the gradual familiarisation with the job through friends who were also colleagues in non-sexual jobs. It also shows that there is no necessary connection between leaving behind a situation of hardship and getting involved in exploitative dynamics.

*I used to work as a pediatrician and my husband was killed for political reasons, so there was no work for me there anymore. I had no money. I was in a very bad situation there, I just wanted to leave. My best friend... she got married here and helped me to come. She gave me some money to get here and helped me find a job as a cleaner and for the application with asylum, which I got granted eventually. Then this other friend of mine, a fellow-cleaner... she also used to work in a flat, and she told me: 'why don't you do this? Only there you can make lots more money!' I thought about it for a long time, I wasn't sure. Sometimes I am happy about it, sometimes I'm not. It depends on the money... It's OK at the moment. I feel fine, I do... because there's a good atmosphere, good people, good bosses every time. I am treated as normal when I'm there, no one says: 'you are a prostitute!' It's normal.*

Most interviewees did not come to the UK with the intention to work in the sex industry, but decided to do so in order to avoid the less rewarding conditions they met in non sexual jobs, both at home and in the UK. The majority of interviewees were introduced to the possibility of working in the sex industry by friends and colleagues they met through non-sexual jobs. In some cases, it is the very friends and - more rarely - extended family members who enabled them to come to the UK who are involved in (and introduce them to) the sex industry. This was certainly the case for this 30 year-old woman from Brazil, working in flats, who explained how 'my sister helped me, I was at their place for 20 days. She helped me look for a job first as a baby sitter but she could not find it so she said let's look online [for flats] and we did'.

Some interviewees had already had sexual jobs at home or in other countries and came to the UK with the intention to work in the sex industry or kept this possibility open in case other plans did not work out. Most were satisfied about their experience of migration to the UK and of working in the sex industry. In the interview excerpt that follows, a 29 year-old woman from Brazil explains that she came to the UK knowing that she would have worked in the sex industry, as she was going to be undocumented. The following excerpt also shows a range of jobs in the home country, in Spain and in the UK and also shows the way experiences of exploitation in the sex and in other sectors are made meaning of in the context of people's life trajectories and priorities.

*In Brazil I used to work in the fields, at 19 I completed my accounting school, but we had problems... with my father. I left home for this reason and because we had no money, I worked as a cleaner and as a baby sitter. I didn't manage to find work as an accountant. My last job in Brazil was in a clothes factory, which closed down while I was maintaining my family already. So the opportunity came, they were looking for people to bring to Spain. The people who took me gave me the money, but then I had to pay double. I was one of those who came for sexual exploitation, when I went to Spain. I knew what I was doing, so it wasn't really sexual exploitation, it was just for the money. So I came to Spain with my pass. I worked as a cleaner, I looked after children, and I did a course in a hotel to work as room girl. Then I worked at my husband's cousin's flats as a maid. I decided to come to the UK because a girl I was working with in Spain took me here with her. She was working here too. She was Brazilian as well. She had told me that the UK was better for work and I needed money. Here in the UK I didn't think of doing any other job than that. If I was legal I would look for another job.*

This last excerpt shows the way poverty, problematic family dynamics, unemployment and the lack of immigration legal status can shape the life trajectories of interviewees as well as their priorities and perceptions of advantage, disadvantage and exploitation. However, the circumstances and evaluations that informed the routes into and outside the sex industry were very varied. The research evidence shows that the decision to work in the sex industry is based on understandings of exploitation, autonomy and advantage/disadvantage which are as varied as the socio-economic and individual circumstances of the people we interviewed. For instance, the following excerpt from the interview with a 22 year-old Hungarian man from a relatively privileged background shows how he decides to sell sex in London in order to maintain the same living standards he used to enjoy back home.

*I used to be at university and had a good job in Hungary, working for a PR company organising gay events. By 2006 I decided that this could not go on forever and came to London with around £6,000, mostly savings. I first stayed in a small room for £100 a week in Goodge Street, small as a cupboard and with only a view of the courtyard. In Budapest, my flat had views of the Danube... Anyway, savings run low and I got a job at a cafe in Soho... That was a heavy job, for only £200 a week, I had to do at least 1 hour of washing up every day. My hands were very dry and I kept thinking that it took me two hours of work to pay for the moisturiser I needed to repair the dry skin I got from it! By then I had finished all the money I had with me and back in Hungary. That is when I decided to take up one of the offers I used to get on my internet profile. I never looked back. I now live with another escort in Chelsea in a flat overlooking the Thames...*

Besides these relatively privileged cases, which remained a minority within the complex of the research evidence gathered, in the majority of cases encountered working in the sex industry allowed migrant workers to improve their living and working conditions as well as those of their families at home, which was the source of great pride and comfort. In the following excerpt, this 39 year old Brazilian woman, working as an escort and in a flat in London explains how she is happy of improving the living conditions of her family and becomes emotional while saying that being able to help makes her 'feel good'.

*Sometimes I solve some of their problems. The quantity I send depends. I send money when it's needed. Once every month and a half more of less. For example now I'm going to send £400 because I want that my oldest sister to open a shop. She could sell things from Brazil and I could send her things from here. I feel good of course about being able to help... (cries)*

Another Brazilian woman, 29, working mainly in flats, describes the way her remittances are fundamental for the survival of the family at home and explains that with the money she earned in the sex industry she was able to buy a land and build a house for herself and her partner. Being able to help her family is described as a source of great joy.

*Yes, I send money home sometimes. For example, if they cut off the electricity, or because I want, £300/£400. I'm so happy when I send money. I'd love to send money every two months. We have land now in Brazil with my boyfriend and the house we are building is almost finished.*

In a few cases, interviewees decided to set up their own sex work establishment. In the interview excerpt that follows, a 25 year-old Brazilian man working in a flat and as a (transgender) escort in London talks about his entrepreneurial experience and of the risks and opportunities involved.

*I also had a friend who used to live in London and I decided to come. She found me a job in a catering company. It was a lot of work, but the money was good. It was £12 per hour, from 6am to 10pm, so I could make a bit of money. I used to live with my friend then and the other people I used to live with were all working in the sex industry, my friends and the other people I used to live with, from Brazil, so I got really used to it. It actually became normal and I learnt a lot of things. This is probably why I decided to open a massage flat, we rented a 4 bedroom house and had different girls every day. We used to make lots of money in the beginning, about 10K per month, but then it started going down and I then decided to work in the flat...*

In the excerpt the interviewee explains how he first entered the sex industry as a manager. As business started going down after a while, he felt he could work in a flat and as an escort himself because he had become completely accustomed to working in the sex industry and to selling sex as a livelihood strategy. Besides this particular trajectory, the excerpt shows the way the possibility of working in the sex industry is measured up against the opportunities and working conditions available in other non sexual sectors. It also shows the flexibility and plurality of opportunities available in the sex industry and its porous boundaries with other sectors.

## **6.2 Skills, Language and Papers**

The analysis of the research evidence highlights the existence of very different experiences of de-skilling, according to immigration documentation, knowledge of English language and the specific skills interviewees brought with themselves. As we have seen in the previous section, many interviewees had skilled jobs in their countries of origin. However, they were often unable to capitalise on their skills in the UK because of their immigration legal status, usually in combination with other factors, such as the lack of English language or other personal circumstances. In the excerpt that follows, the interviewee, a 32 year-old Ukrainian legally resident in the UK explains that her knowledge of English language and the emotional circumstances which followed the break up from her husband, rather than the lack of legal status or qualifications, made her decide to try and work in flats.

*In 2003 I got married with an English man in Ukraine and after a while we moved to London. It was my decision. I was an established musician in my country, at the top level. My first job in London was in a dry cleaner shop, then in a warehouse, then in a coffee shop and in a very busy pub. Maybe under my qualifications I would have found a job related to music, I had actually won a competition to get into an orchestra but my English wasn't good enough at the time to teach children and... I was depressed and I didn't follow it to the next step. We started having problems with my ex-husband as soon as I moved to England. So while I was at the pub I met a Lithuanian girl...who offered me the possibility of working as a maid. I was frightened by all the bad stories you hear, with Albanian men forcing you to well sex... But she told me that Russian women were running that flat and that it was fine... so I had a one-day training with an English girl who used to work there before, and I started working straight away.*

Most interviewees were technically documented, but the conditions they had to meet in order to be and remain documented determined their ability to exert their rights in their working and private lives. Interviewees whose documentation had to be renewed or did not correspond to the intended duration

and/or to the purpose of their stay in the UK had to accept personal and professional circumstances that made them more vulnerable to emotional and other forms of labour exploitation. The research shows that there is a direct correlation between the degree of difficulty in obtaining and maintaining documentation and the vulnerability of interviewees to exploitation, whether they work in the sex or in other industries and whether they are female, male or transgender, as the following extract from the interview with a 31 year-old Brazilian man shows:

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

In the context of immigration the lack of legal documentation sometimes restricted employment choices to the extent that the sex industry was perceived by far as being the only safe option, as the following quote from the interview with a 28 year-old Croatian transgender escort shows:

*I used to work in this top hotel in central London, people were very good with me, but after the first police bust up I changed. I was always afraid that they would come again and deport me. I started having panic attacks as I don't want to go back to Croatia, not if I know that I can't come back here. It was in that period that a friend of mine who was an escort suggested that I tried it out too... I knew him well and knew he was ok with it, that he had a good life and he was fine. So, I tried and I am better now. At least I don't have to worry anymore about the immigration police all the time... and it pays much better.*

Some interviewees underlined the 'easy' and unskilled nature of their work in the sex industry when compared to the other non sexual jobs they had during their working lives. At the same time, other interviewees underlined the skilled nature of their sexual jobs, which was predicated on their abilities to manage the emotional implications of the relations with their clients, as the following two excerpts from the interviews with a 30 year-old Brazilian woman and a 19 year-old Romanian woman working in flats in central London show:

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

*To be honest I sometimes think a normal job is better because this job fucks you up if your brains are not very good. You think it's quick, it's 10 minutes in theory, but sometimes it feels like an hour to you... I don't think it is easy money after all.*

Although some interviewees underlined how working in the sex industry was a 'lazier' option than working in other sector, in many cases they also pointed out that working with people in relation to sex required specific skills, that other jobs did not require. For instance, this Italian 30 year-old man working as an escort points out how

*...one of the best and worse things about this job is people... You have to listen a lot... to incredibly personal things. There is a therapeutic aspect of this work which is very exciting and also quite tiring, sometimes you feel much more exhausted by the talking part than by the sexual part of the job!*

The excerpts informing this section of the report counter the (self)portrayal of migrant workers in the UK sex industry as 'lazy' and of their work as 'easy' and highlight the specific skills and amount of work required by their jobs. At the same time, the research evidence shows that the sex industry is seldom the only or the last option for migrant workers. These decide to work in this sector and not in, or as well

as in, others because it matches their perceptions and experiences of advantage and disadvantage, as well as specific and relevant skills, needs and priorities. In doing that, the sex industry offers a possibility for self-advancement and social mobility to subjects whose skills, priorities, and needs are not equally valued or met in other sectors.

The research evidence shows that besides immigration documentation, knowledge of English language was the other main factor influencing interviewees' possibility of negotiating better working conditions in the sex industry and in other sectors. There is an inverse relation between the reliance on networks in the context of immigration and people's English language skills. This is particularly relevant in the context of exploitative dynamics, as the few interviewees involved mentioned the lack of English language skills as one of the reasons why they felt they could not escape. In the following quote from the interview with a 35 year-old Moldovan woman, she explains how 'I wanted to run out but I had no money... Also, I did not speak any English and had no idea of where I was...' However, the lack of legal immigration status had very important implications for the cases of exploitation encountered in the context of the research, as the few interviewees who had been implicated underlined that the fear of being deported prevented them from contacting the police, as they felt they would have been unable to repay the debt they had contracted and also exposed as 'prostitutes' to their families, friends and relatives. While these dynamics will be the specific topic of a dedicated section of the report on 'Trafficking and Exploitation in the UK Sex Industry', the next subsection will analyse interviewees' perceptions and experiences of advantage and disadvantage of working in the sex industry, when compared with working experiences in other sectors.

### **6.3 Advantages and Disadvantages of Working in the UK Sex Industry**

When prompted to discuss what aspects they liked about working in the sex industry most interviewees mentioned: earning money quickly; managing time flexibly; having more opportunities to travel; being able to afford a dignified life and to help their families; meeting interesting people; getting a unique insight into human sexual and non sexual behaviour; and, less frequently, having enjoyable sex. On the other hand, negative aspects included: the stigma attached to sex work; having sex with unattractive, unclean and/or aggressive clients; the difficulty in combining sex work with romantic relationships and private life more in general; the risk of STIs; and instances of violence (robberies) and abuse (rape) at the workplace. The long excerpt that follows is a good summary of some of interviewees' most recurring perceptions and analyses. This quote is from the interview with 25 year-old woman from Poland, working mainly in flats.

*What I like about this are the freedom and independence really. You'll never be unemployed, you'll never be homeless, you work your own hours, you can work as much as you want to, and equally, as little as you want to. Also, I still think the guys here are very respectful. Then I obviously do enjoy sex, with some people more, with some people less. You'd be surprised how involved people get, how it sometimes means so much more to them than the ... service... than the... job. They tell us things that I don't think they would tell the closest person in their life. It's weird; it's like some type of mistress or wife. As of negative aspects... that you have to hide a lot, no-one knows what you're doing. That's the worst bit. Lying all the time. If I find another job, or, I mean, when I find another job, or stop doing this, I wouldn't have a boss, I wouldn't have a job where I have no control, I would try to do something for myself.*

The majority of interviewees felt safe in their current jobs and described relations at work as friendly and respectful, including those with clients. The research evidence shows that perceptions of advantage and disadvantage emerging from the comparison between sexual and non sexual jobs are closely related to the working conditions attached to working in the sex industry. In this respect, places which tend to be safe, to have a selection of regular clients, where working relations are positive and which offer flexibility and the possibility of retaining a substantial amount of the money made, are preferred to all others. The quality of relations with clients is a key aspect of interviewees' perception of advantage and it is the single most recurring criteria distinguishing a 'good place' from a 'bad place', as the following excerpt from the interview with a 35 year-old Moldovan female flat worker shows.

*I like the money of course, then flexibility...and then the fact that you actually get to meet many nice and interesting people...and even friends sometimes, some of the clients have become good friends. I don't like the stigma...and all the lying that comes with it... I had to lie to absolutely everybody in the last 5 years, my parents, friends, guys... it is very hard... we turn into professional liars... If you have a boyfriend you have to lie because it won't work otherwise. Then I also dislike bad management...and of course rude clients. They are the worst...and those who make you feel miserable... they think you are a junky or your parents were alcoholic... They make you feel so down...they are the worst!*

The excerpt from the interview with this 32 year-old Ukrainian woman working in flats is particularly clear in this respect. On the one hand she appreciates that, when relations with clients are positive, 'this job gives you a lot of confidence, you feel like you're good looking, you get told all the time you're gorgeous and you actually believe it'. On the other hand she also underlines that the worst aspect of her job is that 'some men think like we are rubber dolls, like we're not even human, they never think about what they say to you, what your feelings are or what you think, you have to be mentally strong to just put it away in your head, ignore it if they are rude to you'.

Many interviewees, usually when talking about the advantages of working in the sex industry in comparison with other sectors they had worked in, underlined that one of the things they liked most was the possibility of listening to life experiences they would not have been able to confront with other wise. Many, such as this 30 year-old woman female flat worker from Russia, underlined as a positive aspect of their work in the sex industry the fact that: 'you interact with lots of different cultures, it's basically like a social life, and you learn a lot about different people, especially men. That can be really interesting, to hear what they tell their wives, they'll do anything for sex, it's disgusting. The lies they come up with when they're with you, they'll be on the phone to their wives saying "I'm with a mate". I'm not saying some women deserve it, but some women get really fat, they don't want to have sex any more, but with some guys they have a family, they have kids, and they're spending all this money somewhere else'.

Although the possibility of knowing more of the circumstances of clients' lives was usually considered positively, some female interviewees underlined that as a consequence of this they had lost their confidence in men and in their credibility, as this second excerpt from the same interview shows: I think I'm getting aggressive towards men, and I think I'd need therapy to get to the point where I can trust men again, having seen what they do. Not all men are like that, but a lot, a lot'. Finally, amongst the positive aspects associated with their involvement in the sex industry, a minority of interviewees openly



mentioned the possibility of combining earning money with having sex with a frequency and intensity that matched their 'sexual drives', as the following interview with a 25 year old woman working as an escort specialised in fetish and S/M services shows:

*Well, firstly there's cash reasons, mostly because we're moving flat. But also to be honest, because I just love sex. Seriously, every single boyfriend, I cheated on all of them, always, always, always. I don't want a relationship, I'm seeing two guys, I told them. They're fine with it.*

As far as negative aspects are concerned, some gay and transgendered interviewees mentioned the risk of developing drug habits as a result of work, as it was not infrequent for clients to suggest using drugs while in their company, as the following excerpt from the interview with a 25 year-old Brazilian male flat worker shows:

*Well, I had problems with drugs, there are a lot in the business and it is difficult not to get to use them. I started spending all the money. It's clients... they want you to take them, they ask you if you want them, it is difficult. So I got in a bit of trouble and my mother came here to help me. I asked her to.*

Another related recurrent complaint had to do with the need to use Viagra regularly in order to work, which some male interviewees felt was dangerous for their wellbeing both because it caused them a constant headache and also because they became dependent on it for their private sexual life, as it emerges from the interview with this 28 year-old Brazilian male escort:

*Well, it is good money, but it's hard. I mean... 90 per cent of the time you need to sleep with people you don't like and you need to take Viagra in order to do it... It gives you quite a headache, each time you take it and I take it most days. Also, the problem is that Viagra makes you horny and I now do not get excited without it...*

Finally, some interviewees were concerned that they had become used to earn money in a 'quick' and 'easy' way, which they felt was a problem in finding the motivation to find jobs outside the sex industry, especially in relation to future plans. In the following quote from the interview with a 38 year-old Brazilian dancer, she points out how one of the disadvantages is that you get 'addicted to the money':

*The advantages? Money. Any other work is surviving work, to me this is a profession and I could do the things I wanted, buy the things I wanted by doing it. I could get some savings, I could travel, other things. Disadvantages, you think you are going to do it for a short period and move on, but you get addicted to the money; and your social life... people's attitudes. For me, I'm not proud of it, I'm not ashamed of it, it's my job...*

In this second excerpt, a 23 year-old woman from Latvia, working in a flat, expresses her concern about getting 'a little bit lazy' and unable to 'getting up at 6am every morning'.

*That work anyway makes me a little bit lazy...when I can imagine now and think about going to work every day and get up at 6am... I cannot imagine that anymore...*

In some cases behind the perception of having chosen the 'lazy' option for economic reasons, there are psychological circumstances, usually regarding interviewees' personal experiences of gender and sexuality. These personal circumstances can be seen as making the non-judgemental attitude characterising the sex industry as an advantage, when compared with other sectors. For instance, the excerpt from the interview with a 23 year-old Italian man working as an escort in London shows how his

perception of being lazy coincides with difficulties coping with the demands of a 'straight' job because of his personal psychological circumstances, which working in the sex industry accommodate.

*When I was a student I studied to become a lawyer but due to health problems such panic attacks and depression I gave up the university after three months. I don't want to go back to university... It's too late and also I don't really know what I want... I think I am lazy... (laugh) but sometimes I think I am still depressed. Since I have been living in London, I did not work for a 'straight' job, if you know what I mean... Except distributing leaflets for a night club. I tried sending a CV, but I find working too hard at the moment... I have developed hypochondria and I need to see the doctor quite often when it gets bad...*

The evidence informing this subsection and the rest of the report shows that most interviewees thought that working in the sex industry was a better option than other work opportunities available in the UK. The research findings also shows that experiences of advantage and disadvantage are grounded in circumstances, priorities and needs which are meaningful for migrants because they are embedded within their moral, socio-economic and cultural references. The last two excerpts underline the way in which perceptions of advantage and disadvantage, as well as those of laziness and easiness, in relation to people's involvement in the sex industry can be seen as part of their self-presentation in relation to different repertoires and discourses. On the one hand, by emphasising the easiness of their work in the sex industry interviewees also emphasise their advantage over people who lead more normative working lives and resist being positioned as 'vulnerable'. On the other hand, by underlining their laziness they seem to internalise one of the most common stigmas associated with sex work, which will be the main focus of the next subsection.

#### **6.4 Focus on Stigma**

As we have seen in many of the excerpts informing this section of the report, the stigmatisation of sex work was the main problem interviewees experienced while working in the sex industry and it impacted on them differently according to their gender and their job in the sex industry. In general, interviewees found that there was a clear link between stigma and violence and they felt that the 'bad reputation' attached to working in the sex industry implicitly 'legitimised' violent and criminal behaviour towards them. In this respect, it is important to underline how the main violence-related problems interviewees pointed out were, in general, robberies, and not abusive behaviour from clients. The following quotes from the interviews with two women from Latvia, respectively 30 and 44 years-old, both working in flats, show both the way working relations and terms are seen as acceptable and the association of lack of safety with burglaries and the associated violence:

*Yes, I am happy about the working conditions. I work 3 or 4 days a week, I don't work every day. People think this job is very easy, but it's not. It's mentally not easy so I can't work every day. I work in different flats, I never see the bosses, only the maids. I'm not interested in knowing who the bosses are. I have friendly relationships with maids. With other girls as well, we exchange numbers of different flats to work in. I've got friends as well, from a lot of different countries: Mongolia, Ukraine, Lithuania... Sometimes there are groups but I communicate with everyone so I have no problem. I do feel work is a place I belong, I don't know why, I can't explain, but I'm OK there, I mean, it's my job, it's my bread and butter. I still think that money is the best thing about this all...and the occasional good customer who pays a lot and gives you a good time. But it's only a couple of them in the week. The only thing... I mean, in one flat there's security, but it is still not safe, robbers come anyway. I'm scared. This job is so dangerous, I know it: if you want to do this you have to know it. Especially before Christmas robberies increase, because they think girls make big money...*

*Sometimes I am satisfied about the working conditions, sometimes I'm not. I work 10 to 9 hrs, 2 or 3 times a week, max. If it's very bad, 4 days. Of course I have breaks between customers and I get the same pay as UK citizens. Relations are ok. I get to meet some of the bosses, while with others I just talk to on the phone, they are no friends but the relationship is good. I tend to keep myself to myself... I mean people are very friendly, but I'd rather not get too involved and keep my private and work life separate. I mean, I hate this job, but I love the money, that is the only good thing about this. I sort of feel secure at work... but you can never be 100 per cent sure with clients, he can look good, but you don't know what's in his head. The other girls say they would help but what can 3 girls do... Even with security, if they point a gun at you... what can you do? I had these two bad experiences. This guy who threw me out and another time 5 guys with guns, security gave them all the money.*

These two excerpts show two different experiences of involvement in the sex industry, as the first interviewee identifies as a sex worker and feels that work is a place where she belongs while the second does not. However, in both cases, working conditions and relations at work are described as satisfactory, while the main issue with safety is related to robberies, rather than to abusive clients, which nevertheless remain a cause of concern, as the last excerpt shows.

Male and transgendered interviewees experienced less stigmatisation and violence than their female colleagues, because of the relatively higher degree of acceptance of sex workers within the gay community. However, some transgendered interviewees reported being under a higher degree of abuse from clients when working as transgendered than when working as males as they felt that some clients had unresolved issues with their own (homo)sexuality. The excerpt from the interviews with this 30 year-old male to female transgender working as an escort in central London shows these dynamics at work.

*Well, sometimes people are nasty, especially with transgendered people. I work both as a boy and as a girl and there is no comparison, I get more problematic clients when I work as a girl. They do not accept that they are gay, they are not ready and then they take it out on you. My friend was beaten up by this guy, not long ago, for no reason, just because he must have taken his issues out on her. I don't know if you know that the majority of our clients are passive...I mean, I think that the only way they can have sex with another man is if there is a feminine aspect and that this is something that they cannot live with, that they like other men... to do it to them.*

In general, female interviewees working as strippers experienced less stigmatisation than flat workers or escorts. Finally, cultural and individual understandings of privacy and shame in relation to the sex work stigma influenced interviewees' choice of work within the sex industry. Some female and male interviewees preferred selling penetrative sex indoors to stripping in public or having an internet profile as an escort, as they felt it would allow them to preserve their anonymity and privacy. In the excerpt that follows, a 30 year-old Brazilian woman working in a flat in central London explains how she would not feel comfortable showing her naked body to an audience and having to entertain customers in more public settings.

*I thought that it would be better to work in a flat than as an escort because you have no privacy, no photos of your face on the internet. I knew that you could get at least £150 per hour privately, but that was my choice at the time.*

The stigma associated with sex work often undermined important emotional relationships as most interviewees felt they could not be open about their work with their partners, families and friends, both

in the UK and at home. For many interviewees it was difficult to reconcile working in the sex industry, particularly if selling sex, with their and their partners' understanding of the requirements of a romantic relationship, which were often under considerable strain, as the following interview with a 29 year-old Brazilian woman shows:

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

The perceived need to lead a double life in order to hide working in the sex industry from friends, families and partners caused suffering for many interviewees. Most interviewees resented having to lead a double life in order to keep the respect and love of friends, family and partners. In the interview excerpt that follows, a 24 year-old Lithuanian woman working in a flat in London explains the pressure exerted on her everyday life by the necessity to protect herself from the stigma associated with sex work

*The worst is the double life. My boyfriend does not know. He would kill me. It's difficult. It's hard to lie every evening. The bad reputation is bad too, if someone finds out... The fear...*

At the same time, some interviewees felt that living a double life gave them a sense of separation from work that allowed them to leave it all behind, while others felt that they could negotiate different aspects of themselves at home and abroad, as the following excerpt from the interview with a 27 year-old Lithuanian woman working in a walk up in Central London shows:

*I like it as well like this, that it is so separate. I have my own space and my own money. Here I am a bad girl ...while at home I am a virgin, so to speak. It is true that I am quite traditional though. I mean... I would never go to clubs and bring men home the way girls do here... At the same time I am traditional my own way... because look at what I do! (laugh) (...) The truth is that I am myself in both places, both at home and here... It's just different parts... At the same time it is quite difficult to keep up and live with all the lying... My family does not know anything, of course! And only a couple of friends know...*

This last quote highlights the complexity of people's subjective and professional involvement in the sex industry, which can provide the opportunity to negotiate different aspects of the self, against the backdrop of different implications of stigma attached to sex work in their public and professional lives. Regardless of their gender and job differentiation, many interviewees felt that the combination of the stigmatisation of sex work and lack of documentation made them more vulnerable to violence and abuse while at work.

### **6.5 Future Plans**

The majority of interviewees were satisfied by their overall experience of migration and work in the UK sex industry and felt safe while at work. At the same time, most interviewees indicated that they wanted to leave the sex industry for a number of reasons. These included ageing and the way they felt it would impact on being desirable for clients in the future; the desire to form families; and the fact that many felt intellectually unchallenged in their sexual jobs. The quote that follows is from the interview with a 22 year-old Russian male escort working both with women and men and also managing the profiles of and sometimes protecting a few Russian women working as escorts. The interview excerpt shows that according to this interviewee, the constraints posed by age to the possibility of developing a career in the sex industry are the main disadvantage when compared with other sectors and that these

constraints are particularly significant for men, as women can capitalise on their working experience in the longer term.

*I don't know, not really, I don't think there are any disadvantages. If you take it as a career, it is a short-lived career, particularly as a guy. There are not that many people that want to buy a 40 year old guy, I guess younger women are more popular, but older women are also popular because they have this feel to it and they try more and clients feel it and they know what the man wants.*

Many interviewees expressed a desire to leave the sex industry behind because of the ordinariness and repetitiveness of their working lives, like the following two excerpts from the interviews with a 30 year-old Latvian woman and a 25 year-old Lithuanian woman, both working in flats and as escorts, show:

*It's a job; it's a normal job for me. I am not really happy there, but it's like a normal job... If you work on a coffee shop you are not happy, are you? You just go and make money.*

*To be honest the thing that bothers me most is that I feel bored. I mean it is always the same, I feel that I should do more with my life. After a while it gets very repetitive and you just get along.*

The variety of interviewees' routes into the UK sex industry is mirrored in the variety of their future plans within or outside of it. Many migrants planned to save or had saved money in order to open an independent economic activity, usually outside the sex industry, in the UK or in the country of origin. The following two quotes, from interviews with a 29 year-old transgender escort and with a 27 year-old female flat worker, both from Brazil, show the variety of future plans emerging from the research evidence. In the first case, the interviewee wants to settle in the UK, keep working in the sex industry and open a gay bar, as he feels that he will not be able to express his gender and sexuality at home. In the second case, the possibility of enjoying a heterosexual normative lifestyle is attractive for the interviewee, who plans to leave the UK, return home and live in the house she was able to build with the savings she earned working in the UK sex industry.

*When I first came here I had a tourist visa for 6 months, I now have a work permit from the Home Office, a letter, I just don't have my passport back yet. I want to stay and open a gay bar where I live, there isn't one! One day you will tell me: 'you did tell me in the interview you wanted to open a bar! Well done!' I am not planning to return home, maybe for 3 months, to relax. It's OK there for gay men or women but not OK for trans like me... I will continue working in the sex industry, if they don't make it illegal, yes! I want to work only for the best clients at some point, only VIP, without advertising anymore!*

*I have lots of friends, every single weekend a different party. They don't know about me... they would say this is rubbish. I think I would lose them. They are so "nice", they all have a passport. They know we don't, but that's no problem. My sister has a boyfriend now. He doesn't know. Nobody knows. My mom knows. She keeps telling me please leave it, it's no life, be careful with your boyfriend, he's nice to you, don't do that... I used to have a tourist visa for 6 months. It's expired now. I tried to get an EU passport, but I have no European ancestors! Anyway, I plan to stay in the UK only until December, I'll go back home because I've been here three years. I'm fed up. I've bought a house. It's near the beach, we saved money, it's time to go home! I want kids in two years time. We'll marry next year.*

While in the last excerpt the lack of legal status and the possibility of re-entering a heterosexual normative lifestyle contribute to the appeal of going home, in the excerpt preceding it a similarly

precarious situation in terms of immigration legal documentation is overruled by the advantages of being able to express one's sexual and gender identity in the UK. In other cases, interviewees with a precarious documented status wanted to make it permanent and aspired to obtain the right to live and work indefinitely in the UK, so that they could also visit their families back at home.

The excerpts informing this subsection and the rest of the report show that the interplay between key dimensions such as gender, sexuality, socio-economic circumstances, attitudes towards working in the sex industry, stigma and legal immigration documentation is the context within which choices for the present and for the future are made. Within this complex interplay, the research evidence highlights the variety of trajectories, decision and directions shaping interviewees' migratory projects, against the narratives of exploitation and vulnerability prevailing in current public and academic debates and, most importantly, informing current and proposed policies addressing the nexus between migration and the sex industry. The next section of the report will analyse the cases of exploitation encountered in the context of the research and will focus on the way exploitation and the initiatives of social intervention aiming at countering them are understood and experienced by migrant workers in the UK sex industry.

**In short:**

Working in the sex industry was seen as a better option than those available in the UK by most interviewees, who based their perception on the comparison with other less rewarding working experiences in non-sexual sectors.

The sex industry is seldom the only or the last option for migrant workers, whose skills, priorities as needs are not equally met and valued in other sectors.

The possibility of being safe and enjoying positive working and interpersonal relations with colleagues and clients differentiated positive from negative experiences of work, rather the possibility of working in the sex industry or in non-sexual sectors.

Fear of violence and abuse was mainly associated with robberies, not clients, the majority of whom are described as respectful and considerate.

The interplay between lack of English language skills, legal immigration status and access to personal networks defines the range of opportunities available to migrant workers in their private as well as in their professional lives, within and outside the context of the sex industry.

The perception and experience of the advantages of working in the sex industry are grounded in circumstances, priorities and needs which are meaningful for migrants because they are embedded within their moral, socio-economic and cultural references.

Regardless of their gender and job differentiation, many interviewees felt that the combination of the stigmatisation of sex work and lack of documentation made them more vulnerable to violence and abuse while at work.

## 7. Focus on Sexual Exploitation

Although only a minority of interviewees felt they had been exploited, the fact that public debates and policies are currently dominated by concerns about the degree and extent of dynamics of trafficking and sexual exploitation within the UK sex industry prompted us to give to this topic a space and a relevance that was not mirrored in the everyday lives of most interviewees. Approximately 13 per cent of female interviewees felt that they had been subject to different perceptions and experiences of exploitation, ranging from extreme cases of trafficking to relatively more consensual arrangements. Only a minority of these, amounting approximately to 6 per cent of female interviewees, felt that they had been deceived and forced into selling sex in circumstances within which they felt they had no share of control or consent. The purposive nature of the sample of the research and its qualitative approach mean that its findings are not strictly statistically representative. However, most of the sample was composed randomly, which means that the evidence gathered allows the research to produce scientific generalisations and that the ratio indicated above is evidence based and therefore has scientific validity.

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

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

Almost all of the interviewees who felt that they had been exploited kept on working in the UK sex industry independently. All drew clear distinctions between exploitative and non-exploitative practices in the sex industry and accepted the possibility for women to sell sex freely and consensually. The majority went back to selling sex independently.

### 7.1 Factors of Vulnerability to Sexual Exploitation

The research evidence suggests that there is no single over determining factor enforcing the vulnerability to exploitation in the sex industry, which needs to be seen as the result of the convergence of several different ones, including: the stigma attached to sex work; the necessity to flee hardship situations in the country of origin; lack of awareness of the rights available to migrants who are exploited; attitudes towards the police; and the lack of English language skills. However, from the evidence gathered by the project immigration legal status is the most important factor engendering migrant workers' vulnerability to exploitation in the UK sex industry. In the excerpt that follows, from the interview from a 30 year old Russian flat worker, this critique is voiced particularly clearly.



*I know girls that have had trouble with passports, so when they started they were doing things they didn't want to do, but I've never been in that situation. I've always been strong to myself, and gone without work rather than do the work I don't want to do. Because it's a whole immigration thing, so if people have passports, they have papers, then they won't work in these places [where they have to do what they don't want to]. But they're happy to be in England, they'll do anything for a bit of money, and they end up meeting the wrong people.*

In this last excerpt, the interviewee establishes a clear link between the need and desire to migrate, the lack of legal immigration documentation and the vulnerability of exploitation, by ending up 'in the wrong places'. The following excerpt illustrates the way the pressure exerted by difficult family and economic circumstances made a 28 year-old Moldovan woman decide to take up a job offer which then led her to be exploited in the UK sex industry:

*We used to be fine until my father died, he had a good job, as an architect. I felt really sorry for my mother and my 5 siblings; we did not have enough to live on. I was the oldest, once I finished school I decided to go and work in Chisinau, while I studied to go to college. It was too hard, I used to work in the market. I was exhausted. So I kept on working for a few years, until my siblings were a bit older. I then met my boyfriend and things soon got sour... He used to be very violent and you don't get to break up where I come from... That's when I decided to accept that job offer which then got me into trouble here in the UK. I wanted out and I wanted to keep helping my family.*

This last excerpt shows how particularly hard socio-economic and affective circumstances exerted a heightened pressure on the decision to migrate and led to an underestimation of the danger potentially involved in taking up the opportunity to work abroad. However, the material gathered in London also shows how there is no direct link between hardship and the involvement in exploitative dynamics. The following excerpt shows how a Lithuanian young woman gets caught up in dynamics of exploitation because she felt her professional life was 'leading her nowhere'.

*Well, my family...it's me, my brother and my parents. My father works for a factory, my mother is a housewife and my brother works for IT... We lived in a very average area... I guess I was a good student. Then I went to university for a couple of years, but I did not like it because I could not choose the subject. So I got out of there and worked at McDonald for 3 years... It was ok money, but then I left because I felt my life was not going anywhere... At this time a girlfriend of mine told me that she knew people who could find me a job in the UK... I thought I'd give it a try for a year and that return to Lithuania to study.*

Symmetrically, in the excerpt that follows, a 32 year-old woman from Chechnya explains the way her need to escape an extreme hardship situation such as war prompted her to leave home and the way the sex industry provided her with a job at a moment in which she had no permit to work and no qualifications to facilitate her access to the UK labour market.

*I came here 9 years ago, from Chechnya...there was war at that time, my husband died in the Russian army so I had to go to help myself and my child. This country helped me lots. I claimed asylum here. First they gave me support for a while then I thought, let's do something else... I have been doing this job on and off for years, now I am back again, I have to support myself and my child. I was in Soho and I saw these places with modelling and red lights, so I decided to go in and see what they say, obviously I knew what it was, so I tried and...they gave me a job! I am fine about this. I just work weekends, 3 days, 12 hours a day. Average is maybe £150 a day. I get on very well with everyone, I mean, I belong here... because it's a safe place you can work and support yourself.*

The following two quotes are from the interviews with a 20 year-old Latvian woman and with a 25 year-old Lithuanian woman, both working in flats and with a previous experience of exploitation, from which they extricated by themselves, as they were documented and were not aware that they could seek help from the police.

*I came first to work like waitress and then I end up doing this, because I didn't know I was going to do this. My best friend from Latvia, he told me I was going to be waitress and he put me in a flat to work. He was in Latvia and he sent me to Lithuanian guys. Anyway, I am safe and good now. I didn't see the money, they took the money. There were in the flat 24/7. For three months, but I managed to ran from them. At first I went to Latvia and they catch me there and they sent me back, then I decided I was going to run away again and they caught me in Latvia and they said they would do bad things to my family and I came back, we sent the security guy to the place and I ran away and was shaking and everything. But the Russian girl stayed because they took her passport and they were beating her and the difference was she didn't have a visa and they were beating her and stuff. I just ran away and took my bag and ran away. I called her and she put the speaker on straight away, they were saying when we catch her we are going to do this and that. I decided to break my SIM card. I couldn't call anyone or anything, I didn't know the police or nothing, my English was bad. I went to a hostel and lived there to two weeks, I was in the room, I didn't know what to do, but I did know about some Russian paper where you can find jobs. I thought if I could not find anything then I could call the police, but then I phoned a woman and she said I could come for interview, which was here.*

*I never thought the police could help or that I could run away, because I was alone, I had no money...who was going to help me? If I knew I would have called them...but I did not know they could help.*

Finally, the lack of information and awareness of the potential danger of being forced to work and being exploited in the UK sex industry also emerged as a factor of vulnerability. The possibility of working in the UK tended not to be associated with dynamics of exploitation which were known to happen in other places, which were less connotated in terms of progress, culture and democracy. In the excerpt that follows, a 35 year-old woman from Moldova talks about the way her idealisation of England when she was younger led her to underestimate the risk of getting involved in exploitative dynamics in the sex industry.

*I knew about Turkey, because it was known that many girls used to go to Turkey and then work as prostitutes over there, but I could not imagine that would happen in London... and through an au pair agency... It looked more European and I always had a thing for England, my dream was to become an interpreter at home so I guess that it did not even cross my mind that I could end up in this kind of trouble over here...*

The unavailability of direct contacts and support networks from which to restart projects of social mobility which were interrupted at home also emerged as a factor of vulnerability to being forced to sell sex and exploited in the UK sex industry. A minority of interviewees resorted to the services of agencies and illegal organisations and responded to job adverts (au pairs, masseuses, etc.) in order to find employment abroad. These circumstances were the most frequently associated with the few cases of exploitation met in the context of the research. In the following excerpt, a Lithuanian 25 year-old woman gets caught up in dynamics of exploitation after having replied to an ad and encouraged by that fact that she knew a friend working in the sex industry in the UK.

I picked an ad amongst many. I did not think much because I knew a friend working as a hostess here and I thought that might be a possibility. I started worrying when I got to the airport... and was met by three Albanian men. When we got to the house, the other girls told me how it was...

The research evidence shows that the lack of immigration documentation and the necessity to flee hardship and war alone are not sufficiently determining factors in people's vulnerability to exploitation, which tends to be caused by the concurrence of the internalisation of the stigma attached to sex work, the lack of awareness of the rights available to migrants who are exploited, attitude towards the police and the lack of English language skills.

### *7.2 The Intricacy of Love, Exploitation and Consent*

The research evidence shows that concepts and experiences of exploitation must be read against the material, socio-economic, moral and cultural coordinates migrants bring with them and within their evolving individual circumstances. Generally speaking, identifying and interpreting exploitation dynamics was complex, as they unfolded within interpersonal relations shaped by different understandings of allegiance, gender roles, sexual behaviours, family loyalty, individuality and legality. For instance, socio-cultural and individual understandings of love were indicated by most female interviewees as one of the main factors preventing other women from emancipating themselves from exploitation. In the two quotes that follow, two 22 and 23 year old female flat workers from Romania explain their perplexity regarding the contradictory narratives of love and exploitation they hear from some of their colleagues in London.

*My friends work for themselves, I don't talk too much with other girls... I don't like to ask them because maybe it would hurt them if I asked... It's up to the girl, it's up to them, it's nobody else's fault, why do they stay with them? I can't understand, you show him love and then say you were exploited... Why don't they just leave?! We have the same power as men and here women are very respected: if a woman gets hit the man can go to prison...*

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

In both of these last two excerpts, interviewees underline that one of the main factors underpinning exploitation were feelings of allegiance and loyalty embedded in romantic relationships. The accounts of women who were directly involved in exploitative dynamics confirm the existence and role of different economic arrangements and levels of emotional involvement in relation to their managers and partners. Women who were subject to the most extreme forms of exploitation felt unable to escape because they had internalized the stigma attached to sex work and felt paralysed by the fear of being exposed at home. As a consequence, they feared being seen as 'whores' by their families and their communities of origin more than being forced to sell sex and exploited in the process. In the excerpt that follows, E., a 19 year old female flat worker from Romania explains how the combination of feelings of shame, indirect threats of violence, lack of English language skills, and the confiscation of money and any means of communication did not enable her to escape.

I realised what was going to happen, but I was scared to say no. They started talking a lot about what they could do to other girls who refused to work or escaped... Then I was ashamed because of my family...that they would find out... I really feared for myself at that point. He took my phone and SIM card; I had no contact with anyone else for three months... I kept no money at all. I wanted to run out but I had no money... Also, I did not speak any English and had no idea of where I was.

However, the very same interviewee was also convicted by the UK police for controlling, because she later trained and managed a number of other women arriving from Romania. From the interviews with E. and with two other women from the same Romanian village, who were implicated in the same circumstances and also convicted for controlling, it emerges that each of the three had believed to have a privileged romantic relationship and life trajectory with the same manager, as the following excerpt from the interview with S., 19, shows:

*Look, they liked the guy and were crazy about it. They are different from me, because I was kidnapped; I did not come here on my own...and...I mean E. Was known to sleep around with boys in Romania, going to discos and stuff, she used to wear make up by the age of 12-13...she wanted attention and to be free... They both liked being around young men back in Romania, they gave blow jobs and stuff... When you want to do these things so early on in your life you are basically a whore. They both wanted to be free and to get attention, and that's how they got in trouble. I was kidnapped and I did not belong to that world back in Romania. E. liked the guy, otherwise why would she come back from holiday? Freely? I mean, she actually pimped me at some stage, she told me what to do...*

This last excerpt shows the complex enmeshment of feelings of exploitation/advantage, romantic and economic circumstances, and the internalisation of specific discursive sets, such as the stigma associated with sex work, in interviewees' understanding of their and other people's involvement in the sex industry.

The internalisation of the sex work stigma was a recurrent feature amongst women who experienced the most extreme form of exploitation. However, this was not the only or prevailing attitude within this specific sample as most of the women who felt that they had been exploited saw their involvement as the consequence of economic necessity. This different attitude enabled them to experience and describe more nuanced and complex relationships and arrangements. The following excerpt, for instance, from the interview with a 25 year-old Lithuanian woman who experienced exploitation in London, exposes the intricacy of consent informing the relationships between women and their male partners, which are characterised by different mixtures of instrumentality, honesty, affection and manipulation at different times.

Once I understood I had to pick a guy, I chose him as he was not bad. I mean, he kept telling me he loved me and I sort of believed him as he was not violent. I mean, he still took money from me, but I think he actually liked me too. Unlike his friends, he never could raise a hand on me and we sort of had a good time together. In any case he kept telling me he loved me, and asked me to give me the money for our future... I sort of believed it too for a while, until a colleague of mine let me know he was married. I then got fed up and managed to get rid of him, by threatening to call the police... I then kept on working by myself.

The complexity of these relationships is underpinned by gendered experiences of masculinity and femininity as well as with patterns of inter-dependency underpinning many romantic relationships within and outside the sex industry. For instance, in the excerpt that follows a 35 year old Moldovan

woman living and working independently in London explains how she tends to reproduce a relationship pattern, whereby her male partners become economically dependent on her, in her private life, even if this does not translate in her economically supporting them. She also explains the way her Albanian male partner was pressured to attempt to 'pimp' her to maintain some credibility within his peer group.

*I don't know why I always get with lazy men...starting with my husband in Moldova. He used to work when we first met, but then... I mean, they are not lazy when I meet them, but then they sort of sit down once they meet me and become needy... The guy I used to see here, we were together for years, he even asked me to let him pimp me, but he sort of did it because of his friends. They kept taking the piss because they said I had the trousers in the family. I mean I only had to say no and he never bothered again. I knew he sort of had to try and do it, but I wish he hadn't as I sort of lost respect for him after that.*

The research evidence informed by the few cases of exploitation encountered shows a great degree of ambivalence and fluidity in women's accounts of their direct subjective involvement in exploitative relationships with men. For instance, in the excerpt that follows a 19 year-old Romanian woman with an experience of exploitation in the UK sex industry, talks about her ambivalences towards her previous partner and exploiter and about how her fascination with him was related to her desire to escape from a regime of normativity which was enforced at home.

*I fell in love, basically... He was different from everyone else I knew. I was tired of going out with boys who had no money at all. He was good looking, respected by everybody, he had a nice car and he was well dressed... He was in the UK all the time and I met him through friends... His father had a reputation to bring girls out to work in the sex trade, but not him... I mean he only had a reputation of being a bastard with girls, like a womaniser... My parents always gave me what I wanted... maybe because I was spoilt, but he was different and they were always on my back, always wanting me to be perfect, like the perfect student, they followed every move I made... I did not have enough freedom and he represented something different. (...) even now I feel something for him, after all he did...I still wonder how he is doing...now that the police is after him.*

Besides showing the ambivalent and contradictory nature of women's economic and affective relations with their exploitative partners, this last quote also shows the way perceptions of risk in relation to the possibility of working abroad are rooted within personal affective and socio-economic circumstances.

The research evidence also shows that there is no direct relation between leaving behind a situation of hardship, migration and being caught up in sexual exploitation, as the following two excerpts show. In the first, a 28 year-old Albanian woman working as a maid explains how the combination of the fact that she could not work while she was an asylum seeker, her lack of work experience and the comparison with other experiences of work in the UK led her to decide to work in the sex industry, which she finds advantageous.

*I came here because there was a war there. I had to leave. I applied for asylum and then I wasn't allowed to work for a whole year. After I got the indefinite leave I worked as a waitress for a long time, in an English café outside London. Then I came to live in London and I started to work as a maid, as a friend of mine asked me to work for her. It's much better than waiting tables! It's a very hard job and they were paying me £15 a day! I had to stand on my feet and clean from 9am till 6pm. English bastard was the boss! It is better here because it is not very hard, there's pressure, but if you get on with the girls it goes very quickly and it's not physical work.*

The second excerpt is from the interview with a 38 year-old Thai woman who used to sell sex both in Thailand and in the UK and now works as a maid in a flat and as a waitress in a restaurant. In the excerpt that follows she explains that in order to get to work and stay in the UK she had to get into considerable debt and endure abusive working and living conditions, which she does not interpret explicitly as exploitation, as they allowed her to remain in the UK and work independently.

*I have four children. I came to work in England because there is no money in Thailand and because it was the first country in my dream, everyone says oh England is very beautiful... I didn't have chances to come here so I made a contract with people, I had to give them back £22,000, it was a Thai woman and an English man. I used to work and live in the same flat, 24 hours a day, with three other Thai girls. We used to give her all the money, except £200 to send to our families, but she did not take care of us (...) we only had one egg per day to eat and she put washing liquid in the shampoo bottle. I paid up in 8 months and was free. I work here (flat) and in a restaurant now. The restaurant is better because it's got good reputation. Where's here it's good money but bad reputation. Now I am ok, but I am only scared that immigration could come here and make me go back to Thailand!*

As this last interview excerpt shows, some of the interviewees who were selling sex before migration accepted to repay considerably more than the cost of their immigration documentation and transportation costs, sometimes under very hard living and working conditions, in order to have the possibility of earning more than they would in their countries of origins and of improving their own and their families' livelihoods. While some of these accept having been exploited, the vast majority don't. In the interview that follows, a 29 year-old undocumented Brazilian woman working in flats explains that she knew that she would work in the sex industry and that she would have had to pay more than the costs of her immigration and travel arrangements to the people who provided them, knowledge of which leads her not to identify as a victim of sexual exploitation. This case of 'disavowed' exploitation took place in Spain, not in the UK.

*I was one of those who came for sexual exploitation. I knew what I was doing, so it wasn't really sexual exploitation, it was just for the money, I don't think it is right to take advantage of people, but I have never met anyone who didn't know they were going to work in the sex industry. (...) The money is better here than in Spain, but in Spain though it's safer in a way: over there the police raids flats looking for drugs, here they look for illegal people. I felt more secure in Spain. I guess the only way would be to make it legal...to work in brothels, but then that would not be enough because I could not be working there as I have no papers.*

The excerpts informing this section of the report shows that perception of advantage/disadvantage, abuse and exploitation need to be understood in the context of the personal and socio-economic circumstances of each interviewee and also highlight the plurality of entry points and trajectories into the UK sex industry for migrant workers. They also underline the way legal immigration status influences people's working lives in the UK and one of the main reasons why the sex industry can be an attractive option for undocumented migrants, as it allows them to work and earn satisfactorily sex industry even if they have no legal status or their qualifications and skills are not recognised in other sectors. The last excerpt also voices one of the main critiques interviewees had of anti-trafficking initiatives, which they saw as aimed at countering immigration, not exploitation and as making all workers feel less, rather than more secure. The impact of anti-trafficking social interventions on the livelihoods of interviewees will be the topic of the next concluding subsection.

### 7.3 The Impact of Anti-Trafficking Intervention

The ambivalences and fluidities emerging from the research evidence contrast sharply with the rigidity embedded within anti-trafficking interventions, which tend to simplify the socio-economic and affective coordinates of the people they aim to support according to a rigid dichotomy between freedom and coercion. This rigidity fails to recognise the economic needs, existential priorities, and understandings of love and allegiance which underpin feelings of advantage and/or exploitation. They also fail to acknowledge the possibility of non-exploitative forms of international recruitment of workers for the UK sex industry. These meaningfully different circumstances, which inform people's decision to seek help or not, tend to be reductively understood in univocal terms of exploitation and can end up by contributing to, rather than countering, the vulnerability of migrant workers in the UK sex industry. The excerpt that follows is from the interview with a 37 year-old Brazilian woman who used to work in a flat and, after she became pregnant, decided to set up a profitable business in the sex industry. The quote shows us a negative impact of the rigid application of anti-trafficking legislation on the livelihoods of people involved in a managerial position within the sex industry, even when they do not engage in exploitative practices.

*When I became pregnant of son I decided to open my own flat. Everything went ok for 5 years. I used to get between £3000 and £5000 per week. At first I worked with English girls but I then started recruiting foreigners because clients find them sexier... So I put an advert on a newspaper in Spain, through a friend, and I got lots of Brazilian, Italian and Spanish girls replying. I used to pay for the ticket and then they would give me ½ of what they earned until they paid back the ticket, then I would get the usual, which was much less. After 6 weeks I was charged with trafficking. I spent 19 months in jail, my house was confiscated, my business, my savings, my jewels, they took everything...and now I am also facing deportation...*

Anti-trafficking policies and initiatives are seen as effective and necessary only by a minority of interviewees: those whose experiences match the rigid dichotomy between free and forced set by the anti-trafficking paradigm. In all of these cases, women were unaware that they would be selling sex and were coerced into it through threats, debt bondage and isolation, as this long excerpt from the interview with a 23 year-old Thai woman, who was forced to work in flats in central London, shows:

*Once in the flat I immediately asked the other Thai girls how the work situation was and they told me that on top of the massage I would have had to have sex as well. That was when the real boss entered; she was 30 years old, also Thai and also selling sex. She took both of my passports and left me only with the photocopy. The boss taught me how to work as I had no experience at all... I did not want to but I felt I had to because of the money and visa situation, I had nowhere to go... As I refused working at first, the person who arranged this in Thailand called me and told me not to run away otherwise they would get to my parents and hurt them and also they would have found out that I was selling sex... so that is how it started... I used to work in Soho and outside London...I had to give her all the money... she used to check everything through the maid. I had no money for anything, the boss even bought my toiletry... the debt got smaller because they showed me the deposit and the account... I would have paid it back in 9 months, the boss told me that I could have my passport back then. I used to cry every day and wanted to go back to my life, to my family. They thought that I was going to work as a masseuse; my boyfriend thought that I was working in a restaurant. I used to call often and say that everything was going to be OK. I worked like that for 5 months, until the police raided the flat and took me to the station. I started telling everything when I was in the flat, they told me to pack up everything and that they would have helped me. I gave a statement with a translator and stayed in a shelter for about 1 month. The staff were very nice, very friendly... I was back in Thailand within a month. I wanted to go back as soon as possible. I was not like the other girls there. My story was different. There were quite a few girls from China who were working for*

*themselves and when they found out that I had a debt they were very surprised... I think the majority of the people I met while working in these places is free...most are from Romania, Brazil, China and Mongolia, not Thailand, and it is not as difficult as it is for me to get a visa. I mean, it is so difficult for Thai people to get a visa for the UK, why? If you want to come here to work you need to use these systems and people and it is very dangerous. Although I never want to work like that, if I had to I would do it independently, I would work for myself, not for others.*

Besides the dramatic experiences of exploitation and the appreciation of the intervention of the police, the excerpt also shows three key issues. The first is the relation between the lack of legal migration documentation and the vulnerability to exploitation. The second refers to the interviewee's understanding that most other migrant workers in the UK sex industry were not forced and that they were working independently. Thirdly, the excerpt highlights that there is a relation between the self-identification as sex worker or as an economic migrant working in the sex industry and the individual understanding and experience of exploitation.

Altogether, the research evidence shows that there is a relation between the lack of legal migration documentation, the vulnerability to exploitation, the desirability of police intervention and the perceived and/or actual impact of the latter on interviewees' livelihoods. In the interview material we gathered, this is welcomed only if it produces what the interviewee wants, which varies substantially according to her/his circumstances. While in the case of the 23 year-old Thai woman presented above the outcome of the police intervention coincided with her desire to escape exploitation and return to her home country, other interviewees who were able to escape exploitation through the co-operation with the police did not want to return home and some actually returned to the UK in order to work independently in the sex industry, after they were repatriated. In two cases, interviewees managed to obtain leave to remain in the UK by applying for asylum and receiving support in the asylum claiming process and through projects of social intervention which were made available to them on the condition that they co-operated with the criminal investigation and prosecution of their exploiters. In one of these two cases the interviewee was intercepted by police services and deported more than once and only decided to denounce their exploiters retrospectively, in order to re-establish a sense of justice for herself, but also to gain undetermined leave to remain in the country. In the following long excerpt from this case, a 28 year-old Moldovan woman explains the conditions in which she was first deported, at the time in which she was actually being exploited. She then describes how she decided come back to work independently and to denounce her exploiter in the occasion of the second time she was stopped by the police and faced deportation.

*The first day...it was terrible, I cried all day... Sex is seen as dirty and disgusting at home, I had not even seen a man naked before. I was embarrassed, I kept thinking that this job was not me... Just think that I did not even know what a blow job was!!! My very first customer was very unhappy... I was afraid she found out... I felt I could not complain...although it was not a lot of money... I was very scared and I did not want my mother and my family to know... In the first three months the debt escalated to 20,000 and the rent was also very high. In Soho it was between 300 GBP to 450 GBP per day... To manage these costs I had to do 40 men or more a day, just to manage. Of course 7 days a week, with no break nor medical checkup, although we were told to have sex only with condoms. I also had to pay £600 per month for where I was staying. I was only given £10 a day for food, travelcard and tissues... In 2000 there was a raid in one of the flats. I was arrested together with lots of girls. I spent 2 months in prison in Heathrow... it was*



*a detention centre... It was very rushed and unsophisticated in those days; I spent two days in a cell, in my knickers, for what? The immigration people were tough; they did not even ask you if you were ok. I had met a nice Albanian client in Soho, he felt sorry for me and he came to visit... I was deported with no money at all; I even had to ask my mother the money for the taxi from the airport. I felt guilty, ashamed. I had sold my body for nothing and I started thinking of going back... I also wanted to meet her again, the lady who exploited me, and to see whether I could do something about it... In the end I did go back, I asked my Albanian friend in London to send me some money to come over. I got a newspaper and I responded to an advert for a job in a flat. It was something else. I was free to work when I wanted and with whom I wanted and to do what I was comfortable with, with customers. I used to keep half of the money and I was earning more than £700... on a bad day... I remember that was a good life... I could finally rest, help my family, go to nice places, even have holidays! Then one day the immigration police came and I mentioned what had happened to me before. They had my fingerprints from the previous time... so I had to explain. As I mentioned the name of the trafficker they let me off the issue of having false papers and released me. I had to sign once a week and that was it. We had to do the trial and everything, I felt quite nervous about having to see her again in court. I had asked for a screen to be put between me and her, but there wasn't one. Anyway, I now have got refugee status and an indefinite leave to remain, this was recently. This time the experience was much better, I mean with the police. I was explained everything and I was supported properly.*

This long excerpt subsumes the ambivalence and complexity expressed in the narratives gathered in the context of the research. On the one hand the interviewee was forced to sell sex and exploited. On the other, she also decided to return to the UK and reap the benefits of working in the sex industry. She denounced her exploiter when faced with the possibility of deportation, although she had meant to 'do something about it' before returning to the UK. These observations are not meant to underestimate the nature and intensity of the interviewees' exploitation nor the legitimacy of her claims to asylum and support. They aim at highlighting the different and multiple ways in which strategic factors such as economic necessity, the desire for a better life, the lack of legal immigration status, the possibilities of earning offered by the sex industry and the priorities of social interventions can contribute both to the vulnerability and empowerment of migrant workers. In this specific case, both the sex industry and anti-trafficking social interventions contributed to making the interviewee more vulnerable while she was undocumented and more empowered, when she was (irregularly) documented or when taken in charge by a programme leading to support and regularisation through the asylum procedure. The excerpt also shows the way in which targeted anti-trafficking intervention can contribute to the empowerment of migrant workers when it is not informed primarily by the priorities (and brutality, in this case) of immigration controls, as when the interviewee was first repatriated. Finally, the excerpt shows the predicaments and opportunities posed by making support conditional to the priorities of criminal prosecutions.

All of the five interviewees whose asylum cases were linked to their cooperation with criminal investigations were grateful for the assistance and support they were given by authorities. However, they also felt that they had been pressured into exposing themselves and their families to retaliations which the UK police could not do much about, as they took place in areas which were well outside their influence. The research evidence shows that there is a link between the lack of legal status and the availability/necessity to co-operate with criminal investigations. In all of these five cases interviewees either did not have legal status because of their Moldovan nationality or because the right to stay as Romanian EU citizens were potentially revoked because they had been convicted for controlling. In this respect, it is important to underline that all but one of the interviewees who extricated themselves from exploitation and had legal rights to reside in the UK chose and managed to do so independently, because of the fear of being exposed as 'prostitutes' and for fear of retaliation against themselves and their families in the UK and home.

The research evidence informing this section and the rest of the report shows that there are contradictory meanings and experiences of exploitation at work within and between the sex industry and the initiatives of social intervention targeting it. The interplay between these contradictions, immigration legal status, English language skills and the economic and affective circumstances and priorities of each migrant worker determines the degree to which they experience both their involvement in the sex industry and social interventions in empowering rather than disempowering terms. In order for policies and initiatives of social interventions to be efficient and empowering, they need to be informed by an understanding of exploitation which is able to read within the complexity of migrant workers' circumstances. The complexity of this interplay is summarised in these last two excerpts from the interviews with a documented 43 year-old Thai woman and an undocumented 29 year-old Brazilian woman, both working in flats. In the first excerpt, the interviewee understands both the necessity to fight exploitation and migrants' need 'to go abroad to have a better life' and identifies the lack of immigration status as the main factor enforcing vulnerability.

*One of the girls I know, she is in prison for 6 years because she did human trafficking, it is very bad, the girls want to go abroad and have a better life, but these people make money out of them, and on the other hand it's the only way to come! And sometimes the girls manage to escape... or not. Recently a Thai woman was arrested and sent back and she hadn't even made her money back! It's difficult to think about what to do... The Home Office should give more visas. It's difficult here if you are illegal!*

In this second excerpt, the interviewee explains that she does not feel safe in her job: 'because of the many police and thieves. I am scared they can get to the flats. Police would arrest me. The thieves would not only steal, they would rape us and beat us'. Earlier in the interview, the interviewee explains that she felt she had to come to the UK in order to provide for her two children at home after their father, who was remitting money home, was deported from the UK. In order to get to the UK she borrowed £1,800 from a friend who had been living in London and she had to give back £2,500 six months later, something she does not regard as exploitation, as 'she was the one who was charging the least interest: only 6 per cent, all others wanted 10 per cent!!!'

Both of the last two excerpts show the way in which immigration status and socio-economic circumstances impact on migrant workers' possibility of avoiding exploitative circumstances and on their perception of the services available to protect their rights, as the last interviewees feels threatened by both the police and criminals. They also show contradictory meanings and experiences of exploitation at work and the complex interplay between these and interviewees' individual circumstances. Within this interplay, social interventions should be able and willing to focus only on cases in which the need for help and support is as unambivalent as possible, or risk contributing to, rather than countering the further disempowerment of its target population. The intricacy of the scenario presented in this subsection makes the task of orienting and informing policies aimed at reducing the vulnerability of migrants working in the sex industry both particularly important and complex. This will be the main aim of the next and final section of this report.

**In Short:**

Only a minority of female interviewees, amounting approximately to 6 per cent of the female sample, felt that they had been deceived and forced into selling sex in circumstances within which they felt they had no share of control or consent.

Immigration legal status is the most important single factor engendering migrant workers' vulnerability to exploitation in the UK sex industry, which is the result of the convergence of several different factors, including: the stigma attached to sex work; the availability of personal networks in the UK and in the country of origin; the necessity to flee hardship situations in the country of origin; the lack of awareness of the rights available to exploited migrants; attitudes towards the police; and the lack of English language skills.

One of the main factors underpinning exploitation were feelings of allegiance and loyalty embedded in romantic relationships between women and their male partners. This highlights that perceptions and experiences of advantage/disadvantage, abuse and exploitation needs to be understood in the context of the personal, affective and socio-economic circumstances of each interviewee.

The policies and initiative fighting anti-trafficking are seen as effective and needed only by a minority of interviewees, those whose experiences match the rigid dichotomy between free and forced set by the anti-trafficking paradigm, which applies to a small minority of cases encountered.

Targeted anti-trafficking intervention can contribute to the empowerment of migrant workers when it is not informed primarily by the priorities of immigration control and criminal investigation.

In order for policies and initiatives of social interventions to be efficient and empowering, they need to be informed by an understanding of exploitation which is able to read within the complexity of migrant workers' circumstances.

## 8. Policy Implications

By engaging with the life histories of migrants working in the UK sex industry the research highlighted a number of vulnerabilities and strengths that are obscured by the current emphasis on trafficking and exploitation in public debates and policy. The main aim of this final section of the report is to identify evidence-based policy implications in order to inform more efficient and ethical policies of social interventions which can improve migrants' living and working conditions. It will do so by outlining the way interviewees felt that their living and working conditions could be improved in general and with specific reference to the currently proposed changes to the Policing and Crime 2009 legislation.

The evidence gathered in the context of this project shows that the measures regarding prostitution and trafficking foreseen by the Policing and Crime Bill 2009, including the criminalisation of those who pay for sex with a person subject to exploitation (Clause 14), orders for sex workers convicted of soliciting (Clause 16), changes to offences of kerb-crawling and soliciting to obtain sexual services (Clause 18) and the closure of premises linked to sexual exploitation (Clause 21 and Schedule 2) will be perceived and experienced by the vast majority of migrants working in the sex industry as criminalising and marginalising. This because they are not based on shared (between the sex working community and authorities) definitions of what constitutes exploitation in the specific context of the sex industry and of the livelihoods of sex workers. In the absence of a shared understanding about what constitutes 'exploitation' between authorities and the sex working community, these provisions will paradoxically make sex workers more vulnerable to exploitation and less likely to pursue alternative life trajectories outside the sex industry, if they wish so. The following quote from the interview with an undocumented 35 year-old Moldovan woman working independently in flats, shows the prevailing view amongst interviewees about current proposals to criminalise clients and close brothels as a way to fight trafficking and exploitation. It also shows the way de-criminalisation of the sex industry needs to be coupled with the regularisation of migrants working in this and in other sectors, as legalisation of the sex industry alone might make migrant workers more, rather than less marginalised and exploitable.

*I think this idea to criminalise clients and close down brothels suspected of exploitation is not going to work. How on earth can clients tell who is trafficked and who is not. Trafficked girls would not talk as they would get in trouble, of course! I mean, these girls they know that there is money here, the average salary is \$80 per month where they come from... If you have a family to support, you are not going to be able to...unless you have a very good salary... This is why so many go back to sex work... And even if you stop...that kind of money is always at the back of your head...many people are in and out, it's a bit like a drug... this is why you will never get rid of sex work... It is difficult to say. If you legalise it on the one hand it will be easier for some people, those with papers, for instance, but others will be drive even further underground. The problem is that girls don't know their rights... they have no idea and feel ashamed. They would never go to police or to anyone talking about their problems. It is complicated. I mean, after you have been working in this business for a while, you have a black spot in your CV which is difficult to justify to employers and which prevents you from actually getting a job. On the other hand, if this country cannot provide me with a decent job...which gives me flexibility and a good salary... what else am I supposed to do?*

This last excerpt, and the research evidence in general, strongly suggest that current attempts to curb trafficking and exploitation by criminalising clients and closing down commercial sex establishments will not stop the sex trade and that as a result the sex industry will be pushed further underground and

people working in it will be further marginalised, as the following excerpt from the interview with a 50 year-old American undocumented transgender man shows.

*I think if a girl wants out it is easier said than done. There is a lot of mafia in those countries and the girls are uneducated about the fact that they can get help. I think it's unforgivable for girls to work against their will! We have to dive head one and help these girls. If they make selling sex more illegal it's the worst thing they can do, we would go back in time, not forward; we should live in a moment where people have the freedom and the choice! (Transgender, US, 50, undocumented)*

Most interviewees felt that the criminalisation of clients and the closing down of commercial sex establishments would discourage both migrants and UK citizens working in the sex industry, as well as clients from co-operating with the police and sex work support projects in the fight against actual cases of trafficking and exploitation. The criminalisation of clients will discourage them from helping women who are exploited. The crucial role played by clients was mentioned in most of the interviews with people who had experienced serious forms of exploitation.

*I mean each client is different; you cannot really put them all in the same bag. I escaped from that flat thanks to that Turkish guy and later we were together. Also, I had to always pretend everything was ok, she would send fake customers, friends of her, to see if I was complaining. If a client sees that you are crying he is not going to buy sex from you, so you have to pretend you are fine and he is not going to know. I mean the sex industry is not illegal and is not going to stop like that. (Woman, Moldova, 35, documented, with experience of exploitation)<sup>2</sup>.*

The research fieldwork experience corroborates interviewees' predominant view that the criminalisation of clients and the closure of sex working establishments would push the sex industry underground and discourage its migrant and UK workers from co-operating with the police in the fight against trafficking and exploitation. Between February and April 2009, the combined impact of the deployment of the anti-trafficking Pentameter operation and of Westminster Council's decision to close down several commercial sex establishments by implementing the 'Change of Use' regulations of the Town and County Planning Act meant that most potential interviewees felt subject to a general crackdown on the sex industry. As a result, they refused contributing to our study, as they felt unsafe and vulnerable. The situation only changed after the end of the Pentameter operation and the judiciary dismissal of Metropolitan Police and Westminster Council's joint application to close two flats in Soho in April 2009, which led to a relative decrease in the pace of closure orders.

The interviews informing this research support the view that the success of initiatives against sexual exploitation and the general wellbeing of migrants working in the UK sex industry could be greatly enhanced by provisions that would:

- make it easier for migrants to become and remain documented and allow the sex industry to operate legally by decriminalising it and by introducing the possibility of legally recruiting sex workers both in the national and in the global labour markets.

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<sup>2</sup> In this section, each interviewee will be identified by indicating in sequence her/his gender, nationality, age, immigration status and the type of job or involvement (exploited or not) in the sex industry.

*If they had more support from the government, if you had more information about human rights [it would help]. I think the government should legalise brothels. Because it's something that will go on, no matter if they don't allow it, the sex industry's always going to be there. So why not legalise, why not help? (Woman, Russia, 30, documented, flat worker)*

*Trafficking? That is a crime! They should make sex work legal and make people [migrant workers] legal. (Transgender, Brazil, 29, partially documented, escort)*

- decriminalise peer-based forms of work organisations, in which a small numbers of sex workers share a working space on an equal basis, along the lines of the 'mini-brothel' solution.

*It would be much easier to be able to work with another person. When I say that I mean another transsexual, you cannot have security at home, because you would have to pay them etc. It would be very very nice if they made it legal, to have two or three people working in the same house, so we can look after each other and then we wouldn't feel so lonely. It can be very very lonely, if you have another trans working with you, you feel less lonely, you never know who is going to come up. It's very weird that... that transsexuals in the same flat, I remember a transsexual was killed recently, she was killed by a client. It's very weird that it happens, but it happens (Transgender, Spain, 26, documented, escort)*

- guarantee victims of sexual exploitation the certainty of obtaining undetermined leave to remain in the UK, regardless of whether they are prepared to denounce their exploiters and to co-operate with criminal investigations.

*I am followed by the Poppy Project, they come here every 2/3 weeks to monitor how I am doing and I receive £40 per week. I live in a sheltered accommodation, it is nice. I mainly study English and stay home... I would like to stay here in the UK, I am scared of going back to Romania... But I can only stay here until September, officially. Poppy will pay until then, but I am waiting for a decision from the trafficking legal centre, I am hoping that if we are legally recognised as victims I can obtain one more years of assistance and a working permit... And also some funding to go to college. Poppy is hopeful, but my situation is difficult because I also pleaded guilty for control. (Woman, Romania, 19, documented, with experience of exploitation)*

- provide migrants who were exploited with adequate long-term support and protection to successfully integrate within the UK society or, if they so wish, in their countries of origin. This means not making assistance conditional on giving up working in the sex industry and providing recreational as well as educational opportunities to assisted migrants.

*People there are very kind and they know what they are doing, but there is no freedom at all. Some girls go actually back to work to maintain a degree of autonomy. You cannot pass from having what you want when you want to £40 per week and only training... And also, working without a pimp is a completely different story and they should allow that, rather than telling people to stop selling sex (Woman, 28, Moldova, documented, with experience of exploitation).*

The research findings analysed in the report also highlight the following possibilities for intervention:

- Supporting education and training both as well as combating youth unemployment both at home and in the UK in order to offer migrant a wider range of skills and choice of employment opportunities, including in the sex industry.
- Offering free or subsidized language courses to help migrants negotiate better terms for themselves in their professional and personal lives, within and outside of the sex industry.
- Encouraging migrant (and non-migrant) sex workers to reflect on their understanding of love, advantage and exploitation, which could help them renegotiate their emotional and professional relationships in more rewarding terms.
- Organising information campaigns in the UK, as well as in countries of origin, targeting schools as well as the media and informal socialisation places, could make prospective migrants, including men, women and transgender people, more aware of the possibility and consequences of exploitation.

While it is important to continue investing resources in the fight against the most extreme forms of exploitation which are present within the UK sex industry, the fact that these correspond to the experience of a minority of migrants means that more resources need to be invested in services and initiatives supporting the majority of the sex working population, including both migrant and UK workers. The findings of the research and the successful implementation of its participative approach reaffirm the importance of sex work support projects developing peer-based initiatives and networks, which have produced long-term relationships of trust between key services and people working in the sex industry. These relationships, if invested upon and safeguarded, could enable:

- the identification of shared minimum working standards and indicators of exploitation (O’Connell Davidson 2006: 19-20), which could be agreed on and used by practitioners, the police, and the sex working population and inform priorities and protocols of intervention at a national, regional and local level;
- more efficient forms of co-operation between migrant/UK workers, support projects and anti-trafficking initiatives and projects;
- participatory initiatives providing migrant/UK workers with a wider range of skills and employment opportunities within or outside of the sex industry, if they so wish.

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