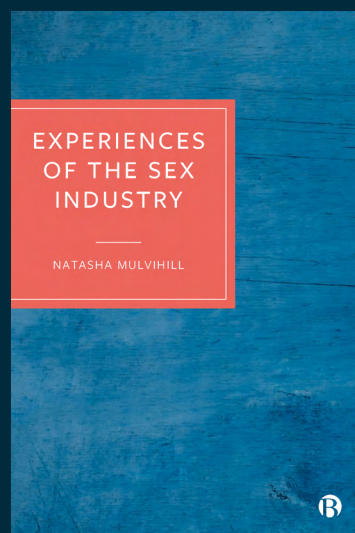


Experiences of the Sex Industry

OVERVIEW

The contemporary sex industry in England and Wales includes a range of activities and services – broadly conceived as ‘sexual’ or ‘erotic’ – exchanged for money or some other compensation or benefit. Increasingly, sexual services are arranged and mediated online, often through specialist paid platforms. Law and policy in this area have developed piecemeal over the decades, are inconsistently applied and do not always reflect emerging individual and commercial practices, or their implications.

This book seeks to bring to the centre the voices of those directly involved in different areas of today’s sex industry. The participants’ narratives document their lived experience, as well as their views on engaging in – and being represented through – research. Participants also reflect the challenges of navigating work and life through the COVID-19 pandemic.



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SIGNIFICANCE

This research is important for two reasons. First, it addresses the ethics of who speaks on behalf of the sex industry and the challenges of producing collaborative research. It recognises that sex workers, like any group in society, are diverse in their status, experiences and attitudes towards what they do. There is no 'single voice', although there may be common experiences.

Second, this work is novel in revisiting participants over time to ask them to reflect back on their experience of being involved in a research project and of being represented in a government report. The participants' narratives shine a unique spotlight onto the 'before and after' impact of the pandemic and how social shocks further expose inequalities, fragile wellbeing and insecure labour.

FINDINGS

The book includes extended narratives shared by 18 participants drawn from five different contexts: female independent sex workers; male independent sex workers; managed brothel workers; erotic dancers and strippers; and sex buyers.

Motivations

- Reasons for starting to sell sexual services were varied, including financial hardship and job loss; coercion; curiosity and sexual exploration; barriers to managing 9–5 work or securing a work visa; incidental encounters and introductions.
- Participants appreciated the financial independence and flexibility of sex working.
- Reasons for paying for sexual services were also mixed, including sexual variety and exploration; not having sexual relations with current partner; emotional or health difficulties.

Harms

- Harms identified include isolated and insecure working, given the regulatory environment, and the impact of stigma and criminalisation, including for workers seeking to leave the sex industry.
- Many participants were sceptical about reporting to the police – for any crime – because of their sex worker identity. 'Ugly Mug' schemes, and posting negative reviews on adult service websites about harmful clients, have evolved as alternative routes to accountability.



IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

For policy makers

- The overwhelming issue identified by participants in this book was the legal and policy framework for the sex industry, particularly the ban on paired or collective working.
- Both brothel workers and erotic dancers/strippers identified the employment practices and working conditions in managed brothels and strip venues as being the key drivers of harm, rather than commercial sexual services per se. These include:
 - ◊ exorbitant house fees (commissions paid to venue managers or for reception, security and cleaning facilities in managed brothels);
 - ◊ toxic cultures (use of drink or drugs or policies which promote competition – and risk-taking – between workers);
 - ◊ the unstable and inconsistently policed regulatory environment, which deters the reporting of crimes and perpetuates employment malpractice.
- The insecure work status of many involved in the sex industry meant that they were unable to access either welfare or income support through the pandemic. Finding ways to protect the groups least able to withstand income volatility should be the priority of all governments, in ordinary and extraordinary times.

For police

- Low trust in the police means that many sex workers will not report crime which occurs either within or outside of sex working. This allows perpetrators to act with relative impunity.
- Policing should be consistent, fair and focused on individuals who perpetrate violence and exploitation, and on reducing harm for sex workers.

For academics and policy makers

- While robust evidence is important to making good policy, repeated consultations and data collection without any resulting material change to the lives of those involved in the sex industry is damaging to trust. Short funding timeframes and shifting political and policy attention mean that the impact of such work on participants is often not recognised.
- In seeking to 'represent' the sex industry, we must be mindful of who speaks and why. Experiences may vary depending on setting and individual context.
- A less punitive legal framework for those selling sex and more robust social support (to manage loss of income, health challenges, becoming a parent/carer, migrating, or enduring discrimination) would better empower people to determine their involvement in the sex industry.

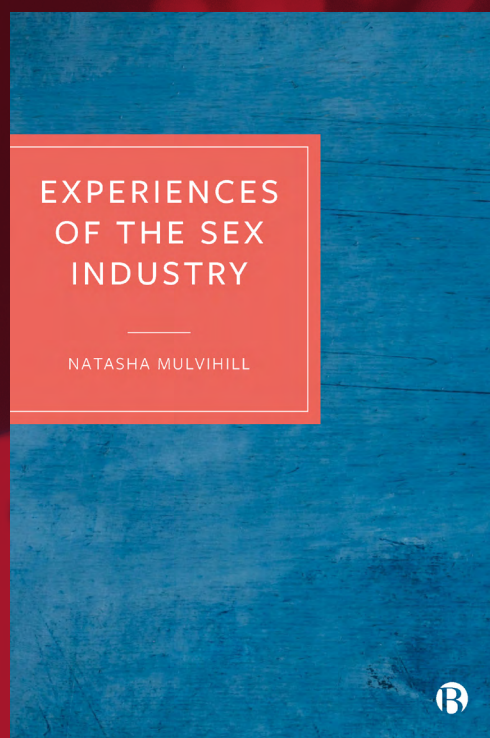
ABOUT THE BOOK

Using unpublished email interviews collected for a Home Office project on the sex industry, this anthology presents the individual stories of sex workers and buyers in England and Wales, in their own words. The author Natasha Mulvihill also re-interviews the participants to reflect on their original interviews, their experience of engaging in research and of managing through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Of interest to policymakers and students of criminology, sociology, social policy, law and qualitative methods, the text seeks to navigate through the difficult politics of the sex industry and re-focus our understanding on the lived experiences of those involved.





AUTHOR INFORMATION

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