

The Eyes and Ears of Sexual Exploitation Online: Are Sex Buyers Part of the Prevention Puzzle to Reduce Harms in the Online Sex Industry?

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UK efforts to prevent modern slavery and sexual exploitation online include assessing Adult Service Websites' (ASWs) moderation and prevention responsibilities. Yet little is known about the role of sex buyers, as the political rhetoric assumes they are sexual offenders within the neo-abolitionist context (Serughetti 2013). Drawing from a large-scale study looking at ASWs' responsibilities in preventing sexual exploitation online, this article shares findings from a survey with 142 sex buyers, understanding their role in this arena. Buyers possess detailed knowledge of sex working practices and indicators of exploitation. Thus, as actors in the prevention puzzle, they are uniquely positioned to understand how regulation can assist in crime prevention but equally create unintended consequences for the consensual sex industry online.

KEY WORDS: modern slavery, sexual exploitation, sex buyers, online sex industry, sex work, decriminalization

SEX WORK IN A DIGITAL AGE

Sex work is defined as the provision of sexual or erotic acts or intimacy for payment in money or other benefit or need (Hester *et al.* 2019). Whilst the terms 'prostitution' and 'sex work' are oftentimes used interchangeably, they reflect different understandings and attitudes towards the sex industry. Sex work as a form of labour occurs under a range of circumstances, both within a context of greater agency and in which conditions of forced labour occur (Sanders *et al.* 2018; Lanau and Matolcsi 2022). Over recent years, the online sex industry has grown exponentially, as sex workers work in the ever growing and expanding gig economy: 'the capital-labour relationship between a worker and a digital platform that mediates workers' supply and consumer or professional demand for the completion of a small task or 'gig' and operates at once as a market intermediary and 'shadow employer' (Gandini 2019: 1040). Thus, Adult Service

Websites (ASWs), where most sexual services are advertised, negotiated and/or facilitated have expanded across the globe and are a dominant form of online space in what is an ever-changing online typology of where sex is sold (see [Cunningham et al. 2018](#)). Online spaces have enabled sexual labour to adapt through the covid pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis as 'sexpreneurs' find opportunities to earn a living ([Brooks-Gordon and Vickers 2022](#)) whilst others equally facilitate exploitation through online spaces ([Keighley and Sanders 2023](#)).

Arguably, the internet has played a crucial role in improving working practices for sex workers, as workers and clients identify each other, agree prices and services, undergo security checks and make payments online ([Hardy and Barbagallo 2021](#)). This has resulted in improved conditions, including safer work (as compared with in-person work) ([Jonsson et al. 2014](#)), increased wages ([Jones 2015](#)) and the increased autonomy of sex workers ([Sanders et al. 2016](#); [Scouler et al. 2019](#)). Research suggests many online workers collaborate to promote their content, share resources for best practice and for social support ([Uttarapong et al. 2022](#)). Furthermore, levels of harms experienced online are typically lower than those reported by workers offline ([Sanders et al. 2018](#)) and strategies to keep safe for both male, non-binary and female sex workers are developed further through online technologies ([Koenig et al. 2022](#); [Machat et al. 2022](#)). The importance of the internet for sex workers was highlighted in research by [Sanders et al. \(2018\)](#) in which nearly two-thirds of survey respondents ($n = 419$) claimed that they would not do sex work without the internet. Furthermore, the internet benefitted sex workers by allowing them to work without reliance on third-party management, avoiding interaction with the criminal justice system and earning more by targeting advertising ([Cunningham et al. 2018](#)). Thus, sex work in a digital age in the United Kingdom allows for conditions under which the sex worker is less likely to be breaking soliciting laws and the sex buyers are assured greater privacy and anonymity through online interactions or private arrangements in discrete settings.

THE ETHICS OF SEX IN AN ABOLITIONIST ERA

The way we define and understand sex work within the United Kingdom has direct bearing on the regulatory frameworks that seek to criminalize or control the industry ([Lanau and Matolcsi 2022](#)). Much of the research on the sex industry has focussed on the workers and the debate regarding the abolition and criminalization, or decriminalization of the sex industry ([Sanders and Campbell 2014](#); [Vanwesenbeeck 2017](#)). Public and policy attention often frames sex work as prostitution, questioning sex workers' behaviour as anti-social or as only victims, whilst buyers of sex are framed as sex addicts or as an exploiter/abuser ([Sanders et al. 2018](#)). Whilst the discussions of the 'prostitute body' are deeply rooted in historical narratives ([Bullough and Bullough 1987](#)), alongside radical feminist thought around the value of women as commodities ([Pateman 2016](#)), recent decades have seen a shift in the debate towards the buyer of sexual services ([Sanders et al. 2018](#)) and an 'end demand' rhetoric. More focus has been given to men and the morality of purchasing sex, underpinned by viewing sex buying as something a civilized society should not tolerate ([Serughetti 2013](#)). These debates are juxtaposed with the deeply rooted sexualized economies on which western worlds are premised, with clear evidence of economic and social mainstream of the sex industry ([Bretns and Sanders 2010](#)).

The complex and overlapping systems of power and inequity within the sex industry have contributed to this debate. Sex work has traditionally been policed as prostitution through a crime of social disorder lens, underpinned by discourses that construct sex work as a form of violence against women and comparable to rape, slavery and torture ([Berger 2012](#); [Coy et al. 2019](#)). Moral panic over the sex industry as abusive and exploitative has become dominated by discourse about 'demand', and how that links to exploitation, coercion and trafficking ([Weitzer 2007](#); [Dempsey 2009](#); [Sanders 2013](#); [Serughetti 2013](#); [Ellison 2017](#)).

The links between sex work and trafficking are well documented, however their conflation and lack of nuance in understanding the dynamics between the two have overestimated the prevalence of sexual exploitation (Dempsey 2009; Kelly *et al.* 2009; Ellison 2017; Coy *et al.* 2019) with a serious deficit of cases entering the criminal justice system for prosecution of traffickers (see Farrell *et al.* 2014). Modern slavery and human trafficking (MSHT) and the sexual exploitation of people for monetary gain (Home Office 2021) have become a key priority in UK policy agendas reflecting the global prominence of attention. There is credible intelligence that MSHT offences are internet facilitated (OSCE 2022). Technology has enabled anonymity, invisibility and control to third parties who can place adverts for trafficked victims and control them remotely for large profit (Hickle 2017). However, despite the consensus that MSHT is a global problem, the number of identified victim/survivors remains low and there are difficulties distinguishing victim/survivors of trafficking from those consensually selling sex online (Ellison 2017). Thus, there is growing need to improve the safeguarding and identification of survivors of MSHT.

One such method framed to address ‘sex trafficking’ was introduced in Sweden in 1999. Commonly known as the Nordic Model or ‘sex buyers’ law’ this approach criminalizes the sex buyer, not the worker, to ‘end demand’ and thus reduce exploitation and the need for a sex industry to exist. Norway, France, Iceland and Ireland followed suit. In 2018 the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Prostitution in the United Kingdom recommended the implementation of the ‘sex buyers’ law’ across England and Wales (APPG 2018). However, there is clear documentation that such a law in the Republic of Ireland saw an increase in violence and hate crimes directed at sex workers (Campbell *et al.* 2020). Meanwhile, abused sex workers were less likely to report their experiences to the police due to mistrust, fear of losing clients, their homes or children and fear of deportation. Thus, rather than reducing violence and exploitation, an abolitionist model exacerbates the very vulnerabilities it seeks to address (Kingston and Thomas 2019). More critically, such laws have been interpreted as not about client criminalization, but a smoke screen for immigration controls against sex workers. Vuolajärvi (2019: 151) states clearly: ‘the Nordic model is a form of humanitarian governance that I call punitivist humanitarianism or governing in the name of caring’.

Whilst the United Kingdom has not passed such a law, there has been an undercurrent amongst political debate that advocates for and supports steps towards criminalization. Scoular and Carline (2014: 609) argue how policy designed to end trafficking has resulted in ‘creeping neo-abolitionism’. There is a failure to look at sex work on a spectrum, from involuntary, forced and exploited acts, to the more voluntary within a set of economic and socio-political constraints, particularly for migrant sex workers (Berger 2012). Comparable evidence from countries which have not adopted the Nordic Model suggests that reducing exploitation lies within respecting sex work as work, whilst giving sex workers labour and employment rights (Jones 2023; Leonelli 2023) rather than making their working conditions dangerous. Criminalizing, or at least stigmatizing sex buyers, even motivated by the goal to protect ‘exploited’ workers views sex workers as helpless and abused victims, with no consideration to their agency to sell sex (Serughetti 2013), nor the agency of a consenting buyer to purchase their services (Silver *et al.* 2022). The evidence regarding alternative models which have reduced impacts on health, violence and stigma are not considered alongside preferred models of criminalization. Models which are based on alternative values, principles and frameworks such as occupational health, harm minimization and employment rights to govern sexual services (Abel and Fitzgerald 2010; Cruz 2013; Brooks-Gordon *et al.* 2021) are rarely explored as alternatives. Nor are safer systems of indoor legalization (Bretns and Hausbeck 2005; Platt *et al.* 2018), or outdoor zones of safe working or toleration (Brown and Sanders 2017; Henham 2021) considered options by governments where the ‘end demand’ rhetoric is strong amongst politicians and campaigners.

ONLINE SAFETY AND THE PREVENTION OF SEXUAL EXPLOITATION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

UK efforts to prevent MSHT in the form of sexual exploitation online form part of a wider effort to improve online safety. The Online Safety Act takes a holistic approach that understands the complex nature of MSHT-facilitated online, putting prevention at its heart, whilst developing tools to disrupt and respond. ASWs, as platforms which involve two-way or multiway communications and display user-generated content publicly ([Online Safety Act 2023](#)) will be required to take a comprehensive, proactive approach to managing risk of harm ([Ofcom 2022](#)).

The Act includes provisions relating to the advertising of illegal services, including adverts that facilitate MSHT ([DCMS 2022](#)). Included are Sections 52 and 53 of the [Sexual Offences Act \(2003\)](#) (see Schedule 7—Priority Offences) which includes ‘causing or inciting prostitution for gain’ and ‘controlling prostitution for gain’ ([Online Safety Act 2023](#)). Furthermore, Section 2 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 makes it an offence to arrange or facilitate the travel of another person, including through recruitment, with a view to their exploitation.

[Ofcom \(2022\)](#), assigned as the independent regulator of the Act, will have the authority to collect information on harmful and illegal content online, but the presence of such content will not establish whether the service has complied with its duties. Therefore, it will not be used as justification to shut down services, like in 2018 in the USA SESTA/FOSTA legal reports ([Jackson and Heineman 2018](#)). Ofcom’s role will be to assess the adequacy of services’ systems and processes to protect users. Thus, ASWs will have a duty of care to prevent their sites from being used to advertise victims of sexual exploitation.

Yet, controlling prostitution for gain is very widely interpreted in the criminal courts ([English Collective of Prostitutes 2022a](#)). Within the law ‘controlling’ is used to criminalize any activities where somebody associates with a sex worker, thus conflating sex work with human trafficking ([Oppenheim 2022](#)). This suggests that whilst online sex work has been largely out of the scope of policy developments, the Act’s focus on modern slavery may lead to increased surveillance of the online sex industry ([Scoular et al. 2019](#)). There is concern that policies designed to stop trafficking and sexual exploitation will be used to target consensual sex work ([Cockbain and Sidebottom 2022](#)). Thus, if the regulatory provisions of the Online Safety Act are not clarified, rather than seeking to protect sex workers from harm, the reform could stop their profession altogether ([English Collective of Prostitutes 2022b](#)). Furthermore, there is evidence that the criminal justice system fails to recognize the difference between sex workers and victims of sex trafficking ([Hamid 2023](#)).

Within these legislative developments, the focus is on improving platform responsibility. Yet little is known about the role and responsibilities of sex buyers, whose moral depravity is often assumed within a neo-abolitionist context ([Serughetti 2013](#)). This article challenges this assumption by presenting data from a research project which identifies the views, professed habits and ideas around the responsibility of sex buyers. First, the article explores the methods, elucidating our engagement with sex buyer populations in the United Kingdom, and a reflection on their role as the ‘eyes and ears’ of both potential and actual harm and exploitation. Then, the article explores some key findings, including presenting the role of sex buyers as members of what we are calling ‘the prevention puzzle’ to reduce harms and crimes in the sex industry. Our research questions set out to explore how sex buyers are in a unique position to understand the ways regulation and tighter control of online platforms may have unforeseen and unintended adverse effects, thus limiting the prevention of MSHT and sexual exploitation facilitated through online spaces. In this way, the article explores both the role and responsibilities of sex buyers, presenting the importance of consulting this population in the regulation puzzle. However, given this lens we want to make it very clear that sex workers are the group who should be at the forefront of decision-making about their own lives, working practices and how regulation, governance and legislation can make them safer.

METHODS

The role of ASWs in facilitating offending behaviour is complicated and unregulated as national intelligence services try to understand routes to trafficking, the police work to identify victims and disrupt criminal behaviour, and practitioners deliver interventions to victim/survivors of exploitation. To gather more evidence of what the issues are, researchers from the University of Leicester (in partnership with Unseen) investigated what role ASWs can play in preventing sexual exploitation in the United Kingdom within a political context of increased online safety and crime prevention.

Through a mixed methods study, the researchers employed interviews with English and Welsh police with experience of modern slavery investigations ($n = 30$ from 23 forces in England and Wales), 13 practitioners from United Kingdom and EU based organizations supporting survivors of modern slavery, five interviews with ASWs operators and an online survey with sex buyers ($n = 142$). The study protocol is available for review and reuse (Keighley and Sanders 2023) with further information on the participatory action research methods (Keighley *et al.* 2023) and the findings (Hopkins *et al.* 2023). The findings from the survey will be reported on within this article, which aimed to generate a unique body of evidence regarding sex purchasing habits, exposure to and responsibilities around exploitative activities, and the effects of regulation on the sex market. Thus, reaching beyond existing data or government consultation as sex buyers have not been consulted in the process of the Online Safety Act gaining Royal Assent. Indeed, sex buyers may be the eyes and ears of identifying sexual exploitation online, as individuals who utilize ASWs to select sexual services, engage with in-person services, and thus, could distinguish between a person working consensually and someone being exploited. This is not to detract from the expertise sex workers have in their own lives, and the autonomy with which most engage in the sex industry. However, sex workers are arguably over-researched and sex buyers remain under the radar in terms of research activity, partly due to the invisible nature of accessing this group of actors within the sex industry. Thus, we engaged with sex buyers to understand their responsibilities in preventing harm and exploitation, and as critical gatekeepers for law enforcement to identify exploitation.

Using JISC's Online Survey, we asked online sex buyers questions regarding their role and knowledge in identifying sexual exploitation, reporting habits and an evaluation of prospective further criminalization and/or regulation in relation to MSHT on ASWs. Thus, we sought to understand how sex buyers perceive their role in MSHT identification and prevention and whether increased regulation would impact the consensual sex industry. Thus, this study will shape prospective laws to regulate the online sex industry to ensure compliance in preventing modern slavery, whilst minimizing the harm to those working consensually.

The survey was advertised online through two ASW platforms, a sex buyers forum, and utilizing our research partner networks, some of whom work in partnership with ASWs to improve their reporting and support mechanisms. This research project recognizes the shift in accessibility of a group of actors who are already under the radar. Fewer than 10 years ago, the research team experienced less gatekeeping to access the sex buyer population, gathering 1,323 analysable responses in a short amount of time (Sanders *et al.* 2018). However, given the increased stigma towards the sex industry and political discourse centring on surveillance of online spaces and criminalizing the client, such populations were more difficult to access in 2022/2023. Thus, the ASWs which engaged and advertised this survey are those who are active in MSHT prevention initiatives and represent promising regulatory practice. However, to reach sex buyers on less regulated ASWs (where we anticipated more exploitation, or at least less prevention) we hoped to engage through snowball sampling and word of mouth. Given we did not ask questions regarding specific platform use or where respondents located our survey, these data are not known.

The survey collected basic socio-demographic data from participants (e.g. gender and age), whilst preserving anonymity, due to the hyper-stigmatization of the sex industry (Benoit *et al.* 2018; Sanders *et al.* 2018; Easterbrook-Smith 2022), whilst understanding the diversity of consumers of sex on ASWs. To assess their awareness of online-facilitated sexual exploitation, a mix of closed and open-ended questions were asked. The inclusion of open-ended questions allowed respondents to describe their thoughts and experiences, particularly in an under-researched area. The data were analysed using simple analysis on Online Surveys and Excel and more formal analysis with Statistical Packaging for the Social Sciences (SPSS), using a range of descriptive and crosstab analysis tools. The open-ended questions were analysed using thematic analysis and compiled into a codebook to understand the relevant themes.

One hundred and forty-two individuals who disclosed purchasing sexual services on ASWs completed the survey. Most respondents were aged 55–64 (31 per cent) or 45–54 (24 per cent), whilst 14 per cent of individuals were 35–44 or 65 years and older and 12 and 5 per cent were 25–34 or 18–24, respectively. The vast majority were male (92 per cent) who purchased sexual services from cisgender women (98 per cent), and many had been purchasing sexual services for more than 10 years (37 per cent). Thus, our respondents provided a range of experience pertaining to sex purchasing habits, but it is not known the extent to which they represent the wider sex purchasing market in the United Kingdom (for more detailed studies see Sanders *et al.* 2018).

There are several limitations to this project worth addressing. First, whilst it is assumed that respondents answered the survey honestly, it is not known whether some were giving desired answers. For example, whilst 50 per cent of respondents said they would continue to purchase sexual services on ASWs regardless of regulation, very few were keen to share any personal information that would aid in disrupting MSH and illicit activities. Thus, it is unclear how they foresee reconciling these opposing views. However, given almost all respondents engaged in detail with the free text questions, the time they spent completing the survey suggests an inclination towards consultation. Furthermore, this study only sampled 142 sex buyers: a self-selecting sample who felt comfortable engaging in academic research may not be representative of the wider market, whilst those who did not answer may demonstrate ongoing distrust in the authorities. This flags the continued need to think of creative ways to engage marginalized populations, especially those considered ‘deviant’.

FINDINGS

Sexual exploitation on ASWs

Respondents were first asked whether they had ever experienced an interaction with someone they suspected was potentially being exploited: 16.9 per cent of respondents ($n = 24$) reported experiencing such an encounter with a sex worker. Ten individuals (7 per cent) were unsure due to the lack of clarity regarding what constitutes abuse and exploitation. Twenty-one respondents gave further details of experiences suggesting exploitation, describing instances of ‘bait and switch’ (where the advertised worker is switched for another individual upon arrival at the venue), the presence of a male/third party/possible ‘handler’ suggesting a lack of independence of the sex worker, or the sex worker appearing nervous, upset or unwilling to engage:

When I got a room number in a building, things didn’t seem right. Felt there was a man in the room overheard possibly East European voices ... a second man appeared and told me to go in.

Male, 55–64,
10 years purchasing on ASWs

With younger women from different places outside the UK, it's stated to be 'independent' as in she herself is, but it's not independent as was stated, so giving cash in hand to another man and not the woman directly as I thought I would be, isn't what I would've opted for.

Male, 18–24,
1–2 years purchasing on ASWs

Given growing interest in the surveillance and regulation of ASWs to decrease MSHT perpetration (Skidmore *et al.* 2018; Home Office 2021; OSCE 2022), survey respondents were asked whether they regarded themselves as having responsibility to ensure they are not purchasing sex from someone who was being sexually exploited? Answers were given on a linear scale, ranging from 0 (no responsibility) to 10 (total responsibility). Opinions were categorized using a Net Promoter Score Index, where scores of 0–6 are classified as detractors from responsibility, 7–8 are passive about responsibility and 9–10 are promoters of responsibility. 27.5 per cent of respondents ($n = 39$) felt they had little to no responsibility, 45.8 per cent ($n = 65$) felt they had a responsibility and 26.8 per cent ($n = 38$) were neutral. This suggests a prevailing level of awareness amongst sex buyers surveyed regarding their role in MSHT crime prevention.

Building on this, respondents were asked questions regarding their purchasing habits and whether they considered any potential indicators of exploitation both when perusing adverts and when meeting the worker they had made a booking with. 55.6 per cent of respondents ($n = 79$) reported performing some form of verification/check when making a booking, 28.9 per cent ($n = 41$) disclosed they performed no checks and 16.2 per cent ($n = 23$) were not sure if their behaviour constituted checks for exploitation.

Given the sex buyer population has previously been under researched regarding their role in crime prevention, little is known about their awareness of potential indicators of exploitation, their self-selection criteria to avoid sexually exploited individuals, or what they do if they encounter exploitation/concerns. Such indicators are useful, as they form the basis of police investigations, whether manually trawling through ASW adverts for exploitation, or looking for signs of exploitation through data scraping tools such as Traffic Jam or the Sex Trafficking Identification Matric (STIM) (Giommoni and Ikwu 2021; L'Hoiry *et al.* 2021). Yet given buyers have not been consulted, it is not known whether the indicators used by law enforcement match those sex buyers consider important. As sex buyers are often the first people to encounter a worker's advert, scan the images and read the profile or meet in person, they are in a prime position to identify suspicious activity early on.

First, respondents identified their five most significant concerns that may constitute potential exploitation *when viewing adverts* (see Figure 1). The most frequent indicators mentioned include: the booking not made directly with the sex worker (62.7 per cent of respondents, $n = 89$); the sex worker's nationality/ethnicity (37.3 per cent of respondents, $n = 53$); the same contact being used in different adverts (36.6 per cent of respondents, $n = 52$); age explicitly under 18 or implied references to youth (32.4 per cent of respondents, $n = 46$); reference to being 'new': 'new in town'/'just arrived' (29.6 per cent of respondents, $n = 42$). Other significant indicators included services offered at a low price, the offer of 'risky' services (such as 'bareback'—sex without protection, anal sex or 'OWO' (oral without a condom)); low-quality images used in their advert and the worker showing distress in the images.

Similarly, respondents were asked to identify their five most significant concerns that someone may be sexually exploited *when interacting with the person* (see Figure 2). The most frequent indicators include: the worker being unable to speak English or having limited English (45.8 per cent of respondents, $n = 65$); evidence of harm (e.g. cuts and bruises) (45.1 per cent of respondents, $n = 64$); evidence of substance misuse (45.1 per cent of respondents, $n = 64$); looking 'spaced out' (36.6 per cent of respondents, $n = 52$); appeared/looking scared (35.2 per

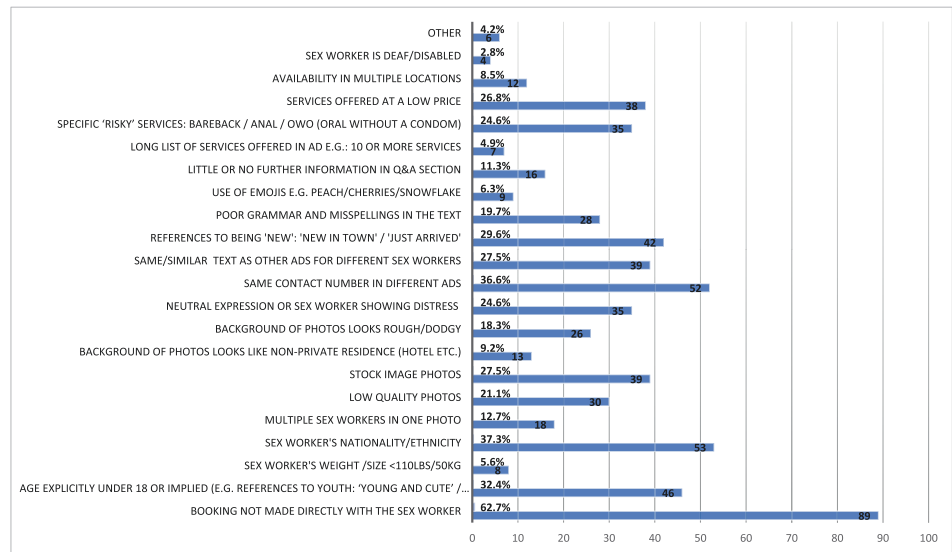


Fig. 1 Most significant concerns of potential exploitation *when viewing adverts on ASWs*.

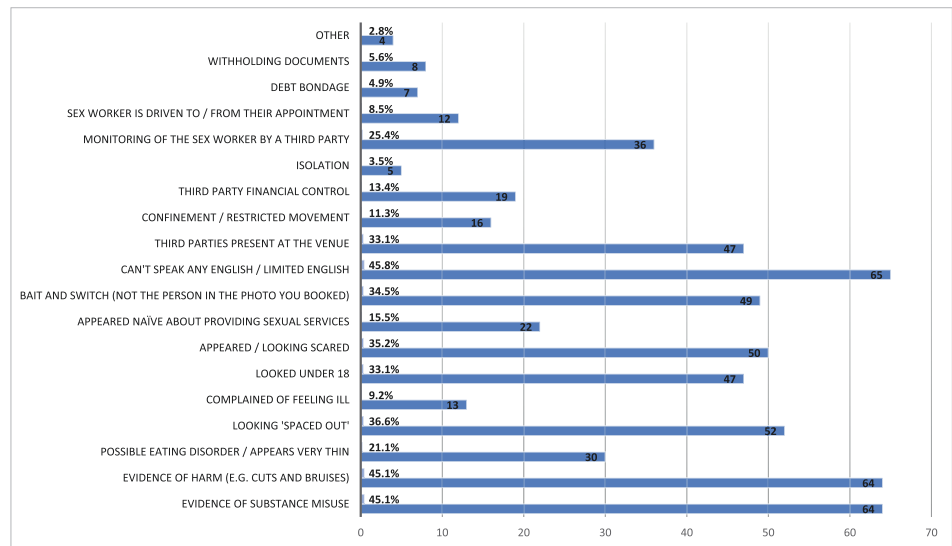


Fig. 2 Most significant concerns of potential exploitation *when interacting with the person*.

cent of respondents, $n = 50$). Other significant indicators included monitoring of the worker by a third party; bait and switch; looking under 18; and appearing thin or unwell. These indicators match those presented in research by L'Hoiry *et al.* (2021), who developed the STIM for law enforcement, and research by Giommoni and Ikwu (2021), suggesting consistency between the indicators used by law enforcement and those that concern sex buyers.

To understand sex buyers' perceptions of responsibility, we asked what they would do either during the booking process or during an appointment if they suspected exploitation. 73.9 per cent of respondents ($n = 105$), representing a majority, reported they would cancel

the booking, with a further 34.5 per cent ($n = 49$) sharing that they would report to the police, whilst 30.3 per cent ($n = 43$) would report to an ASW or discuss with the sex worker, respectively. Whilst it is not known the extent to which respondents were choosing answers they thought were 'correct', given many took the time to give appropriate details in their responses, we may assume a certain level of honesty. If so, this finding matches the Net Promoter Index suggesting responsibility amongst the sex buyer population. Surprisingly, 49 respondents disclosed trusting police enough to report an incident, despite historical evidence suggesting a strained relationship between the two (Sanders and Campbell 2016). Whilst seven individuals (4.9 per cent) disclosed that they would continue to make the booking, two gave further detail, stating they would not engage in any activities but feared harm to the worker if they cancelled the booking. This demonstrates an awareness of the complex harms exploited individuals are exposed to. Furthermore, this challenges the stereotypical misconception that all sex buyers seek to harm women (Farley 2016; Jovanovski and Tyler 2018), rather some sex buyers may actively seek to protect workers from harm. Thus perhaps the stereotypical assumption that buying sex is inherently harmful and an infringement on public morality ought to be explored further (Silver *et al.* 2022).

With regard to experiences suggesting potential exploitation, only 13 per cent ($n = 18$) of respondents had ever reported a concern to an ASW platform. Within a free text question, respondents were asked to elucidate why they had or had not chosen to report. 62 per cent ($n = 88$) of respondents reported they had not experienced any concerns, whilst 8.5 per cent ($n = 12$) of respondents did not know where to report, and 5 per cent ($n = 7$) cited a mistrust in authorities. Meanwhile, 11 individuals (7.7 per cent) disclosed having reported a concern to the police. Of the 16.9 per cent ($n = 24$) who reported having experienced an encounter where they thought the individual had been exploited, 33.3 per cent ($n = 8$) of these reported their concern to the ASW platform and 29.2 per cent ($n = 7$) to the police.

Of the 16 individuals who did not report to their ASW platform, two reported to the police, one to an NGO anonymous helpline, one posted a review on a punter website listing their concerns, four were not sure that their concerns amounted to exploitation, four did not know where to report on the ASW platform, and two were concerned for their own anonymity. Of the 17 individuals who did not report to the police, three of these had reported to an ASW platform. The remaining 14 individuals were those who cited their reasons for not reporting to an ASW platform above: one reported to an NGO anonymous helpline, four were not sure that their concerns amounted to exploitation, three did not know where to report on the platform and two were concerned for their anonymity. After taking these reasons into account, only four individuals took no action for no identifiable reasons, suggesting amongst this sample some levels of responsibility.

However, given many chose not to report to the ASW platform or police, we must understand both the motivations for, and barriers against, sex buyers reporting their concerns. The survey asked respondents for their two most significant barriers to reporting. 76.8 per cent ($n = 109$) cited a wish to remain anonymous, 39.4 per cent ($n = 56$) did not know where to report, 30.3 per cent ($n = 43$) cited mistrust in the police and 26.1 per cent ($n = 37$) did not believe any action would be taken upon reporting.

I would not trust them. I once looked into the process for how a sex worker could remove photos from a particular site and it looked incredibly difficult and involved giving up a lot of personal information. For a vulnerable person, impossible I would say.

Male, 45–54,
more than 10 years purchasing on ASWs

At the time of my concern there didn't seem to be online help you could report to. Obviously finding a police officer or phoning the police, is both embarrassing and liable to put yourself in jeopardy...this would be ok if you knew that the police would react and rescue the girl... but could lead to the girl being put in even worse jeopardy if not carried out properly.

Male, 55–64,
more than 10 years purchasing on ASWs

A further three individuals cited concerns of criminalizing both the worker and buyer if they reported, fearing that criminal justice responses may exacerbate rather than alleviate harms for the worker and/or survivor of exploitation. Thus, there is an awareness amongst some sex buyers of how surveillance of online spaces whilst failing to understand the vulnerabilities of the exploited can increase harm. Furthermore, surveillance can disrupt sex workers' rights to work and may have some unintended consequences to be explored later in this article.

Finally, respondents were asked which (if any) organizations they would trust to provide information regarding the risks of sexual exploitation. Contrary to their reporting habits, respondents trusted ASW sites most (47.2 per cent, $n = 67$), with a further 33.8 per cent ($n = 48$) trusting peer forums and 32.4 per cent ($n = 46$) trusting the NHS or another healthcare provider. Previous research has demonstrated how sex buyers utilize punter forums and networks to exchange information about workers, thus they trust each other to provide accurate information (Sanders 2013). However, for sources of authority, despite not reporting concerns to ASW platforms, nearly half of respondents would still trust them to share indicators of exploitation. Significantly, just over a quarter of respondents (26.6 per cent, $n = 38$) shared that they would trust the police. Despite previous reports of high levels of mistrust between sex buyers and the police, this implies a potential for growing levels of trust.

The regulation and prevention of sexual exploitation

Following the introduction of the UK's Online Safety Act to regulate online spaces to prevent harms, MSHT became offences to be prevented (DCMS 2022). Ofcom were charged with producing Codes of Practice to shape the regulatory frameworks of websites that may be harbouring or facilitating illegal activities (ready for 2024). Thus, whilst it is not known the extent to which ASW platforms will be regulated, such a regulatory change to responsabilizing online spaces is likely to impact on their operations. Consequently, this research wished to understand sex buyers' opinions on greater regulation as users of such platforms. 51.4 per cent ($n = 73$) of respondents were in favour of greater regulation, 24.6 per cent ($n = 35$) were against such measures, whilst 24 per cent ($n = 34$) were unsure. Respondents expanded on their answers in a free text response, with those in favour of regulation citing a duty of care, and a need to stop trafficking at its source whilst maintaining the legal sex industry.

I think it will lead to a safer environment for sex workers and give assurance to clients that sex workers are making a free and informed choice to follow sex work, and are protected from exploitation, slavery and trafficking from criminal enterprises.

Male, 55–64,
More than 10 years purchasing on ASWs

These sites are not going away. Investigating potential exploitation should, given adequate resources, be easy and deliver results.

Male, 45–54,
3–5 years purchasing on ASWs

Those against regulation, expressed concerns about displacement of the wider market, arguing that online crime is impossible to regulate, whilst some cited mistrust in state interference.

I prefer to know service providers are not exploited but must be careful that over-regulation doesn't drive activity underground and make service providers less safe. A legalised safe environment would be safest for all. When an activity is illegal it encourages criminal involvement.

Male, 55–64

1–2 years purchasing on ASWs

Recognizing the legitimacy of the sex industry whilst not overregulating should assist in harm prevention. Presumably, many UK sex buyers are aware of FOSTA/SESTA and the implications of increased regulation and the criminalization of the sex industry in the United States, driving exploitation and the sex market to less visible spaces, consequently increasing vulnerability and harm (Albert *et al.* 2020; Oppenheim 2022). There are concerns that the UK's Act will be a backdoor FOSTA/SESTA, contributing to Scoular and Carline's (2014) contention that we live in a creeping neo-abolitionist society.

Expanding on their concerns, respondents were asked whether they believed increased regulation would have an impact on the sex industry. 30.3 per cent ($n = 43$) shared that increased regulation would impact on their choice to purchase sexual services. 38 per cent ($n = 54$) said it would have no effect, whilst 31.7 per cent ($n = 45$) were not sure. Thus, there are concerns that poorly crafted regulation will discourage buyers from using ASWs, as respondents shared worries of displacing the consensual market and consequently, exploitation to less visible spaces. When asked to rate on a scale of 0–10 whether regulation would influence the sex industry where 0 is no effect and 10 is the shutdown of ASWs, using a Net Promoter Score Index, 67 per cent of respondents believed regulation would have a negative effect. Similarly, 72 per cent believed the Online Safety Act would make sex workers more unsafe when advertising their services.

When asked about their purchasing habits following increased regulation if the platform they used started asking for more personal information or requiring a log in, 50 per cent ($n = 71$) reported they would continue to use ASWs, 29.6 per cent ($n = 42$) said they would move to a lesser known platform, 21.1 per cent ($n = 30$) would purchase offline, 8.5 per cent said they would purchase on the Dark Web, whilst 13.4 per cent would stop purchasing sexual services altogether. Given so few buyers would stop purchasing sexual services suggests that movements towards abolition would be unsuccessful, as buyers are unlikely to be deterred from purchasing, regardless of legality. Drawing on consequences of sex buyer laws in other countries, we postulate that in fact, making such acts illegal in the United Kingdom would only serve to increase violence and exploitation and disincentivize buyers to report concerns, whilst the industry would be displaced to less visible and accessible spaces for law enforcement and support services. To understand the likelihood of displacing the sex industry following regulation, respondents were asked what personal information they would be comfortable sharing and having stored on ASWs to support crime prevention (see Figure 3). These measures are just one of many proposed to shape Ofcom's Codes of Practice, however it is not known which measures will be adopted.

In their multi-choice answers, 52.1 per cent ($n = 74$) of respondents said they would be comfortable sharing their email address, 29.6 per cent ($n = 42$) a contact number, and 26.1 per cent ($n = 37$) their name. To a far lesser degree, only 5.6 per cent ($n = 8$) would have a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check, 8.5 per cent ($n = 12$) would share their ID, 7 per cent ($n = 10$) their home address, 3.5 per cent ($n = 5$) their banking details and 38 per cent ($n = 54$) would share no details. Financial and personalized data are commonly used by law enforcement during investigations. Thus, their use within the regulatory framework would be an effective way to

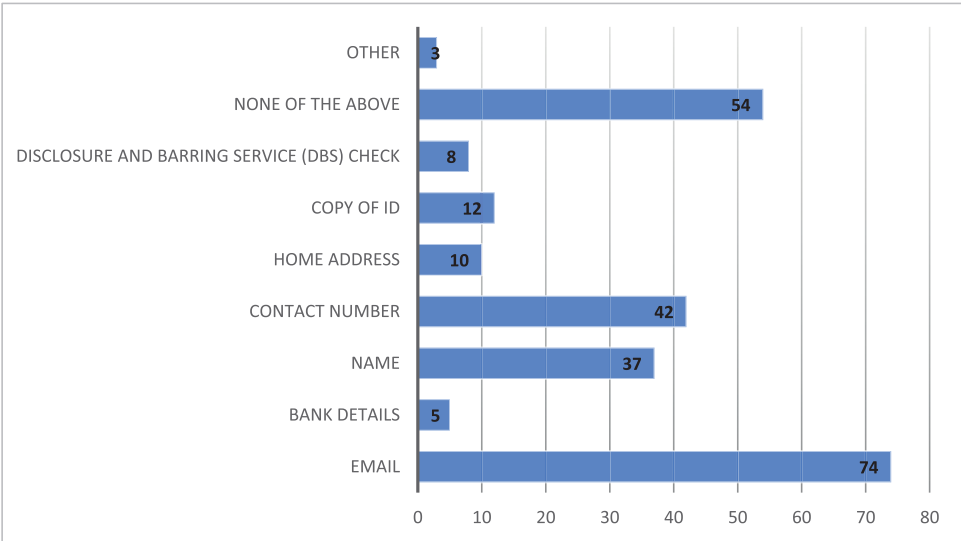


Fig. 3 What personal information would sex buyers be comfortable sharing with ASWs?

discern licit buyers and sellers from those engaging in exploitation. However, given sex buyers who engage in the licit sex market are unwilling to provide such personal details, there are concerns that increased regulation will not have its desired effect to prevent exploitation.

Finally, 59 respondents shared further comments regarding the regulation of ASWs in a free text question. 35.6 per cent ($n = 21$) explicitly mentioned how regulation in some form would be helpful, whilst 40.7 per cent ($n = 24$) argued that regulation would not work or would be problematic. Those who were pro-regulation emphasized its use to protect the consensual sex industry, arguing that this would require regulatory measures that were stringent to verify identities.

It might discourage at the beginning. But people would get used to it. If there are clear places of how the personal information is being stored, and how can it be used, this could only mean a better service for clients and a better job for sex workers.

Male, 25–34,
More than 10 years purchasing on ASWs

Anything that reduces exploitation in this industry is a good thing, but regulation should not interfere in what consenting adults do in private.

Male, 55–64,
6–10 years purchasing on ASWs

Many respondents re-emphasized how the regulatory framework should not be so onerous as to disrupt the industry, but that transparency of policies would make the industry safer.

The real ones won't bother; it will get rid of all the fake and dodgy ads and make it safer for both worker and client.

Male, 45–54
3–5 years purchasing on ASWs

Those against regulation argued that it would result in driving exploitation underground, thus being impossible to regulate.

Fix the problem at the source, not put a patch over the top. If these poor women are being exploited, the scumbags will find worse ways around it.

Male, 35–44

Less than 1 year purchasing on ASWs

If oversight becomes intrusive or a risk to either worker or client, then this will 100% go underground to the detriment of potentially abused workers. Prohibition always brings about covert criminal involvement. Just look at history.

Prefer not to say, 65 and over,

6–10 years purchasing on ASWs

Regulations are being haphazardly brought in without proper consultation with those affected so it can be done in a way that doesn't cause unforeseen (and totally foreseeable) effects. Likely to drive at least some and possibly most (both buyer and sellers) to significantly less safe arenas (having a significantly greater impact on sellers).

Prefer not to say, 25–34,

3–5 years purchasing on ASWs

There were concerns that the legislation is poorly designed, missing the complexities of apprehending offenders and safeguarding survivors of exploitation online and that this would be exacerbated by poor implementation. Respondents argued that whilst workers may not mind providing more personal details to ASWs, buyers would likely be unwilling, leading to risky behaviours (such as using less legitimate sites or giving fraudulent information). This would ultimately not give added protection to sex workers or survivors of exploitation. Some respondents wrote at length about the possibility that regulation could be a smoke screen for criminalization:

The government's own biased view is being used against sex workers. They do not recognise this as a valid role in society, and as such are determined to stop such work. By regulating ASWs, the original idea (which is good) to make these safer places for people to interact, has been overtaken by the desire to criminalise the internet, and restrict freedom of expression and trade.

Male, 55–64,

More than 10 years purchasing on ASWs

Consequently, there are significant concerns that need to be addressed to ensure the regulation is fit for purpose and creates accountability and transparency through reporting processes where suspicious behaviour is detected.

WHY SEX BUYERS COULD ASSIST IN PREVENTING SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Limited research has looked at the beliefs (and reported actions) of sex buyers with regard to what they do when they witness MSHT conditions (Sanders *et al.* 2018; Smith 2019). As central actors in the sex market, sex buyers are both the first to encounter adverts on ASWs and the

worker in question, upon negotiating and interacting with their services. Yet beyond this fact, the noise from pro-abolitionists who base their arguments on the premise that sex buyers are perpetrating violence and abuse against women as an absolute bottom-line position (Berger 2012; Coy *et al.* 2019) has meant that sex buyers have been ignored and outcast as potential stakeholders in prevention or protection interventions, policies or law reforms. This approach means there can be only one outcome: to ban the purchase and sale of sex in attempts to eradicate demand for paid sex and the sex industry at large. As such where this approach has been favoured moral panic ensued, targeting and demonizing sex buyers as complicit in exploitation and trafficking (Weitzer 2007; Serughetti 2013; Ellison 2017). Political rhetoric often points sweepingly to all sex buyers as exploiters, and their very behaviour is what inadvertently provides the market for traffickers to exploit women, hiding them in plain sight amongst consensual workers (APPG 2018). Current socio-political deliberations suggest measures to prevent sexual exploitation include creeping neo-abolitionist attitudes as the consensual sex industry is targeted (Scoular and Carline 2014), with very little nuance to separate out involuntary from voluntary sex work. As there appears to be growing concerns around the number of people sexually exploited, it appears the 'end demand' approach is far from successful (Berger 2012), not least because of its damaging implications for the health, safety and protection of sex workers (Brooks-Gordon *et al.* 2021).

This study has demonstrated that despite the sample being self-selecting, there is evidence of responsibility within sex buyers' purchasing habits, as many make pre- and post-purchase checks, whilst demonstrating inclinations to report concerns. This suggests that not all sex buyers are complicit in engaging in exploitation or perpetuating abusive structures, but that motives for engaging in the consensual sex industry are distinct from those of traffickers. Understanding who purchases sex and the motives of buyers is important (Huysamen 2020; Sanders *et al.* 2020). Sanders *et al.* (2018) learned much about how this group engages with online platforms, their choices across different markets, and partly about how they react to exploitation, safety issues and changes in the law. Most sex buyers surveyed for this study reported being unwilling to continue a booking with someone they suspected was being exploited, except in specific circumstances, where the booking would be honoured but the buyer would not engage in any sexual acts, but merely exchange money to protect the woman from further harm.

Whilst law enforcement perform data scraping checks of ASW adverts, these advertisements can only tell you so much, and traffickers are adept at hiding the exploited amongst regular adverts (APPG 2018). However, evidence of exploitation when meeting the worker can be an important means of identification. Evidence of harm, substance misuse or negative well-being were significant indicators of exploitation for sex buyers when meeting the provider. These are particularly important, as law enforcement and ASW operators cannot verify the health and well-being of workers. Thus, encouraging sex buyers to report any concerns upon engaging with sex workers would increase the overall efficacy of the Online Safety Act.

However, barriers to reporting need to be addressed, including making ASW platforms responsible, to have a clear and anonymous reporting route for buyers. Our findings suggest an inclination for reporting and a concern amongst sex buyers to ensure the industry is safe and not attractive to traffickers. However, this is only possible whereby they are encouraged to report, both through the platforms they use and by anonymous and positive reporting behaviour absent of stigma towards their sexual proclivities.

It appears promising that just over half of sex buyers are in favour of greater regulation, whilst showing a propensity towards reporting concerns of exploitation. Whilst a quarter were against regulation, another quarter were unsure: therefore if the Codes of Practice (which Ofcom are consulting the public on in 2024 to be released 2025) are shaped to not disrupt the sex industry whilst at the same time focussed on reducing harm, the conditions are set up for sex buyers to assist in preventing MSHT online.

Whilst the need for regulation is established in the broader project's findings (see [Hopkins et al. 2023](#); [Keighley and Sanders 2023](#)), there is a fear that unintended consequences could scupper any real progress in the prevention puzzle. Sex buyers are concerned that regulation will result in extra surveillance of ordinary sex work activities. Respondents shared their planned purchasing habits if regulation were to require greater surveillance of the sex industry, demonstrating a likely shift to offline or encrypted spaces. Moreover, few buyers were willing to stop purchasing sexual services altogether, demonstrating that criminalizing the wider sex industry by preventing the purchase of sexual services is unlikely to be successful. If further stigmatized, buyers are less likely to report any concerns, for fear of repercussions on themselves and loved ones. Presently, sex buyers are concerned that regulation will be overbearing on the industry serving to make workers less safe, with many reluctant to share personal information for verification purposes. Furthermore, even if some demonstrate responsibility in MSHT prevention, traffickers will move their operations to less regulated spaces where buyers are unaware of the worker's lack of consent or may adapt their practices to hide the exploitation of victims further.

Alternatively, restorative social justice efforts offer more support and resources for safeguarding and provide exits for those wishing to leave the sex trade ([Leonelli 2023](#)). This would also reduce vulnerabilities to exploitation, by safeguarding the wider industry and removing the threat of poverty and criminalization. Included is the continued criminalization of human trafficking, and an accountability to online platforms to increase their regulatory frameworks to tackle exploitation. After 20 years of implementation ([Kingston and Thomas 2019](#)) and transference in policy ([McMenzie et al. 2019](#)) the Nordic Model of criminalizing sex buyers and aiming to end demand would not work, but pushes sex workers into more unsafe environments as buyers will still purchase sex, just in less surveyed areas ([Leonelli 2023](#)). One of the core concerns from senior police voiced in our study was that encrypted software which no-one has access to would be where sexual exploitation would flourish if ASWs were banned.

Given the knowledge sex buyers have pertaining to MSHT on ASWs and a propensity to report, it seems significant that they are consulted in the development online regulation policy. Law enforcement recognize ASWs, and their users are a useful intelligence pool to identifying criminal activity, whilst supporting the safeguarding of sex workers as another policing priority ([NPCC 2023](#)). This research suggests buyers are open to discussing their purchasing habits (without stigma or criminalization), yet no meaningful efforts have been made to engage this group as legitimate stakeholders in the United Kingdom, despite laws making the sale and purchase of commercial sex between consenting adults legal.

CONCLUSION: SEX BUYERS AS STAKEHOLDERS IN POLICY AND REGULATION

The infrastructure and governance systems of ASWs have 'important consequences for workers, affecting whether they are empowered or exploited' ([Choudary 2018](#): 1). Whilst some in the sex industry (both consumers and sellers) have expressed concerns regarding the over-regulation of the industry, and creeping-abolitionism ([Scoular and Carline 2014](#)), the UK government has argued that the online safety legislation will not be used to target the consensual industry. Furthermore, policymakers have emphasized the critical role ASWs can play in engaging in the anti-trafficking movement ([Trueman et al. 2023](#)). However, throughout the ongoing policy discussions, there has been no consultation with sex buyers, despite being active users and individuals who come face to face with workers and consequently with survivors of exploitation. A significant number of sex buyers believe they have a level of responsibility to spot signs of exploitation and report these to the authorities. Yet current regulatory plans have

failed to incorporate comprehensive strategies of how sex buyers will be motivated to report their concerns. This step could prove effective, addressing significant resource concerns for those currently tasked with moderating content and identifying crimes online (N8 Policing Research Partnership 2020).

However, sex buyers are distrusting of police and ASWs to respond to reports of sexual exploitation appropriately. Furthermore, the sex industry feels over-surveyed and stigmatized. Where there is a failure to distinguish between sex work as work and exploitation, many in the industry face discrimination (Turner 2021). Much of the debate on sex buyers is underpinned by abolitionism, thus seeking to demonstrate the complicity of sex buyers in an industry framed by abuse, exploitation and non-consent (e.g. see Dempsey 2009; Coy *et al.* 2019; Silver *et al.* 2022). Negative attitudes towards sex buyers have influenced worldwide criminal justice policies based on 'distorted information' about the sex buyer population (Sanders 2013: 175). The planned regulatory measures are likely to exacerbate concerns, with sex buyers arguing that regulation needs to be carefully managed to prevent displacement of the sex industry and modern slavery offences. Creating an environment in which sex workers are stigmatized and vulnerable may push the sale and purchase of sex to the margins, creating more opportunities for exploitation. Thus, the regulation may inadvertently deliver abolitionist consequences regardless of intent.

This research has highlighted the important role sex buyers can play in the prevention jigsaw, recognizing the utility of regulation, and their role within this, challenging assumptions that purchasers of sex are abusive or immoral (Sanders *et al.* 2020; Silver *et al.* 2022). Ultimately, most sex buyers want a safeguarding approach, that disrupts trafficking, without increasing surveillance of the sex industry. Given the knowledge sex buyers have pertaining to sexual exploitation and a propensity to report their concerns, it seems significant that they are consulted and included in the regulation puzzle.

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