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# Beyond the Gaze: Summary Briefing on Internet Sex Work



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## **Project aims**

BtG is the largest study to date of the safety, working practices and regulation of internet based sex work in the UK. The aims of this research were to:

- a) understand the wider theoretical significance of new technologies for changing the social practice of sexual consumption and the sex industry.
- b) map the trends and understand the working practices in internet-based sex work markets<sup>1</sup> within the broader processes of the regulation and policing of sex work in the UK.
- c) learn how safety and health services working with sex workers have responded to the needs of this sector.
- d) facilitate the integration of online sex work into safety & health related provisions.

*Note: this is not a study of modern slavery and trafficking within the online adult sex work sector nor is it a study estimating the size of the online sex work sector generally or the percentage of those within who are victims of modern slavery or are coerced.*

## **Research methods**

The study used a participatory action research model and a mixed methodology. Community co-researchers assisted in the recruitment of participants, review of research instruments and methods and the development of project outcomes e.g. the production of safety information for online sex workers). In addition, there was an integrated service provision and developmental role built into the project team through a Research & Netreach Officer.

Five stakeholder groups contributed to the project:

- 1) Police (n.b. the project had support from the National Police Chiefs Council, National Lead for Prostitution), national and local policy makers;
- 2) Sex workers who work online and the broader sex work community;
- 3) Sex work projects and practitioners working with sex workers;
- 4) Web platforms and other marketing stakeholders;
- 5) Customers of sex workers.

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<sup>1</sup> The BtG definition of internet-based sex workers was: 'Sex workers based on their own, or in collectives, or working through an agency, who use the internet to market or sell sexual services either directly (i.e. interacting with clients in person e.g. escorting, erotic massage, BDSM) or indirectly (i.e. interacting with clients online e.g. webcamming').

Individual components of the study, undertaken between October 2015 and March 2017 were:

- online survey of 641 sex workers based in and/or working in the UK, who use the internet in their work;
- semi-structured interviews with 62 sex workers of all genders who use the internet for their work;
- semi-structured interviews with 56 police representatives across the UK; and 21 individuals, including managers or moderators of online advertising platforms/forums/safety schemes for sex workers, plus other experts on online regulation of commercial sexual services;
- online survey of 1,323 customers of sex workers using the internet;
- online survey of 49 projects providing support to online sex workers; and
- desk research to map online spaces where sex workers market and/or provide services.

The following sections draw on the findings to explore the importance of the internet to sex workers, how and where they advertise and/or provide services online, the characteristics and working practices of sex workers using the internet, how the internet is used for networking, crimes and reporting, the legislative context and support services to sex workers.

## **Mapping the online sex industry: changes in working practices**

As the BtG research study shows, attempting to assess the internet-based sex worker population through drawing on selected sites may not represent the diversity in online sex work, in terms of factors such as the gender profile of sex workers, their sexuality, the client base or services. Sex workers provide a broad range of services via the internet, including direct services where marketing and communications are primarily online, but services provided offline; and more recent forms of indirect online sex work such as webcamming, instant messaging and self-produced internet content (e.g. personal websites, photos and videos). **The online sector is the largest sector of the UK sex industry:** data provided by a market lead advertising platform for adult services showed that during a three-month period 1<sup>st</sup> August 2017-31<sup>st</sup> October 2017, 29,826 adult service providers were verified as advertising on the platform.

The BtG study found that the internet was of significant importance to sex workers in different aspects of their work, with 65.3% (n=419) agreeing or strongly agreeing that they would not do sex work if it was not for the internet. This related particularly to those working exclusively in webcam/phone sex work, where 90.5% (n=67) tended to or strongly agreed with this statement, but also to more than two-thirds (67.5%; n=131) of independent sex workers/escorts who did not work in any other sex industry sector. The responses to the survey of sex workers showed the internet played a large part in improving working practices. For example, the following percentage of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with these statements about the internet:

- it enabled sex workers to decide where to work (89.4%; n=573), or when to work (89%; n=570);
- it also enabled respondents to work independently without having to rely on third parties (89.4%; n=573);
- it facilitated monitoring enquiries and screening clients (85%; n=545);
- it enabled workers to find out about their rights at work (81.9%; n=525);
- it gave access to sex worker networks and peer support (80.7%; n=517);

- it had improved the quality of respondents' working life (78.3%; n=502).

However, there were certain potential disadvantages, for instance:

- the internet had increased the amount of time respondents spent managing their work (64.1% agreed or strongly agreed; n=411);
- more than half were worried that their friends and/or family might find out about their sex work through the internet (58.7%; n=376).

## Online spaces of sex work

The diversity of online working practices is reflected in the proliferation of online spaces providing or facilitating commercial sexual transactions. The BtG study identified a typology of 12 sex work-related online environments:

Types of online space
Escort directories/advertising platforms
Webcam platforms
Multi-service adult entertainment platforms
Dating and hook-up platforms with commercial advertising
Dating and hook-up platforms without commercial advertising
Customer Review Forums
Agency websites
Individual sex worker websites
Classified websites
Social media platforms/apps
Sex worker forums
Content delivery platforms

- Escort advertising platforms are third party websites that allow sex workers providing in-person direct sexual services to create profiles to advertise their services. Some are international and others operate at a national or more local level. Escort advertising is often divided by gender, although some platforms carry adverts from sex workers of all genders with various search options. There are also escort advertising platforms which focus on niche markets. Some sites operate on a subscription basis, while others are free for sex workers to advertise but offer paid upgrades.
- Webcam platforms are sites dedicated to the facilitation of webcam shows, providing an interface between webcam models and customers. Certain market leaders dominate the field globally. Some sites operate on a model that revolves around 'tips', where a model performs a show in a public 'room' that customers can log into and watch free of charge. The customer then tips the model using tokens purchased from the webcam platforms. Other platforms operate a pay-per-minute system for customers. In this approach, there is a distinction between group and private shows: the former are performed to more than one customer and each spectator pays a per-minute rate. Private shows are performed to just one customer and may be priced more highly.
- Multi-service adult entertainment platforms are websites offering a range of different sex work services within the one site. The market-leading website in the UK (Platform

1) is an example of this model and was used in different ways by the vast majority of both our interview and survey participants.

- Dating and hook-up platforms include those with designated commercial advertising spaces where sex workers can advertise their services openly; and those which have policies prohibiting advertising for paid sex, which some sex workers may use for covert advertising. Use of dating sites in this way was more common amongst male sex workers in our study.
- A customer review forum is an online space where customers post messages about their experiences of buying sexual services, including reviews of individual sex workers they have visited. These forums, as well as being a space for customers to share experiences, are also a marketing opportunity for sex workers.
- Agency websites are run by third parties who act as intermediaries between sex workers providing in-person direct services and their clients. Sex workers often have little involvement in how they are marketed online, as this is controlled by the agency. Some sex workers, particularly independent workers offering direct sexual services, prefer to manage their own websites, which many design themselves, although some will employ a web designer for this purpose.
- Classified advertising websites are generic websites where individuals can post advertisements for a range of goods and services. Some of these sites permit sex worker advertising, whereas others prohibit it.
- Social media platforms are used by a range of sex workers to network with peers or customers, or to market themselves and their service.
- Content delivery platforms are sites where sex workers sell goods, such as photos or homemade videos, as well as other items relating to their work.
- Sex worker forums are important for providing peer support and advocacy. For example, participants in our study used these sites to share information and advice on marketing, safety, rights and a range of work-related matters.

## **Characteristics and working practices of sex workers using the internet**

The BtG study shows the diversity of sex workers using the internet in their work, in terms of gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, education and domestic circumstances. Although there is the potential for self-selection bias and the difficulty of reaching some groups should be acknowledged, the findings from the BtG study also reflect the diversity shown in other studies of indoor-based sex workers.<sup>2</sup> The characteristics of respondents in the survey of 641 sex workers using the internet were as follows:

- Nearly three-quarters (73.5%; n=469) were female; 19.4% (n=124) were male; 3% (n=19) were transgender, with the majority of these (n=17) being male-female; 2.9% (n=18) were non-binary or intersex.
- While 51.3% (n=239) of female respondents gave their sexuality as straight/heterosexual and 43.6% (n=203) were bisexual, only four identified as lesbian. In comparison, 63.7 per cent (n=79) of male BtG survey respondents

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<sup>2</sup> E.g. Jones (2015) 'Sex work in a digital era'. *Sociology Compass*, 9 (7): 558-570; Pitcher, J. (2015) 'Direct sex work in Great Britain: reflecting diversity', *Graduate Journal of Social Sciences*, 11 (2), 76-100.

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identified as gay, 28.2 per cent (n=35) as bisexual and only eight respondents as heterosexual.

- Over half of respondents were aged between 25 and 44: 36.8% (n=236) were aged 25-34; 26.5% (n=170) were 35-44. A further 20.4% (n=131) were aged 18-24. Only one respondent was aged under 18; 11.1% (n=71) were 45-54 and 4.7% (n=30) were aged 55 or over.
- The largest group of respondents (43.8%; n=281) entered the sex industry when they were aged 18-24; 15.4% (n=99) were aged 25-29; and 18.9% (n=121) were aged 30-39. Only 5.1% (n=33) entered sex work when they were aged 13-17.
- The majority of respondents (87.2%; n=559) were white; 5% (n=32) were of mixed ethnicity; 2.7% (n=17) were Asian/Asian British and the same number Black/Black British. Nearly 15% (n=94) of respondents were of non-UK nationality.
- Respondents were comparatively highly qualified: 22.9% (n=147) were educated to degree level; 14.4% (n=92) had a postgraduate qualification; 33.1% (n=212) possessed qualifications to A-level or diploma level.
- Most respondents (71.1%; n=456) did not have any financial dependents.

The highest proportions of survey residents were based in London, the South East and North West of England. Some sex workers travelled from across the UK to work in Greater London and there was also mobility across regions outside London.

While the majority of survey respondents worked in independent sex work/escorting, a substantial proportion worked in webcamming (Table 1). Respondents often worked across different sectors using the internet, with many working in two or more sectors. While 41.4% (n=196) of independent sex workers/escorts worked solely in the one sector, only 16.1% (n=41) of webcam workers undertook no other forms of sex work.

**Table 1: Types of sex work currently undertaken**

	No	Percent of Cases
Independent/escorting	474	74.1
Agency work	34	5.3
Webcamming	254	39.7
Phone	199	31.1
Brothel	28	4.4
Street	11	1.7
Exotic dance	17	2.7
Adult film	83	13.0
Modelling	74	11.6
Sexual massage	96	15.0
BDSM	180	28.1
Current work other	17	2.7

N=641. Note: multiple response so percentages add up to more than 100

More than half of survey respondents (54%; n=346) worked 10 hours or fewer per week providing services to clients; however, 59.1% (n=379) spent up to 10 hours per week doing administrative or other tasks relating to their work, which was often likely to be unpaid time.

Just over half of respondents (51.9%; n=333) had gross annual earnings of less than £20,000. Only 10.1% (n=65) earned £50,000 or more annually. Earnings largely reflected working hours: for example, 77.4% (n=171) of those earning up to £9,999 annually and 54% (n=95) of those earning £10,000-£29,999 per annum worked 10 hours or fewer per week providing client services, whereas the largest group earning £50,000 or more (39.1% of those in this income group; n=25) worked 11-20 hours weekly providing client services.

Comparatively more male than female respondents worked 10 hours or fewer per week providing client services and earnings tended to reflect this difference in hours, with annual earnings of male sex workers being proportionately lower than those of female respondents.

While sex workers were not asked about clients in the survey, 61 participants in interviews for BtG provided services to male clients. Ten provided services to female clients and 23 of all genders provided services to couples.

Some independent sex workers employed third parties to take on aspects of their business, such as photographic services (31.2%; n=200) of respondents, accounting (26.5%; n=170) and web design (15.7%; n=101). Interview participants who employed third parties noted that they wanted to present a professional image of their business.

## **Use of the internet for networking, communication and safety strategies**

The internet plays a key role in enabling sex workers to access peer networks and support. In the survey of sex workers, 61% of respondents (n=391) strongly agreed, and a further 19.7% (n=126) tended to agree that the internet gave them access to such networks and support.

Interview participants mentioned using peer forums, some regularly and others more occasionally, for example when they wanted specific information or advice. For instance, Alice (46, independent escort) noted that these forums were helpful for information when touring: *'just this morning I was asking people's opinions on two different locations for tour and which one would be preferable, you know, in a particular town'*. Boyd (32, working in several sectors, including independent escorting and camming) commented that peer forums could be particularly useful for accessing safety alerts and other business-related information for people new to sex working, *'guys that are coming into it and don't have much experience to get to grips with it'*. Milena (32, independent escort also providing BDSM services) found regional forums useful for buddying with other sex workers: *'girls are very open because obviously we started talking about the safety from the very get-go... If you didn't have that internet ...everything would have been underground and everybody would be scared'*.

Some interview participants also used social media such as Facebook or Twitter, or phone apps for professional networking, support and sharing safety information. The use of these platforms or applications for private small groups of colleagues working in the sector was mentioned by a number of participants. These closed internet-based networks helped to reduce the isolation experienced by independent lone workers.

The internet plays an important part in safety at work. For three-quarters of survey respondents it was very (47.1%; n=302) or quite important (28.1%; n=180). The main benefits to safety from using the internet related to being able to screen potential clients, networking with others and accessing information about potentially dangerous clients. For example, the internet *'allows me to screen clients, communicate with other workers, update*

*my buddy on my whereabouts and safety*' (Non-binary independent sex worker, webcammer and worker in other indoor sectors, aged 18-24). The main safety precautions taken to protect online identity included: using a pseudonym (91.5%; n=567); not linking work/personal profiles (87.6%; n=543) and not giving out personal details (76.5%; n=474).

Additional safety strategies at work used by survey participants in all sectors were:

- Avoiding drugs or alcohol at work (64.2%; n=357);
- Screening potential clients (44.2%; n=246);
- Seeing only/mostly regular clients (41.7%; n=232);
- Sharing safety information informally (40.1%; n=223);
- Sex worker forums (34%; n=189);
- National Ugly Mugs alerts (33.1%; n=184).

For respondents providing in-person services, a buddy system or having someone present in their working location provided further security.

## **Working conditions and job satisfaction**

The BtG study asked survey respondents a number of questions about working conditions and job satisfaction. A high proportion of survey respondents declared themselves to be satisfied (47.7%; n=306) or very satisfied (34%; n=218) with working conditions in their sex work job. More than half (51.3%; n=329) were enthusiastic about their job most of the time, 19.2% (n=123) felt enthusiastic all the time and 20.9% (n=134) were enthusiastic some of the time.

Job satisfaction related to a number of factors. For example:

- Nearly all respondents felt they were good at their job always (50.2%; n=322), most of the time (41.2%; n=264) or sometimes (6.4%; n=41);
- More than a quarter (27.9%; n=179) felt their work was socially useful most of the time; 22% (n=141) felt it was socially useful always and the same number indicated it was socially useful sometimes;
- 52.1% (n=334) strongly agreed and 29.5% (n=189) tended to agree that they were well paid for the work they did;
- 37.3% (n=239) strongly agreed and 49% (n=314) tended to agree that they had good relationships with their clients.

Control over working conditions was an important element of the job:

- 79.4% (n=509) strongly agreed, and 16.1% (n=103) tended to agree that they always made decisions on how they organised their work;
- 80.8% (n=518) strongly agreed and 13.3% (n=85) tended to agree that they could decide when they worked;
- 75.2% (n=482) strongly agreed and 13.3% (n=85) tended to agree that they could decide where they worked;
- 82.8% (n=531) strongly agreed and 10.9% (n=70) tended to agree that they could decide how they spent their earnings;
- 82.1% (n=526) strongly agreed and 12.6% (n=81) tended to agree that they were able to refuse clients by their own judgement;
- 75.2% (n=482) strongly agreed and 15% (n=96) tended to agree that they could choose what sex acts to perform.



Nonetheless, certain factors could detract from job satisfaction. For instance:

- 24.6% (n=158) felt exhausted at the end of the working day most of the time or always, although 28.6% (n=183) indicated they rarely or never felt exhausted;
- While 39.1% (n=251) rarely or never felt isolated in their work, 24.2% (n=155) felt isolated most of the time or always;
- Although 35.4% (n=227) rarely or never experienced stress in their work, 21.2% (n=136) did experience stress most of the time or always;
- While 62.4% (n=400) tended to or strongly disagreed that they felt disrespected by clients, 10.8% (n=65) strongly agreed or tended to agree that they felt disrespected;
- More than half (50.6%; n=324) strongly agreed or tended to agree that they worried about their neighbours finding out about their work; and 26.7% (n=171) strongly agreed or tended to agree that they were concerned the police might visit their working premises.

Some interview participants expressed concern their neighbours might report them for illegal activities. As Jane (40, providing BDSM services) remarked *'I'd say the worst bit of the job is constantly feeling like you've got to look over your shoulder. Even though I'm working legally, I'm constantly worried'*. This was particularly an issue for independent direct sex workers such as escorts: 57% (n=110) of those working solely in this form of work expressed concern that their neighbours might find out about their work. As a result, many participants took steps to ensure their working situation remained within the law. This might include not working with other sex workers, as this could be interpreted as managing a brothel. Our survey found that most respondents (72.1%; n=462) did not share premises with other sex workers. Yet the text responses to the survey also showed that the change to the law respondents felt could most improve sex workers' safety was allowing sex workers to be based together.

## **Crimes, privacy and reporting**

A majority of respondents (80.8 per cent; n=518) had experienced at least one form of crime in the past five years. We found relatively high levels of online harassment, non-payment and verbal abuse, with the highest occurrences in the following types of crime:

- Persistent or repeated unwanted contact or attempts to contact individuals through email text or social media: 65.1% (n=417) had experienced this in the past five years and 45.6% (n=292) had encountered this in the past 12 months;
- Threatening or harassing texts, calls or emails (56.2% (n=360) in the past five years and 36.3% (n=233) in the past 12 months;

As part of these, threats to 'out' people about their sex work and to 'dox' i.e. posting sex workers personal details online were common.

- Non-payment or attempting to underpay for services: 53.8% (n=345) in the past five years and 33.1% (n=212) in the past 12 months;
- Verbal abuse: 49.1% (n=315) in the past five years and 31% (n=199) in the past 12 months.

There were lower reported incidences of violence, sexual assault and theft:

- 91.6% (n=587) had not experienced burglary in the past five years;
- 84.4% (n=541) had not experienced physical assault in the same period and only 5% (n=32) had experienced physical assault in the past 12 months;

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- 82.8% (n=531) had not experienced theft or robbery and less than 5% (n=31) had encountered this in the past 12 months;
- 77.8% (n=499) had not experienced sexual assault in the past five years, although 7.6% (n=49) had experienced this in the past 12 months.

In most of the categories of crime there were no major gender differences. More female than male respondents had received threatening texts, calls or emails in the past 5 years (58.4 per cent; n=274; compared with 46.8 per cent; n=58) and repeated unwanted email contacts in the past five years (66.1 per cent; n=310; and 55.6 per cent; n=69). While the numbers are relatively small, a higher proportion of female than male respondents had experienced physical assault over the past five years (14.5 per cent; n=68, compared with 8.1 per cent; n=10); and also sexual assault (20 per cent; n=94, compared with 12.9 per cent; n=16). Some survey respondents related incidences of crime to the safety measures they had developed, such as sharing information with other sex workers or using safety alerts such as NUM.

There was also some difference according to working sector: while 60.2% (n=118) of those who worked exclusively as independent sex workers/escorts had encountered threatening texts, calls or emails in the past five years, 55.1% (n=27) of those providing solely webcam/phone services had experienced this. Percentages were not dissimilar for verbal abuse, however, and relatively high proportions of both groups had experienced non-payment or attempts to underpay (55.6%; n=109 of independent escorts; 53.3%; n=40 of webcam/phone workers).

Respondents who were exclusively indirect webcam/phone sex workers appeared less likely to have experienced any form of violent crime in their work. Text responses indicated they felt safer because they did not have direct contact with clients. While digital technologies and intermediaries provide the facility to screen clients, however, safety also depends on taking certain practical steps to preserve anonymity and to put measures in place, as discussed earlier. Although respondents identified a number of safety benefits associated with use of the internet, some also voiced concerns, particularly in relation to risks such as being identified or having data stolen. Nearly half (48.8%; n=313) had concerns about their privacy online, particularly female respondents (51.7%; n=242, compared with 34.4%; n=42 male); and 240 (37.4%) stated that information they had put online had been used without their consent. This proportion rose to 45.9% (n=34) of solely webcam/phone workers.

Only 114 (23%) out of 496 respondents stated they had ever reported incidents to the police, proportionately more female than male respondents (25.4%; n=93, compared with 16.5%; n=15). Of those who had ever reported incidents, 46.5% (n=53) were quite or very satisfied with how the complaint had been handled by the police. There were several key reasons for not reporting central was fear that reporting and engagement with criminal justice system would alert police to their sex work, which could lead to public identification, jeopardizing anonymity or for some an anxiety it would lead to arrest or disruption of their business.

A third of respondents (n=212) stated they were quite or very likely to report incidents to the police in future, whereas 39% (n=250) felt they were quite or very unlikely to report incidents. More female than male respondents said they would be likely to report (37.1%; n=172, compared with 28.1%; n=34). Being able to report anonymously was a key concern raised in text responses.

## **Policing and the law**

The majority of police interviewees were aware that sex markets had undergone changes in the past decade, but detailed knowledge of the nature and extent of these changes and of developments in internet-based sex work was variable. This was partly because of lack of resourcing, but also because policing of sex markets has tended to be focused on more visible aspects of sex work, such as street-based work, often responsive to complaints or concerns raised. The majority of respondent identified the policing of online markets as in it's infancy. Furthermore, the majority of police activities in relation to internet platforms were within a modern slavery remit this was an increasing priority for forces during the research fieldwork period. Labour protections and the safety of those sex working of their own volition tended to be less of a consideration. Thus, for example, online searches have primarily focused on issues related to safeguarding and modern slavery, with assumptions sometimes made that migrant sex workers are by definition victims of trafficking. This picture may be contrasted with the voices of migrant sex workers interviewed for the BtG study, which presented a diversity of reasons for engaging with sex work similar to UK nationals participating in the research.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, police activities targeting slavery and exploitation could impact on the working practices of consensual sex workers and could have implications for their safety and privacy.

Nonetheless, some police participants noted the need to develop more effective responses in relation to online sex work. While some forces interviewed had had some interaction with online companies in relation to specific operations, enforcement activities in some instances had been detrimental to relationships with advertising platforms for sex workers. It was acknowledged by some police participants that it would be productive to pursue greater cooperation in order to support sex workers. There was limited awareness of the threats to privacy faced by internet-based sex workers, through practices such as 'doxing' and how 'outing' or threats to out people could be used as part of on and offline harassment, stalking and abuse. Few forces had been involved in activities to improve the reporting of crime amongst this sector to the police There are therefore challenges for policing of online sex markets and provision of support to sex workers.

Responses from the survey of sex workers were mixed regarding how activities relating to sex work should be regulated, although apart from regulation of managers and others facilitating direct sexual services for whom a small minority felt this should be illegal (8.4%; n=54), the majority felt activities should be legal, which for most meant they should be regulated in the same way as any other type of work. For example, 70.2% (n=450) indicated that offering webcam services and 59.6% (n=382) that selling direct sexual services should be regulated in the same way as any other type of work.<sup>4</sup> The main emphases in the text responses were on labour rights and protections for sex workers and addressing exploitative practices in managed establishments.

Police interview participants also acknowledged inconsistencies in the interpretation of laws relating to sex work and noted that a key concern was to ensure greater safety and protection for sex workers. One of the issues raised by all groups of research participants was the way in which the law is currently enforced, particularly legislation relating to brothel management or controlling for gain, which may impact negatively on sex workers based collectively.

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<sup>3</sup> Although it should be acknowledged that the survey and interviews may only have reached a small number of migrant workers and not those who may have been victims of modern slavery/trafficking, who are harder to reach.

<sup>4</sup> However the text responses indicated that the question on regulation may have been confusing for some respondents and thus these statistical findings should be treated as indicative only.

## **Support services for online sex workers**

One element of the BtG study was to investigate how health and specialist outreach and support services for sex workers in the UK have responded to the developing internet-based market. Our research found that peer support was a key element of sex worker networking, with dedicated sex work projects currently tending to play a smaller role. Respondents to the sex worker survey accessed a number of websites for advice or support. Nearly half of female respondents (49%; n=177) used the forum attached to Platform 1, a major site catering for sex workers of different genders, but predominantly used by female sex workers providing services for male clients. Male sex workers tended to use sites specifically for men providing services to other men. Other sites used were a peer-led networking forum for escorts (39%; n=180) and a national safety and warning scheme for sex workers (34.8%; n=161). A smaller proportion of respondents also used social media. Some respondents to the survey and interview participants also mentioned specific local sex work support projects or sexual health services. There was a spectrum of use of services amongst online sex workers, a greater proportion were accessing mainstream sexual health & industry based support forums than specialist sex work provisions. Key reasons for this included; they did not have a specialist service in their area, they perceived local specialist services as not relevant to their sector but for other sectors (e.g. street), they preferred to access generic health services. But specialist provisions were seen as important for: those who preferred to access non judgemental specialist support, 'vulnerable' groups of sex workers and were seen as an important option for all should they encountered a health safety or other crisis.

The survey of 49 support projects working with sex workers found that 71% (n=35) stated that they were currently working with internet-based sex workers. Just over half (53%; n=26) said they provided specialist targeted services for this group. The most frequently provided provision was having a profile with information about their service on online escort advertising platforms or forums, followed by having a profile about their service on social media. Just over two-thirds (67.3%; n=33) of project respondents were interested in enhancing services for online sex workers. In interviews sex workers identified a number of areas where they felt sex work projects could make a contribution to meeting the needs of people in the online sector. Key amongst these were:

- the provision of confidential non-judgemental sexual health services
- emotional support
- support for 'vulnerable' sex workers (particularly those experiencing coercion or exploitation)
- ugly mugs alerts
- safety information
- reporting options including an intermediary role with the police
- legal information and advice
- involvement in advocacy, policy influencing and challenging stigma to improve the wider context in which sex work takes place
- enabling and providing spaces for peer support initiatives.



The findings from the BtG study suggest that recognition of the role played by online sex worker networks and peer support is important for the development and delivery of the signposting, advisory and support work provided by sex work projects.

## Conclusions

- The research findings highlight the diversity of sex workers using the internet in their work and the contrast between this group of workers and those in other sectors, such as street-based working.
- The study demonstrates the range of online platforms used for marketing and delivering commercial sexual services and the importance of peer networking across these platforms.
- The internet was seen by sex workers to be of considerable importance in developing services, enabling independent working and greater control over working circumstances, and improving safety strategies.
- Sex workers reported high levels of job satisfaction and ability to take decisions about different aspects of their work.
- Nonetheless, the increased use of online facilities also brings potential disadvantages for sex workers, particularly in terms of the possibility of their sex working identity being revealed. Independent sex work via the internet may also lead to isolation for some, which may be exacerbated by the need to keep their working life secret.
- Peer networking and support plays an important part in reducing social isolation, although sex work projects might also develop their role to provide services to further address the needs of internet-based sex workers.
- The research findings show that people providing both direct and indirect sexual services via the internet may experience online harassment and threats, or non-consensual use of their data. Without having comparative data for the general population of internet users, it is difficult to tell whether these levels of online-specific crimes are comparatively high for sex workers.
- While certain crimes may be prevalent in online sex work, the BtG study also confirms that levels of violent crime encountered by internet-based sex workers are considerably lower than those reported in studies of street-based workers.
- Police activities in relation to online sex markets are relatively limited, except those concerning suspected modern slavery or safeguarding issues.
- Certain police operations targeting modern slavery or other forms of exploitation may have potential consequences for people engaging legitimately in sex work of their own volition, and this may impact on levels of trust in the police.

## Further information

For further information and resources go to the BtG website <https://www.beyond-the-gaze.com>

- Follow BtG on  @beyondthegaze or  <https://www.facebook.com/Beyond-the-Gaze-1496497424002122/>
- The book 'Internet Sex Work', based on wider findings from BtG is available from: <http://www.springer.com/gb/book/9783319656298>
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