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DOCTORAL THESIS

“It’s still a form of violence”
Sex workers’ experiences of domestic and familial abuse

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“It’s still a form of violence”: Sex workers’ experiences of domestic and familial abuse

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

Sex workers' experiences of violence and abuse within the family and intimate partner dynamics is under-researched and under-theorised. Based on the experiences of sex workers across England and Wales, this thesis explores how sex workers experienced domestic violence and abuse (DVA) while they were sex working, and the ways in which sex work and DVA intersected and overlapped at various points in their life. Set against the backdrop of neoliberalism, and drawing on discourses of agency, responsibility, and criminality, this thesis further asks why sex workers may not disclose their experiences of DVA and where, if anywhere, they do and seek help and support.

This study applies a scholar-activist and intersectional approach, and involves a thorough literature review of both academic and activist materials. 15 qualitative semi-structured long-form interviews with current and former sex workers were carried out, and what follows are significant findings which uncover the extent of stigma and the effects of criminalisation in personal and familial relationships, the importance and the holistic work of sex worker outreach projects, and the power of narratives and discourses in how sex workers understand and articulate their experiences of violence.

Utilising personal experience, professional knowledge from frontline domestic violence and sex worker outreach, and a strong history of sex worker activism, this research fills a much needed gap in knowledge in focusing on sex workers' experiences of domestic and familial abuse.

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Glossary

BDSM	Bondage/Discipline, Dominance/Submission, Sadism/Masochism
Civvy work/Square work	Work outside of the sex industry
DARVO	Deny Attack Reverse Victim Offender
DVA	Domestic violence and abuse
Domme/Dominatrix	A woman who physically or psychologically dominates her partner in a paid transaction
Dungeon	A privately owned space which is specifically set up and equipped for BDSM or kinky sex
Full service/full service sex work	Penile-vaginal penetrative sex
Phone sex	A pay per minute service offering sex themes conversation over the telephone
Security buddy	A friend, partner, or fellow worker who checks in before, during and after the booking for safety.
Submissives	A person who engages in a power exchange (partial or total) within a relationship, often without money changing hands.
Sugar Dating	A pseudo-romantic transactional sexual relationship between an older wealthy person and a younger person
SWARM	Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement
SWOP	Sex work outreach project
Third parties	A person or a business who helps to organise, facilitate or manage sex work. Third parties include manages, colleagues, maids, drivers, receptions, security staff. Third parties are criminalised in the UK.
VAWG	Violence Against Women and Girls
Webcamming	A form of performance sex work where a model performs erotic acts online, such as stripping, masturbation, or sex acts in exchange for money or goods.

1: Introduction

I never thought of my first relationship as abusive until about ten years after it ended. At the time that he and I met, I was 16, he was 37, and over the course of a year that I was involved with him, he groomed me, raped me, and abused me, until one day I was too frightened to get on a train to visit him. I felt compelled to, of course, and terrified of what would happen if I did not, but the fear of going back won. I never saw him again, though he attempted contact with me a few times. He was the first, but not the last, abusive man I was with.

In 2015, when I was 26, I met a man through sex work. He had been an online client of mine when I was webcamming, and being bored and a bit lonely I met up with him on an unpaid date when I was in his city visiting my family. We began a relationship, and, as time went on, he became coercive, threatening and manipulative. I do not believe that all men who pay for sex hate women, but he certainly did. Then, when I was 28 and still sex working, there was a man I met on a dating app who was sexy and funny and fun. After two years, a black eye, bruises on my neck and him accusing me of sleeping with all of his friends because I was a ”whore who didn’t know better”, I left him as well, this time with a drug addiction and 10kg underweight.

In 2018 I was single, and I took on a ‘civvy job’ alongside sex work, ostensibly as a way to transition out of the sex industry. I worked for a sex work outreach project having volunteered there a few years previously. My job involved going to parlours and brothels, hostels and night-shelters, sex workers’ houses and hotel rooms, and I would dispense condoms or sexual health screening kits, or help them report an incident to the police. I signposted to stalking services, or accompanied women to hospitals or doctor’s appointments. I was trained in how to manage disclosures of sexual violence and wrote pamphlets on how to stay safe with clients. For many sex workers who were engaged with the service, work was work and it was, on the whole, not ideal, but not violent or dangerous. What many women I spoke to struggled with were families, and partners, and the police. Often they spoke to me about their difficult family dynamics or relationships they did not feel safe in. They did not want to go to the police because they feared arrest, nor did they want to attend statutory domestic abuse services because they worried they would be blamed, or judged, or turned away because of their work. Many people in their life did not know they sex worked and so in addition to the abuse, there was compounded isolation and shame.

In 2021, when I was 32, happy and healthy and two years into my PhD, I went on holiday with a close friend who I had met through sex work activism. She and I were talking about how we entered into sex work; me, at university, three years after the abusive relationship I'd experienced at 16, and her after leaving home and moving to another country as a teenager. We spoke about an underlying, yet unnameable factor in our deciding to sell sex which we knew was linked to being abused, yet we could not work out how. What we knew for sure was that both of us could draw parallels between sex working and being around men who hurt us.

Even as someone who had experienced it, and who had seen friends experience it also, it was shocking to me how many sex workers had partners or family members who pressured them to work and then stole their money, who called them names or threatened to 'out' them, who mocked them, belittled them, assaulted them, and often felt justified in doing so because of how acceptable it felt to hate and abuse sex workers generally. It was my time working at the outreach project, my years in sex worker activism, and my own experiences of abuse, that led to me doing this PhD. It was clear to me that these experiences of abuse, of fears and apprehension of the police, and the distrust of statutory DVA organisations, were not being reflected accurately in the academic literature. Sex work research rarely focused on intimate relationships or families, and DVA research rarely accounted for sex workers except as de facto victims of gendered violence. My aim with this research is to fill a much needed gap in knowledge about sex workers' experiences of domestic and familial abuse, and to amplify experiences which are often unexplored in research.

1.1 The context for the research

This thesis is focused on exploring sex workers' experiences of domestic and familial violence and abuse, based on the experiences of sex workers across England and Wales. It will explore how sex workers experienced DVA while they were sex working, and how sex work and DVA intersected at various points in their life. In exploring these experiences, this research project is also interested in sex workers' discourses of abuse and of victimhood, especially how sex workers drew on or resisted these discourses in naming or identifying the abuse. Additionally, this thesis aims to understand why sex workers may not disclose their experiences and where, if anywhere, they do disclose and seek support.

The issues that this thesis discusses cannot be meaningfully decontextualised from the wider socio-political or economic landscape in which they happen. The aim of this introduction is to describe the backdrop against which the formulation of this thesis, and its findings, are placed. While there are many interconnecting social trends at play, the influence of neoliberalism and the emphasis of crime control as gender justice are fundamental to understanding the meaning of sex work and of DVA, their construction in policy and the state responses to it.

After briefly introducing these concepts, this chapter moves on to the structure of this thesis as a whole with an outline of each chapter and ends with the hopes for this thesis.

1.1.1 Neoliberalism, social policy and social change

Neoliberalism is not a single discursive entity and remains an 'essentially contested concept' (Gallie, 1956; Gane, 2018) meaning that while it has been varyingly theorised, this has resulted in a range of definitions (Masson, 2020). While definitions vary, neoliberalism is largely understood as an ideology influencing public policies of governments and international agencies, generally associated with "anything that smacks of deregulation" (Rodick, 2017: 2). Broadly speaking, neoliberalism refers to the rise of the free market and the concomitant withdrawal of the state from the social sector, encouraging financial policies of deregulation, privatisation, and with it, a rise of corporate power (Cheng and Kim, 2014). Importantly, a key principle of neoliberalism is the transference of public services to private organisations (Bumiller, 2008). The dominance of this principle over policy has liberalised the free market, limited the power of trade unions and overseen the breaking up and selling off of public assets such as prisons, healthcare, transportation, utility companies and welfare services (Harvey, 2005; Birch and Siemiatycki, 2016).

In the UK especially, encroaching neoliberal policies are in stark contrast to 'welfarism': a collection of social policies based on post-war solidarity, where the onus is on the state to protect citizens through policies such as social housing, retirement pensions and the National Health Service (Timmins, 1998; Marques, 2010; Mooney, 2011). With the advent of neoliberalism however, this process of care becomes individualised and the state is no longer responsible for the protection of its citizens, and by the late 1970s, the tenets of neoliberalism were influencing American and British public policies (Marques, 2010; Bumiller, 2008). Alongside this shift to private companies, there is a concomitant rise in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that are expected to step in and address welfare and other social problems where the state has stepped back and private companies do not see profit. This has been conceptualised as the hollowing out of the state (Milward et al, 2010; Rhodes, 1994), highlighting how it is poorer communities, and frequently vulnerable groups, who suffer most when services that used to be provided but are now withdrawn from the state.

Some feminists have argued that the core features of neoliberalism - materialism, consumerism and corporate culture – clearly expand well beyond the economic realm (Fraser, 2012). Rottenberg (2018: 7), for example, argues that neoliberalism is behind the relentless conversion of all aspects of our world into “specks of capital”, including human beings themselves who are encouraged to become self-investing and entrepreneurial, focusing on their individual ability for success rather than collective action and social welfare. Neoliberalism represents a governance that constitutes people as individual subjects whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for self-care and self-reliance —the ability to provide for their own needs, exercise autonomous choices, and service their own ambitions (Brown, 2005; Rottenberg, 2018; Downing, 2019). Part of this governance is sexual, and Duggan (2003: xxi) theorises that the economic cannot be transparently abstracted from "the state or the family, from racial apartheid, gender segmentation or sexual regulation."

These changes occur alongside, and in equally broad trends around gender and sexuality. There has been ongoing and sustained liberalisation attitudes toward sexual minorities (McCormack, 2012), alongside more progressive attitudes to non-marital sex shifting from a minority to a substantial majority saying premarital sex is "not wrong at all" in the past thirty years (Albakri et al., 2019). These attitudes are partly spurred by modern methods of contraception, alongside the shift towards individualism which sees morality as organised through personal fulfilment rather than religious or other duty. McCormack et al (2021) argue that a normalisation of sexual attitudes and practices have occurred in recent years, which shows both the trends and limitations of this approach.

With a rise in neoliberal values, and a normalisation of progressive sexual attitudes, it would make sense for a sex worker to be regarded as both an enterprising, self-actualising individual, and symbolic of sexual libertarianism (Chapkis, 1997; O'Neill, 2001; Cheung, 2013). Sex workers are often not, however, instead being understood as engaging in a risky lifestyle and morally culpable, criminal, and hypersexualised to the point of being rendered little more than "body-objects" (O'Neill, 2001: 136; Marques, 2010).

1.1.2 Violence Against Women and Girls and the relevance of gender

Understanding, responding to, and preventing violence against women and girls (VAWG) has in recent years become a governmental priority across the world (Action Aid, 2022; WHO, 2023; United Nations, 2023). In the UK, the VAWG strategy is a UK government initiative established in 2010 which aims to tackle all forms of violence against women and girls through prevention, protection and prosecution (Home Office, 2016; NPCC, 2022). VAWG covers a range of crimes including rape and sexual assault, domestic violence and abuse, stalking and harassment, and crimes committed in the name of "honour", all of which disproportionately affect women and girls (CPS, 2019; ONS, 2021; Home Office, 2021). VAWG is very much focused on embodied and interpersonal violence, rather than structural violence, and responses to VAWG are primarily concerned with legal reform and criminal responses; both as symbolic and actual space for justice.

Yet, rendering those involved to their individual actions and responses, and removing gendered experiences such as sex work, domestic and sexual abuse, and other forms of interpersonal violence against women and girls from their wider socio-political context, both fosters and masks violence by the state itself (Smith, 2020). As Munro (2013) has pointed out, though the concept of violence is grounded in a very real experience of harm or wrongdoing, the meanings of 'violence' are heavily socially constructed. For example, the VAWG strategy focuses primarily on conviction, meaning an increased police presence rather than increased provision in refuges, welfare support or economic stability (Olufemi, 2020; Home Office, 2022). Instead of stronger state welfare, women's safety is invariably linked to increased state control, punishment and surveillance (Gruber, 2020).

While evidence from the Home Office itself draws clear connections between austerity and selling sex, in policy these connections are notable only by their absence (Smith, 2020; APPG, 2014; 2018). For both sexual exploitation and experiencing DVA, evidence has shown that access to economic stability decreases both; access to other financial options means that if those involved in the sex industry continue to sell sex, they are not forced to work in vulnerable or exploitative ways. Additionally, access to capital means you may be able to leave an abusive situation, and take the children, even if it is only for a night (Olufemi, 2020).

Coy and Kelly (2019) have argued that neoliberal policies have displaced responsibility for welfare and safety away from the state and onto individuals. This privatisation of responsibility means that risks are supposed to be managed by individuals, ostensibly with a focus on their agency, rather than the structural or institutional constraints; but, this both renders them vulnerable to abuse, and limits their possibilities for safety. Governing neoliberals have endorsed radical feminism's 'patriarchal force' thesis, which provides both political fuel and theoretical justification for the reliance on criminal justice interventions as a primary means of addressing domestic abuse (Gruber, 2020; Porter, 2020). Feminists opposing this reliance have long pointed out how convenient it is for neoliberal government to harness a criminal justice response, with criminalisation becoming the stand in for condemning male power, violence and control over women (Bernstein, 2012; Rottenberg, 2018; Porter, 2020). Neoliberalism is individualised but opportunities to exercise agency are heavily constrained by social contexts, including the material resources available to women in coping with life challenges in extreme situations (Campbell and Mannell, 2015).

Throughout this thesis the language I often use is gendered, and I draw on discourses of violence against women and girls. This is because theoretically and methodologically the field of research into DVA originated in radical feminist analysis of violence against women (Harne and Radford, 2008; Donovan and Barnes, 2020). Still, I resist attempts to apply heteronormative, cis-normative theorising uncritically (Donovan and Barnes, 2020). Drawing on intersectional theorising, this thesis rejects a fixation on gender as central when other forms of marginality and stigma are present. There is not an absence of gender relations, however - we live in a heteronormative, patriarchal and gendered world – and the findings in this thesis are contextualised by both a culture of misogyny and the stigmatisation and objectification of women; both of which perpetrate the violence against sex workers, including domestic and familial violence and abuse.

On the subject of gender, nor am I disregarding the importance of gender roles in the sex industry. While not everyone who sells sex is a woman, and not everyone who buys is a man, it is evident that most buyers of sex are men with money, and most sellers are women, including trans women, without (Mac, 2016; Mac and Smith, 2018). Regardless, as Smith et al (2015: 2) argue, a focus "beyond the hetero-centric gender norm" is important for developing fresh insights into how gender, sex, and power are theorised and contextualised in the context of commercial sex.

1.2 Outline of the thesis

The following chapter is the first of two literature reviews and begins by mapping the legal and social conditions of working in the sex industry in England and Wales. Chapter 2 documents what is said to constitute sex work and the sex industry, and assesses the literature which focuses on who sells sex and why. This chapter then looks back and traces the historical debates shaping discourse on sex work, paying particular attention to feminist advocacy and activism, and the opposing arguments of radical feminism and sex worker activists. As this divide within feminism has deepened from the 1970s until today, the positionings of 'anti' or 'pro' sex work have been reoriented, to being shaped along broader discursive trends of neoliberalism and its emphasis on responsibility and self-advancement. While trends in neoliberalism may clearly benefit sex workers, there is a disturbing trend of conflating the right to work and organise with rigid individualism. This alliance of feminist justice with the neoliberal agenda will be critically examined in this chapter, before moving to interrogate how these discourses have contributed to and maintained stigma against sex workers.

Chapter 3 begins with a statutory definition of domestic abuse, as defined by the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, and following is a discussion on the reported prevalence of DVA along with current state interventions and responses to it. The second section of Chapter 3 documents both the construction of violence and abuse within some factions of the second wave feminist movement, and the historical critique of gender as the primary oppressor; a criticism levied by Black and Asian feminists from the second wave until today. The influence of intersectionality on theorising DVA will be introduced here before moving to the final section of this chapter, which is focused on the intimate and familial relationships of sex workers. While research in this area is scarce, the literature does document familial reasons for entering the sex industry, and the pressures of the sex industry on intimate relationships. This chapter ends by exploring the reasons why someone might stay in an abusive home or relationship, and what may prevent them from seeking help or leaving.

I open Chapter 4 by reviewing the politics and ethics of researching sex work and DVA. Throughout this methodology chapter, I thread through the ways that my personal history informs how this research is structured, reflecting on the benefits and the challenge to navigate in this scholar-activist piece of work. This reflection is grounded in intersectional feminist approaches to reflexive research, approaches which are explored in depth in this chapter. As such, I end the first half of the chapter by interrogating the emotional impact of this research project on me. The second half of this chapter is focused on the research design, and here I explain the methods undertaken for the research, including participant recruitment, interview style, coding and analysis. Issues of ethics and vulnerability are integral to researching sex work and DVA and these concepts are considered throughout this chapter.

Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 are the findings chapters. The first of these - Chapter 5 – begins to contextualise the complex interplay between sex work and abuse. Here, I show how participants defined and problematised the term ‘sex work’ and explore how they articulated their exchanging sexual activities for money; what form this work took, and how and why they began sex working. Though I divide the experiences of some participants into ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ landings into the industry, this chapter adds to the body of work which defies binaries and explores nuance in agency, choice, and financial decision making.

Chapter 6 focuses on the ways that violence and abuse manifested in relationships and within families while the participants were sex working. Though findings in this chapter are divided by ‘types’ of abuse – emotional, physical, economic and sexual – it is necessary to clarify that abuse was not experienced as separate individual events or typified incidents, but as a web of ongoing and multiple victimisations. Sex working and domestic and familial abuse intersected at different points for different participants, and for many abusive family members and partners, they were able to coerce their partners in ways which were hidden and hard to detect if the participants were or could have been making a conscious choice to sell sex. The intersections of DVA and of sex work are shown to be particularly pertinent in this chapter.

The findings in Chapter 7 build on the discursive interrogation of the previous two chapters and focuses on how participants talked about their experiences of violence and abuse. In particular, this chapter analyses how participants internalised, reproduced, and resisted dominant narratives, and the ways in which these narratives shaped their own stories, their perceptions of themselves, and their roles within the relationship. Language is at the heart of one's construction of the world and imbued with political consequences, something many participants were acutely aware of. This is why it is so important to interrogate how they chose to define themselves, how they define their experiences, and their resistance or reproduction of certain narratives.

Chapter 8 focuses on the third research aim of this thesis: to understand how, if at all, participants sought support for the abuse they were living with, and this chapter contextualises these experiences within the broader neoliberal framework. In talking about interventions and support, participants also spoke about barriers, both real and perceived, which they felt prevented them from reaching out for help, as well as interventions which occurred with and without their consent. The chapter is divided into three systems of intervention: child protection and domestic abuse services; the police; and sex work outreach projects.

In Chapter 9, the concluding chapter, I draw together the key contributions to knowledge gained from this thesis. I reflect on the methodology and methodological implications, most notably my own subjectivity and relation to the research project. I also consider the limitations of the research project as a whole, noting possible areas for future study. I use this chapter to suggest policy recommendations based on the findings of this thesis, and end with a personal reflection on this work.

In concluding, this thesis is not simply a piece of academic research. It developed as a personal project to reach out and connect with others who have experienced DVA away from, or alongside, their time sex working. As a sex worker activist I openly campaign for the full decriminalisation of sex work as harm reduction and this research project has become part of this activism. While I do not ask about, nor directly speak about, decriminalisation with participants, their experiences of partners, families, and the police, as well as their broader interactions with stigma, shame and criminality shape the analysis in ways which strengthen the fight for sex worker rights. This thesis is built on decades of feminist research, as well as the seminal work of sex worker activists within and outside of the academy, and so, this project is praxis as well as theory. The measure of a society's humanity is how it treats its most vulnerable. It is my hope with this thesis to change the way we treat one another, and with it, society.

2: Sex work, stigma and the state

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the sex industry, particularly the legal and social conditions of engaging in sex work in England and Wales. In order to contextualise the debates within this thesis, it is necessary to review how sex work is represented in law and policy and so this chapter opens by mapping what is known on the nature and prevalence of sex work; what sex work may consist of, who might be susceptible or likely to work in the sex industry, and what the legal responses might be. This chapter then traces the historical debates of sex work in feminist advocacy and activism, showing how debates on the sex industry have been reoriented from pro/anti sex work, to being shaped along the neoliberal backdrop of individualism and capitalism. This alliance of feminist justice with the neoliberal agenda will be critically examined in this chapter, before moving to interrogate how these discourses have contributed to and maintained stigma against sex workers.

2.1 Nature and prevalence of sex work

The exchange of money for sexual intercourse is documented as an activity since antiquity and has been constructed and understood in different ways (Bell, 1994). While the transactional relationship between money and sex is not new, the term 'sex work' to describe it is comparatively modern. Sex worker activist and writer Carol Leigh coined the term 'sex work' "in 1979 or 1980" (Leigh, 1997: 229) to "mark the beginning of a movement" with the aim of uniting all of those who work in the sex industry – prostitutes, porn performers and dancers – under a shared referent. As well as uniting those in the sex industry through their legal and social needs to be recognised as workers, the term ‘sex worker’ was created to direct focus on the work performed rather than on the woman performing it; a move away from the social construct of the “prostitute” with all its socially marginalised meanings and consequences (Bell, 1994). The new terminology solidified this new social movement’s demand for recognition as workers and so, sex worker describes not only a person performing sexual labour, but a political identity and a worker entitled to labour rights (Bell, 1994; Sanders et al, 2009; Jeffreys, 2015).

Since the coining of the term ‘sex worker’, the landscape of the sex industry has changed, and accordingly, ‘sex work’ as a term has expanded to include online and offline sexual services as well as broader understandings of what ‘sex’ is to include fetish, kink and BDSM exchanges also (Sanders et al, 2009). In this thesis, the term ‘sex work’ refers to any and all negotiation and performance of sexual service for remuneration, and comprising any form of sexualised labour. This includes performing for pornography companies, producing and selling erotic photos and videos, stripping and exotic dancing, phone sex, as well as one-to-one or group sexual services including selling full service penetrative sex, and BDSM or fetish work. Additionally, in this thesis, a sex worker is used to refer to anyone who partakes in this labour. The sex industry, a broader term still, is used in this thesis to refer to those who are selling, and are sold or traded, for sex, and this includes opportunistic work for money, drugs, or somewhere to sleep.

While the majority of people do not engage in sex work, sex workers constitute a substantial minority in the U.K, but estimating or researching the prevalence of sex work is challenging for a number of reasons (Hester et al, 2019). Activities often occur in private due to stigma or criminality; sex work is transient, and workers move in and out of the industry, or move between different parts of the industry. There is also a lack of identification with the political connotations of 'sex worker' which could result in low response rates in research. 'Facts' on the prevalence should therefore be treated with caution, but estimates suggest that there are between 70,000 and 100,000 sex workers currently in the UK, with the overwhelming majority identifying as women (Kinnell, 2008; Home Office, 2016; Hester et al, 2019).

Sex work is sometimes positioned as a gendered activity where women sell services to men. While there is evidence that far more women sell sex than men, and far more men buy sex compared to women, it is also important to recognise that men sell sex, both to heterosexual women and gay and bisexual men (Kingston, 2020). Patmen (1988: 199) has argued that "the sale of men's bodies" "does not have the same social meaning" as the sale of women's bodies, however this gender essentialism erases the diversity of lifestyles, experiences and complexities of those who both buy and sell sex (Morris, 2018). Nussbaum (1999) and Walkowitz (2020) have argued that sex work is one of few economic options available to working-class women, and this contributes to commercial sex being perceived overwhelmingly as 'women's work'. Morris (2018) also notes that the list of gendered, often pejorative, terms available to describe sex workers such as 'call girl', 'hooker', 'prostitutes' and 'whores', and the much fewer terms available to describe men, such as 'hustler' or 'rent boy' translate into limitations of thought, framing the discourse around sex work, and influencing regulatory policies. Male sex workers may be acknowledged, but they are not problematised or theorised on as much as female sex workers.

The reasons why people enter the sex industry are diverse in terms of demographics and motivations which means that cautions must be taken in generalisations on why people enter the sex industry. McLeod (1982) has argued that women’s generally disadvantaged position in capitalist society’s, as well as the overall feminisation of poverty, is central to their entry and experience in the sex industry. Neoliberal fiscal policy has shaped the ongoing race to the bottom in international labour standards, with regimes of ‘flexible accumulation’ involving the fragmentation and cheapening of labour through widespread casualisation or informalisation of work and a structural failure to provide job (Burnett, 2022: 5). In these conditions, sex work is tempting for many. Experiences of poverty, systemic racism, institutionally and socially ingrained sexism, transphobia, as well as barriers to education and healthcare mediate the choices of many subjects, both in and out of the sex industry (Nussbaum, 1998). People sell sex because out of a range of options, sex work is often the quickest and most adaptable to their needs, regardless of what those options are. This is true of survival or coerced sex workers, and this is true for more privileged agentic workers; and is especially true when considering the conditions of working in late capitalism.

Historically, poor wages for working women formed by far the strongest link between poverty and prostitution, and feminist historians have often positioned prostitution as part of the survivalist strategy of the poor over many centuries (Walkowtitz, 2016). Yet, more recently, there has been growing evidence that the demographic of those who enter the sex industry has moved beyond being a safety net for poor women. There is an increased student presence in the sex industry (Roberts et al, 2012), as well as those who take on sex work as a “side hustle” alongside “square work” (Bowen, 2021). Bernstein (2007a) has shown the ways that the internet and other technologies have reshaped the sex industry in ways benefit the middle classes. Rather than selling sex outdoors or in brothels, people can work independently from home, using the internet to advertise and find clients.

Additionally, sex workers are increasingly sharing knowledge, how-to guides and spaces to acquire skills and training with the aim of professionalising sexual labour, and marketising a worker's education or cultural capital to a particular clientele (Bernstein, 2007a).

A number of studies have indicated that for many women, they choose to enter and continue sex work to support their children and families (Basu & Dutta, 2011; Church, 2012; Sloss and Harper, 2004; Willis et al, 2016). For these women, having to sex work is contingent on their need to fulfil their role as mothers and, like other working mothers, they must manage their occupational responsibilities while dealing with the demands of parenthood (Dodsworth, 2014; Basu and Dutta, 2011). The 'good mother' ideal constructs women as the primary care giver of their children and for mothers to be fully devoted to this task (Meeussen and Van Laar, 2018). The specific context in which these good mothing narratives perpetuate, or recommendations of what children may 'need', often exclude marginalised women, such as sex workers; these marginalised groups are constructed as outside of what is considered 'normative mothering' (Lockwood, 2017; Miller 2005).

Although sex work remains highly stigmatised around the world, sex workers' accounts reveal various benefits of sex work while mothering, including economic independence from intimate partners or families (Basu & Dutta, 2011; Duff et al, 2015). Rivers-Moore (2010) found that sex work allows women to think of themselves as particularly good mothers, able to provide for and spend quality time with their children due to sex workers' high earning power and flexible working hours.

2.1.1 Sex work in law and policy

The legal framework of sex work in the UK has maintained a somewhat libertarian approach, categorising it as a private affair and historically only intervening in cases where it became a public nuisance. Despite it always being legal to exchange money for sex between consenting adults, there is a partial criminalisation of the full-service sex industry. This means that while selling and buying sexual services is legal, some aspects of sex work and the sex industry are penalised.

Two key pieces of legislation in the twentieth century began to shape the legal discourse of commercial sex in the UK: The Sexual Offences Act 1956 made brothel-keeping[1] an offence, and the Street Offences Act 1959 criminalised loitering or soliciting with the intent of prostitution. Later, the Sexual Offences Act 1985 created the new offence of 'kerb-crawling' to buy sex, which impacted buyers rather than sellers. Under Section 52 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003, and Section 2 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, the criminalised aspects of the sex industry now include soliciting or communicating for the purposes of prostitution; facilitating the travel of a person for the purposes of commercial sex (even if all persons have full informed consent); pimping, pandering, and 'third-party profiteering' referring to maids, assistants, landlords, drivers, and managers.

Currently, the act of buying and selling sex is legal in the absence of coercion or force (Section 53A of the Sexual Offences Act 2003) or third-party facilitation, control and profit- making (Section 52 Causing or Inciting Prostitution for Gain and

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[1] There is no statutory definition of a 'brothel'. However, it has been held to be *"a place where people of opposite sexes are allowed to resort for illicit intercourse, whether…common prostitutes or not": Winter v Woolfe* [1931]. Further, Stevens v Christy [1987] notes *"Premises only become a brothel when more than one woman uses premises for the purposes of prostitution, either simultaneously or one at a time"*. This implies that if two women are present, both must be there for the purposes of sex work. In circumstances where sex workers are working individually out of one flat but there is a rotation of occupants and the young women are moved on a regular basis, it does constitute a brothel.

Controlling Prostitution for Gain; Section 53 Sexual Offences Act 2003). Notably, policy and regulation in the UK remain largely focused on street and indoor full-service based sex work. Despite the online sex work sector of webcamming and pornographic content production now constituting the largest sector of sex work, and despite most commercial sex being facilitated online, and there seems to be limited awareness of online sex work reflected in law (Campbell et al, 2018; Mulvihill, 2022; Beyond the Gaze, 2018). Stripping is also ambiguous territory legally. It is legal to work at, or operate, a strip club if it is licensed as a sexual entertaining venue (SEV), but local councils are able to determine an appropriate number of strip clubs in a certain area, providing the opportunity to set so-called ‘nil-caps’, effectively outlaw the stripping industry entirely (Herrmann, 2022; Wordon, 2023).

This partial criminalisation has resulted in a paradoxical situation whereby selling sex is not illegal, but it is almost impossible to do without breaking a number of laws (Sanders et al, 2009). The current situation also leaves sex workers vulnerable in a number of ways. For example, the only way to work legally in the UK as a full-service sex worker is to work alone, in a solitary premise, with no security, no management, no colleagues, and no public facing advertising or communicating. Sex workers’ power to negotiate for safety at work or labour rights is weakened by potential prosecution, and many sex workers fear reporting violent clients or bosses for fear of arrest themselves (Platt et al, 2018; Sanders et al, 2009). State reluctance to legitimise sex work through active regulation, or to decriminalise it entirely, has permitted the growth of unregulated markets which are open to coercion, exploitation or force (Graham, 2017).

The question of whether sex work constitutes Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) has informed a significant body of academic literature (see Agustin, 2001; Beran, 2012; Farley, 2004; Raymond, 1998; Coy, 2017). Sex work, coded as ‘prostitution and pornography’ has been included in the England and Wales VAWG strategic vision (Home Office, 2010); the VAWG action plan (Home Office, 2011) and the Conservative government strategy against VAWG (2016-20), though in all of these, prostitution is referenced in terms of associated harm and exploitation, not *as* harm and exploitation (Coy, 2017). In the 2021 VAWG Strategy, it is stated that, “prostitution and sex work can lead to the exploitation of women and involve sex trafficking and modern slavery” (2021: 30) and continues,

> In order to continue to ensure the Government is addressing the exploitation and harm of women which may arise from prostitution and sex work, the Home Office will work with the other Government departments, the police, charities and others to consider whether there are additional measures to address those aspects of sex work and prostitution that have the potential to cause harm or exploitation (2021: 71).

In all of these VAWG strategies, prostitution and sex work clearly are considered on the spectrum of violence, but it is not clear why, or which part of sex work is so dangerous. Additionally, within all of these policies commercial sex is categorised as entirely separate from gendered economic injustice; poverty, low income and economic survival are not mentioned at all in reference to sex work or violence against women, except in passing to say that poverty’s existence undermines gender equality (Smith, 2020). Instead, sex work and prostitution are understood as de facto gendered crimes against women, assumingly by men, and not as a result of income instability or poverty.

The construction of sex work as gendered, and the sex industry as violent, is relatively modern, as is the construction of sex worker as a political identity. In this next section I trace how feminist activism and advocacy has shaped these constructions and how the current discourse of sex work stands today.

2.2 Feminist debates around sex work

The grassroots feminist movement of the late 1960s and 1970s began as separate from, and as resistance to, the patriarchal and neoliberal state. To these feminists, the state had been complicit in the subordination of women, so the movement emerged as entirely distinct from government and policy makers. Concomitantly, feminists had been negotiating how best to engage with the state to advance women's safety and equality, with various strategies creating divide in the feminist community. Some feminists have been resistant to engage with the same governments which are complicit in their inequality, while others believe it is the only way to get the law on their side and make meaningful change for women.

One area where this divide is stark lies in the various understandings of, and responses to, the sex industry. Here, there are two core positions: the first is a radical feminist approach that seeks to abolish sex work and pornography; the second, a pro-decriminalisation one that seeks to improve conditions and reduce harm for people who participate in the sex industry. In this section, I explore the origins of these debates

2.2.1 Radical feminism and the move to criminalise sex work

The feminist activist movements of the 1960s through the 1980s, also known as second wave feminism, brought to light many of the issues which were suffered almost exclusively by women (Mackay, 2015; Olefumi, 2020). The movement centred women's subjugation within the family, the workplace, sexual relations, bodily autonomy, and since the Abortion Act of 1967, reproductive rights. Feminism of the second wave was focused on criticising mainstream institutions such as marriage, as well as the repressive legal structures of the masculinist state which had been the cause of their oppression (Freidan, 1963; Dworkin, 1974; Coote and Campbell, 1982). Feminist groups had spurred into action as separate from, and as a reaction to, the state, and much of their work was according to the ethos of being women and 'survivor' led; their activism exposed how the seemingly private types of violence that many women lived with, such as sexual assault or domestic abuse or even expectations around domestic labour, were rooted in systemic and deeply ingrained sexist and patriarchal structures (Bernard, 2017).

At the time of second wave feminist organising, the sex industry largely consisted of pornography and prostitution and was one area of gender relations that feminists focused on in their interrogation of wider society. The phrase 'sex work' was not common parlance, instead it was 'prostitution' which referred to the sale of sex, and 'pornography' to the filming and distribution of it. To many feminists who were part of the second wave, prostitution and pornography lay at the very core of women's oppression (Dworkin, 1989; Jeffreys, 1997; Millett, 1970). Radical feminists saw male violence against women as a keystone of women's oppression and a tool of male supremacy, and believed that all sex work was symptomatic of a patriarchal society – the justification for men of buying access to women's bodies (Barry, 1995; Dworkin 1989; Jeffreys, 1997; MacKay, 2015). Not all feminists felt this way, however, and even from the beginning of the second wave, the focus on the sex industry was fraught with much controversy (Mackay, 2015).

Socialist feminists, in contrast to radical feminists, were often reluctant to problematise men as a homogenous group in this way, and focused instead on the role of capitalism in the oppression of not only women, but men too (Ehrenreich, 1976). Other feminist organising at this time, identifying as sex-positive or sex-radical feminism, sought to dethrone what they believed to be ‘oppressive heterosexuality’ by building community for marginalised groups on the sexual fringe and aligning women’s freedom with sexual freedom (Rubin, 1992; Glick, 2000; Bracewell, 2019). To sex-radical feminists, commercial sex, sadomasochism and pornography could and should be sites of sexual pleasure, not reducible to sites of male violence against women (Califa, 1988; Rubin, 1992).

The purchase of sex was constructed by radical feminists to be violence against women, and not just violence against women in the sex industry; violence against every woman (Connelly, 2018). The body of the prostitute became the site of enactment of male domination, and could be read as women’s repression in society as a whole (Bell, 1994; Connelly, 2018). Radical feminists of the second wave such as Susan Brownmiller and Andrea Dworkin explicitly drew a link between pornography, prostitution and women’s subordination to men with the former arguing that “the case against pornography and the case against prostitution are central to the fight against rape” (Browniller, 1975: 390). Similarly, Robin Morgan claimed that “pornography is the theory, and rape is the practise” (1980). Sex work, framed as a form of sexual or physical violence against women, was the epitome of male domination and incompatible with a world working toward equality of the sexes (Barry, 1995; Jeffreys, 1997; Dworkin, 1989). In these initial stages of feminist analysis of prostitution, prostitution was understood in a reductionist way to simply be deviant and akin to sexual slavery (O’Neill, 2001); thus, there have been calls to abolish the sex industry in the interests of women’s equality and freedom, a position recently coined as ‘sex work abolitionism[2]’ (Dworkin, 1974; 1989; Barry, 1995).

As second wave feminism emerged in opposition to, and separate from, the patriarchal state which had enabled men’s violence, radical feminists at this time were reluctant to call upon the state in their agenda. Creating refuge spaces and disseminating literature among their occupants and wider consciousness raising groups were two methods of social change at the time, both of which emphasise the significance of community support and inter-personal networks. It seemed counter-intuitive, then, to call for the law to act in women’s interests when the legal institution had been key in women’s oppression. Feminist legal scholar Catherine Mackinnon acknowledges this when she writes that “The law sees and treats women the way men see and treat women” (1983: 644), but later contends that “law should not be let off the hook, is too powerful to be ignored” (1991: 1285). Thus, if the law had upheld men’s entitlement to violence, changing the law or the policing of the law so the state intervenes to challenge men’s dominance’ seems reasonable. By engaging the law, some feminists believed, men’s actions would not go unpunished, and men’s legal power could be dismantled, empowering women toward a more equal society (Mackinnon, 1991).

Deciding whether to engage with criminal law was a deeply divisive and contentious issue for second wave feminists and some concerns at this time focused on the problem of ‘first response’ by police officers (Edwards, 1989). When the police were called to domestic violence incidents, for example, these incidents were frequently classified as 'disputes' rather than assaults, and formal records – when they did happen, which was rarely – were trivialised or downgraded (Edwards, 1989). The availability of violence to men as a resource in dominance over women is structured by the lack of state intervention to stop this and so, Redefining activities such as prostitution, domestic abuse and rape as *criminal activities* was and is part of the strategy to get the state to take women's abuse seriously (Weisberg, 1996; Dworkin, 1989; 1993; Farley et al*,* 1998; Barry; 1984; Mackinnon, 1983; Kelly, 1988). For some, what had started out as an anti-state, grassroots movement was now clearly calling upon the state to act in the interests of women. This was because feminist movements without state support were somewhat limited in their abilities to intervene and support the lives of women for the better.

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[2] ‘Sex work abolitionism’ is not to be confused with ‘abolitionist feminism’. ‘Abolitionist feminists argue that state’s criminal legal system works to maintain a racist, patriarchal, and capitalist order of social control and they advocate for a world without police or prisons (see Davis et al, 2022). ‘Sex work abolitionism’ deploys the concept of prison abolition to advocate for a world without sexual slavery.

This radical feminist position, then as now, asserts that, as in other areas of men's violence and objectification, clients of the sex industry ought to be treated as criminals (Dworkin, 1993; Mackinnon, 1993; Weisberg, 1996). Their argument is that prostitution and pornography had to be abolished so men did not feel entitled to subjugate and objectify women. Some went so far as to argue that even advocating for decriminalisation of prostitution or calling for labour rights for sex workers ought to be criminalised as 'hate speech' against women (Strossen, 1993). Further, those who profit, coerce and 'use' sex workers ought to be held accountable under criminal law too (Mackinnon, 1993; Jeffreys, 1997; Raymond, 2013; Dworkin, 1989). For radical feminists, involving criminal law was not contentious, it was necessary; the patriarchal law could shift toward women's favour and criminalise aspects of men's behaviour which endangered women. Then, through law, women's status as sexually subordinate could be eliminated. Neither social movements nor the context in which they emerged are static, however, and any description of their goals or strategies can be subject to revision and diversion. This might help to explain why a movement which had once defined itself in opposition to the status quo could come to believe that engaging with the criminal justice system, whilst contrary to their own anti-oppression agenda, was the best way to protect women from further harm (Dobash and Dobasah, 1992; Houston, 2014).

Since the 1970s the sex industry has globalised and diversified, and alongside this growth a developing impetus to criminalise the sex industry has developed (Bindel, 2017; Jeffreys, 2009; Carline and Scoular, 2017). In the 1990s after kerb-crawling was supposedly ‘dealt with’ through criminal sanctions, there came a growing political interest in sex trafficking. Globalisation and increasing border militarisation have resulted in a rise in economic migration, including sexual economic migration, as well as human trafficking for sexual, domestic, agricultural and hospitality labour (Agustin, 2007; Kenway, 2021). Prostitution and sexual trafficking have been equivalated as both are founded on sexual violence and male entitlement and, to radical feminists, in both cases, consent is impossible (Ward and Wylie, 2017). Radical feminists have collated these issues, and they increasingly conflate all sexual commerce with sexual trafficking; prostitution is viewed as a cause and consequence of inequality, not a job like any other (Bindel, 2017; Kelly, 2004; Raymond, 2002). Such conflation between sex work and sex trafficking or sexual exploitation has stepped up the urgency to eradicate the problem through increasingly punitive means. These feminist commentators often pronounce that police apparatus must be strengthened, and criminalising both the demand of the client and the profiteering by the manager would go some way toward shrinking the sex industry. Imposing these criminal sanctions could readdress the power imbalances which make sex workers so vulnerable (Bindel, 2017; Taylor, 2021;

MacKay, 2015). Indeed, the evolution of laws around sexual commerce has changed from dealing with a public nuisance, to dealing with perceived gendered vulnerability, always centring on women who sell sex.

Feminists with a focus on abolishing the sex industry believe criminal interventions are in the best interests of women for several reasons. They argue there is no conceptual difference between 'free' and 'forced' prostitution (Kelly, 2004; Jeffreys, 2009; MacKinnon; 1993, Raymond, 2002); the circumstances or location do not mitigate what the actual act of prostitution is, and that is the use of women's bodies in any way a man wants once money has changes hands (Dworkin, 1993; Taylor, 2021). As money is the leverage of consent, prostitution is paid rape and rape is criminal (MacKinnon, 1993). In this analysis, there is not, and can never be, a difference in consent between various aspects of the sex industry or differences between women's involvement in it (Kelly, 2004). The absolute inability to consent means, in this argument, that it is in the best interests to save or intervene on women who have been trafficked or coerced into the sex industry by closing down their place of work and arresting those 'responsible' i.e., the clients and the third parties: pimps, managers and traffickers. The sex industry is seen as a dangerous manifestation of global gender inequalities and so criminalising the purchase of it stems the flow of trafficked women (Jeffreys, 1997). The eradication of sex trafficking is thus bound up with the eradication of the sexual commerce sector: one necessitates the other. These radical feminists, "have a goal: to bring about an end to the global sex trade, and to inhabit a world where no woman, man or child is prostituted— a world where sex is not bought, sold or brokered" (Bindel, 2017: 18).

The 'End Demand' Model offers a 'solution' to the 'problem' of sex work by way of a proposed change in legal regime. This policymaking framework aims to reduce the demand for prostitution by ostensibly decriminalising sex work and criminalising the purchase of sex as an instrument to fight trafficking and sexual exploitation (Giametta et al, 2018). First introduced in Sweden in 1999, this legal model is often referred to as the 'Nordic Model' or 'Swedish Model', but as it has moved across the world it became known as the Sex Buyer Law or the End Demand Model, all operating the same way. Under this legal model, known hereafter as the End Demand Model, all penalties against those selling sex are lifted, and those who are 'driving the demand for prostitution' – pimps, traffickers, brothel managers and clients, all gendered as 'male' – will be arrested. (Raymond, 2002; Jeffreys, 1997; APPG, 2014). It is argued that a zero-tolerance legal approach that banned the exchange of money for sexual services could be the scaffolding society needs to stop objectifying women and move closer toward equality (Johnson and Matthews, 2016; APPG, 2018). The anti sex work rhetoric in the early days of second wave feminism remains a vocal part of the feminist movement. Calls for police intervention are justified further by panics around sexual trafficking and calls to women – especially migrant women's – vulnerability to men's violence (Bernstein, 2018) A belief in the state to 'abolish' the sex industry through criminalisation has codified appealing to stronger legal and criminal instruments as feminist praxis.

It may be easy to overstate the influence of feminism on policy given that it is not feminist activists who legislate (Gotell, 2015), but radical feminists have been an integral part of the legislative shift toward increasing criminalisation in their strive for gender equality (Bernstein, 2012; 2018; Gottell, 2015). 'Ending demand' as the mechanism to tackle prostitution has become the approach of governmental policy across the global North, legislated in Sweden (1996), Finland, (2003), Norway, (2009), Canada (2014), France (2016), Northern Ireland (2015), The

Republic of Ireland (2017) and Israel (2020). While the End Demand Model has not reached the England and Wales, Carline and Scoular (2017) argue that this abolitionist influenced agenda had had a noticeable impact on sex work policy. In the UK, for both Home Office's reports, *Paying the Price* (2004) and *Behind Closed* Doors (2018), as well as the All Party Parliamentary Group on Prostitution and the Global Sex Trade (2014), radical feminist perspectives dominate. The "global hegemony" of neo-abolitionist discourse systematically conflates all sex work with sexual exploitation and forced trafficking (Giametta et al, 2018) and within such a discourse prostitution is constructed as gendered, un-consensual, exploitative and victimising, with suggested solutions being variations of the End Demand Model (Home Office 2004; APPG 2014; 2018; Carline and Scoular, 2017).

Pressure is mounting at the governmental level to move to the End Demand model at the same time as evidence is discounting its effectiveness. In Sweden rather than reducing exploitation and abuse, the End Demand laws have made sex workers more vulnerable to exploitation; sex workers have less time to negotiate with clients and this reduces their ability to assess potential risks (Levy and Jakobsson, 2014; Kingston and Thomas, 2019). Similarly, in France, research has shown how the criminalisation of clients has increased levels of violence and risks that those who sell sex face and shifted the power relationship in favour of clients who feel more able to make demands and impose conditions (Kingston and Thomas, 2019; Le Bail and Giametta, 2018; Giametta et al, 2018). In research with sex workers across Sweden, Norway and Finland, Vuolajärvi (2018) found that the shift in regulation from prostitution to immigration policies meant that migrants, constructed as trafficking victims, have become targets of punitive regulation executed through immigration and third-party—the so-called pimping—laws. In countries where the

End Demand has been implemented, the punitive governance of commercial sex has, in practice led to increased violence, deportations, and sex workers' conditions becoming more difficult (Vuolajärvi, 2018). Sex workers who have been caught up in anti-trafficking interventions often claim that they do not get support and safety, but "detention, court fees, and criminal records that only make their lives more difficult" (West, 2021: 9).

2.2.2 The sex worker activist movement

While radical feminists perspectives dominate in policy, sex worker discourse is an important and under-theorised aspect of the politics of prostitution (O'Neill, 2001). Considering that sex work law reform is most frequently endorsed without the input of those most affected, sex workers have been integral to the slow, yet progressive, discourse which helped usher in decriminalisation of sex work in New South Wales, Australia (1995), New Zealand (2003) and Belgium (2022) (Munroe and Scoular, 2012; Aroney and Crofts, 2019; Healy et al, 2020).

Over the past forty or so years there has been a growing body of literature, led mostly by feminists working in the sex industry and their allies and advocates, that insists those working in the sex industry deserve the same human rights and civil liberties as other workers (O'Neill, 2001; West, 2021). During the second wave of feminism, in the US, Margot St. James established COYOTE: Call of Your Old Tired Ethics, in 1973. COYOTE is a collection of sex workers, former sex workers and trafficking survivors, united to resist stigma against them and to campaign for full decriminalisation of the sex industry. On 2nd June 1975 over 100 sex workers occupied the Saint Nizier Church in Lyon protesting police harassment and demanding the government listen to their needs. The English Collective of

Prostitutes (ECP) set up soon after in the same year to campaign and raise awareness of stigmatising prostitution laws and their unfair enforcement by the police.

According to sex worker rights activists, sex work/sex worker are the correct terms to use when talking about people who engage in transactional sex. Sex worker rights activist Emily Warfeld (2022) argues that 'sex worker' is a reflective term and preferable to others such as 'prostituted person' or 'prostitute' for two main reason: the first is Carol Leigh's (1997) argument that sex work as a term emphases the labour and agency of the worker rather than their character or identity; and the second reason is that by using a non-specific umbrella term which refers to the whole industry, workers can be vague if they do not wish to disclose how they work, where and by what means.

From the 1970s until the present day, sex worker activism has attempted to shift the debate from discourses of criminality and morality onto employment law and rights for sex workers as the working poor (Berg, 2014; Brents and Hausbeck, 2010; Walkowitz, 2020). Further, activists' renaming and reconceptualising of prostitution as 'sex work' was a direct pushback against the discursive construction of prostitution as violence; instead it was, and is, labour. Sex workers themselves argue that the experiences of sex workers are not reducible to experiences of violence, and that anti-sex work feminism is implicated in their experiences of violence and degradation through their dehumanising and objectifying language (Lee, 2021; Gira Grant, 2014). The desire of men to buy sex is, to sex worker activists, less relevant than attending many of the immediate needs of the women selling it: money, flexible working hours, no documentable paperwork and instant paid transaction. Focus then, is on decriminalisation of sex work; not because sex work is a viable career choice, but as a method of harm reduction and the removal of police interference and social stigma until the need to sell sex to earn money has been addressed structurally (ECP, 2014).

In radical feminist theory and advocacy, as well as current policy and law, it is only the female body which has been concentrated on in relation to sex work, sidestepping male, or genderqueer, workers (Sanders et al, 2009). The feminist movement historically explored the epistemic value of women's lived experiences; their knowledge was, and is, understood to reflect the distributions of power which services the dominant class – that is, men (Smart, 1990; Hewer, 2021). Ironically, the marginalisation of voices by those who sell sex is instrumental in the construction of knowledge which frames sex work as a site of gendered oppression. By failing, often deliberately, to listen to the voices of those who sell sex, radical feminists are complicit in a process with very oppressive material consequences (Hewer, 2021). Sex work rights activists often emphasise in response that while sex work is gendered, meaning it is overwhelmingly sold by people who identify as women and overwhelmingly bought by men, it is not *only* women who sell sex, thus pushing back on the conceptualisation of sex work as necessarily gendered violence. People who do not identify as women sell sex; additionally, trans women, queer men and gender non-conforming people are disproportionately more likely to sell sex than cisgender women because they are disproportionately more likely to be poor (Mac, 2016; Mac and Smith, 2018). The experiences of male sex workers are either conflated with female experiences, or 'de-problematised' to extent that they are discounted entirely (Jeffreys, 1997). Hewer (2021) theorises that radical feminists problematise sex work by explicitly referencing masculine domination and a women's clear lack of choice, yet, by focusing only on women who sell sex, and only men who buy, the wider gendered and sexualised aspects of the global sex trade are closed off for interrogation. This is especially problematic when asking who is vulnerable to selling sex, and why.

With so few countries adopting decriminalisation, much of the literature is conceptual, but evidence has shown the validating impact of decriminalisation in acknowledging sex workers as people with rights (Armstrong, 2021). Sex workers, advocates and academics argue that decriminalisation would go further than empowering workers with labour rights; a global change in the legal model could reduce violent police intervention, open avenues for engaging with the police in matters of abuse and destigmatise their work so they can openly try to move away from the sex industry without suspicious gaps on their CVs or a possible criminal record (Mac and Smith, 2018; ECP, 2019; O'Connell Davidson, 2003). In New South Wales, Australia, for example, where sex work is decriminalised, sex workers have greater access to healthcare without stigmatisation, and their use of condoms is higher than in other Australian jurisdictions that have varying levels of criminalisation; additionally sex workers report feeling safer to call the police when a client is violent or aggressive (Baratosy and Wendt, 2017; Healy et al, 2020).

While the discursive construction of prostitution is similar in both governmental and feminist discourse, it is reductive to link the two without drawing on broader discursive trends. Kantola and Squires invoke the "moral order discourse" (2004: 90), and Carline (2012), as well as Munro and Scoular (2012) suggest that frames of vulnerability, with little to no defined meaning of how sex workers are 'vulnerable' or to what they may be vulnerable to, are deployed to justify a neutral state as protector. The focal point of contention between sex work abolitionists and sex work activists is not necessarily about how sex work is experienced - many sex workers agree with anti-sex work feminists that their work is a site of exploitation and abuse - but rather, how it ought to be dealt with. Practices of sex work reflect the social conditions of the wider world and are not separate from the socio-economic contexts in which they take place (Dewey, 2012). Discourses of individualisation and responsibilisation shape the stigmatising ‘problem’ of prostitution, and the similarly stigmatising ‘solution’ through governance and criminalisation (Hewer, 2021). It is these reorienting discourses which will be examined next.

2.2.3 The demonisation of sex workers as neoliberal subjects

Radical feminists often personify sex workers as neoliberals par excellence. Anti-porn feminist, Dines (2012), argues that the porn industry is one manifestation of how patriarchy and capitalism merge, with porn performers espousing neoliberal ideals of self-advancement and the accumulation of wealth. Feminism, Dines argues (2012; 2017), has been co-opted by a neoliberal ideology that rebrands the sex industry as female empowerment, and emphasises what she refers to as “individualised, narcissistic sexuality, which is the kind individual neoliberalism creates” (2012). As such, campaigning for sex workers to be empowered and respected through labour rights is the neoliberal approach of free individuals that are making free choices to sell sex. Similarly, radical feminist Bindel (2017: viii) differentiates herself from “neoliberal choice feminists who have absorbed the argument about sex-working being empowering”. Anti sex work activist Moran (2015) also writes that those who advocate for sex worker rights are “primarily white, middle-class, Western women in escort agencies—not remotely representative of the global majority”. To radical feminists, sex workers embody the neoliberal ideal, characterised by the rhetorical tool of the “happy hooker”: self-serving, self-interested and self-fulfilling.

Thinkers aligning with radical feminism have all have positioned sex workers as autonomous actors within the free market and complicit with what Gill (2007) names as the postfeminist and neoliberal discourses that see individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating. Sex work, within this discourse, can be understood as an idealisation of neoliberal values: men are consumers who shape the industry through their demand, and women are sellers who respond accordingly. Radical feminists argue that sex workers view sex and money as a route to feminist empowerment, and thus understand sex workers as neoliberal subjects: self-managing, self-responsible, seeking for self-advancement (Cheung, 2014). Female desire for individuality and self-sufficiency ought not to be demonised off hand after a long history of women living as the possession of their fathers and husbands (Downing, 2019), and sex work is one of the few careers where one can exploit their ‘erotic capital’ most profitably (Hakim, 2010). Further, within a limited range of very constrained choices in a sexist, racist and capitalist economy, sex work is not always the worst option.

These arguments, however, conflate sex worker activists’ demands for labour rights with sex workers as entrepreneurs (Phipps, 2014). Radical feminist arguments that sex workers are neoliberal because they ‘choose’ to sex work and find money to be ‘empowering’ speaks to many sex workers’ experiences, but this argument sidesteps the overarching issue of why and how that choice might be so tempting. Sex worker activists Mac and Smith (2018) push back against this framing of sex workers as entrepreneurs as undermining to the wider sex worker activist movement. They draw parallels between the characterisation of sex workers as ‘professionals’ or ‘entrepreneurs’ and the pre-twentieth century depictions of prostitutes as frivolous, shallow and “obsessed with luxury goods” (Mac and Smith, 2018: 28); a characterisation still informing radical feminist discourse today[3].

Viewing sex work through the lens of a free agent’s choice and using words like ‘empowered’ ‘professional’ or ‘entrepreneur’ glosses over the material conditions of a sex workers’ workplace and plays directly into the interests of those who wish to abolish the industry. The adversarial language which sets ‘happy hookers’ against the “global majority” (Moran, 2015) constructs sex workers who fight for labour rights as a threat, and obscures the fact that their politics is focused, not on the right to sell, but for the right to survive (SWARM, 2018). Reframing the argument away from one of universal labour rights, and onto privileged workers putting their individual need above the greater need of more vulnerable workers allows critics to avoid asking why sex work was the best option for them, why they may not choose to leave the sex industry and why criminalisation cannot possibly improve workers’ lives (Mac and Smith, 2018; Smith, 2020). As Lewis (2017) has argued, the fact that certain developments in neoliberalism happen to benefit sex workers is no reason to conflate self-organisation and demand for labour rights with individual self-serving consumerism. Rather, evidence gathered by Home Office research has shown that it is often directly because neoliberal fiscal and employment policies that many people turn to sex work; it is the only way they can afford to live (Oppenheim, 2019; Butler, 2019; Hester et al, 2019).

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[3] Nordic Model Now dismiss any calls for labour rights of sex workers by asserting “The sex workers that call for prostitution to be considered a job are mostly middle-class women who prostitute themselves for a new dress, a fashionable phone and to make a good impression on a walk downtown on a sunny day” https://nordicmodelnow.org/2021/04/05/when-the-client-pays-for-those-minutes-your-body-is-his-and-he-will-do-what-he-wants/

Sex work may be so easy to demonise in neoliberal contexts because of society's discomfort at queer or marginalised people, women, especially women of colour, with comparably high earning power compared to other forms of gendered labour (Nussbaum, 1998; ECP, 2019; Bateman, 2021). Berg (2021) suggests that many feminists are happy to support End Demand style criminalisation of sex work, but not for other exploitative, underpaid, typically migrant staffed gendered work, such as child-minding or domestic labour, possibly because successful white women depend on it, and they depend on it being cheap. Additionally, Bateman (2021) has drawn attention to the 'moral nature' of feminists in their calls to abolish sex work rather than other forms of gendered labour. Bateman uses the example of care work by comparison - an industry where workers are also exploited, underpaid, regularly assaulted, and arguably, also contribute to gendered inequality and stereotypes in wider society – but where there is no push to criminalise. Bateman (2021: 3) highlights this "logical inconsistency" to show fallacies of the End Demand Model and argues that feminists ought to challenge the conservative ideas which demonise sex work rather than be complicit with them. Similarly, Nussbaum (1998) has previously noted that stigma against sex workers is often based on class prejudice or stereotypes of race or gender. Nussbaum (1998) further suggests that feminists who wish to abolish the sex industry through criminalisation may be insufficiently grounding their theories in the lives of the working class or those who sell sex to survive, hence the aggressive paternalism. This logical inconsistency shows how, within the seeming amoral system of neoliberalism, there is a very strong moral agenda (Cheung, 2014). The strange alliance of radical feminism and state forces are united in their support of the middle classes, of domestic relationships, and of gender roles; and poor people, especially migrant women, selling sex violates these.

2.2.4 Crime control as poverty control

Wacquant (2009: xv) has argued that the growing emphasis on law-and-order responses in neoliberal contexts is “a reaction to, a diversion from, and a denigration of” the generalisation of the social and mental insecurity produced by inequality and the decrease in living standards as a result of neoliberal policies. The rollback of welfare, and increase in criminal justice policies are interlinked, and a strong carceral system is not a deviation from, but a constituent component of neoliberalism (Wacquant, 2009). Radical feminist demands for more certain and severe punishments for crimes against women feed into these reactionary forces, resulting in a direct alliance between feminist activists and legislators, with both promoting crime control as safety for women (Bumiller, 2008; Bernstein, 2012; Gruber, 2020). This is clear in policies pertaining to the sex industry.

It is a tempting notion to believe that if a ‘bad’ thing exists in a particular place, that it can be located, criminalised, and punished. When the ‘problem’ of trafficking or the ‘problem’ of women being bought for sex can be located to the ‘bad’ men who pimp women and the other ‘bad’ men who buy sex, feminist campaigners and governmental bodies alike can be seen to be effectively tackling the problem by calling to further criminalise these actions (Home Office, 2018; APPG, 2014; 2018). The convergence between sex work abolitionists and neoliberal policy makers lies in the erroneous idea that the ‘problem’ of the sex industry can be so easily located, and further, such a move absolves the state from examining its own role in the construction and maintenance of the sexual labour market (Bernstein, 2010;2012;2018; O’Connell-Davidson, 2003).

By emphasising criminal actions, and thus criminal solutions, state bodies can divert focus from their own policies of immigration and asylum, health, employment, economic development and austerity, education, and welfare (O'Connell Davidson, 2003; Rubin, 2011). When radical feminists follow similar logic and argue against men's demand for sex whilst making no mention of the role played by poverty in the global dynamics of trafficking and sexual labour, it performs a particular kind of scrutiny; feminist activists can critique the police and policy makers for not doing enough to prevent women being sold into the sex industry and the response can be a performance of self-examination and a promise to 'do better' by the government in question who then enact more laws (Bernstein, 2007a; 2010; Engel, 2019; APPG, 2014). This discourse helps to neutralise further critique that the state is not doing enough from other strands of feminism. This neoliberal rationale is the dominant political discourse currently and so it makes sense that they would co-opt feminist ideology to further its aims (Rottenberg, 2018). Rottenberg has further argued that neoliberalism needs feminism in this way (Rottenberg in Banet-Weiser et al, 2019).

There are two interweaving discourses present here: The first from a regressive feminist movement which calls for the criminalisation of sex work on the basis of opposing the neoliberalism that they perceive in sex worker activism. In turn, this feminist movement support a second crime control discourse that supports police expansion through criminalisation and aversion of interrogating the role of the state in welfare. Rather than addressing the reasons why women are vulnerable to being trafficked, or the causes which enable pimps to earn money from forcing women to sell sex, or the economic precarity that women live with if they do not sell sex, the state and its arms are able to sustain criticism whilst also staying committed to the neoliberal, capitalist doctrine. This unholy alliance of feminism and the capitalist classes, means that, rather than seeing improvement or progress for women either in or out of the sex industry, neoliberalism is further entrenched by individualising the cause of and solution to the sex industry.

Bernstein (2012) argues that radical feminists have in part abandoned their earlier concerns with social and gender justice and recast them by introducing the notion of the carceral to understand their approach. This ‘carceral feminism’, a term coined by Bernstein, refers to the commitment of feminist activists who wish to see an end to the sex industry through criminalising it out of existence, as shown above (Bernstein, 2007b; 2012). Instead of calling on the welfare state to support women economically so they do not feel a need to sell sex, or pushing for an end of the harsh border controls rendering economic migrants vulnerable to human traffickers, carceral feminists mobilise the emancipatory aims of feminism into the expansion of the carceral state (Bracewell, 2019; Bernstein, 2010; 2018). This convergence has benefits for both feminists and the criminal justice system: feminist activists can advocate for harsher penalties for men who exchange money for sex, and policy makers can push for increasingly harsher prison sentences, border control and police powers under the guide of protecting women (Bernstein, 2007a; 2010; 2018).

The neoliberal pursuit of social control reconstructs sex work as failed responsibilisation, but if the effect is toward criminalisation, this move decontextualises and individualises (Porter, 2020). Scoular and O’Neill (2007) argue that through neoliberal individualism, disadvantage and exclusion are no longer viewed as structural inequalities, but are reframed as ‘private troubles’ or ‘individualised factors’. Consequently, the structural and material reasons why some people are vulnerable to selling sex, or being sold for sex, are sidelined to focus on perceived individual needs and protecting women from risk (Scoular and O'Neill, 2007). While sex work is an individualised job, it is necessarily individualised through the partially criminalised framework which penalises working communally, cooperatively or through management.

The model of prostitution put forward by radical feminists or as they are known to some, 'carceral feminists', and governmental policy bears little connection to economic or structural factors and is wholly attributed to the actions of bad men. Perhaps this is why, whilst debating around sex worker's rights, women's rights, sexual equality and violence against women is no longer dissident – or at least not as contentious as it once was – there has been little structural improvement or progress for women within the sex industry: their conditions have not changed, and the capitalist system upholding the industry is more entrenched now than ever (Fraser, 2013). Srinivasan (2021) asks those who wish for harsher punitive responses to the sex industry to shift their perspective. Instead of viewing men paying women for sex as representative of relationships between men and women, rather view men paying women for sex as an economic and pragmatic response to it within the socio-economic context. We ought to then, feel compelled to strengthen women's hand in their situation.

2.3 Sex work and stigma: whorephobia

The stigma that is attached to sex work has a long history and, for female sex workers in particular, there is a wealth of research into the manifestation and effects of stigma: what it looks like, how it is experienced, and how it can possibly be overcome (Armstrong, 2019). The social stigmatisation of sex workers is a well-documented barrier to basic healthcare (Benoit et al, 2018; Grenfell et al, 2017; Ryan and McGarry, 2022), education (Platt, 2019), justice (Strohmayer et al, 2017; Sanders et al, 2009), and future careers (Vanwesenbeeck, 2001; Sanders, 2018; Weitzer, 2017; Pheterson, 1993; Benoit et al 2018). Stigma is such a pervasive presence in the lives of sex workers that may be considered omnipresent in sexual commerce (Weitzer, 2017: 717).

Goffman (1963: 9) described stigma as 'the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance', and argued that individuals are stigmatised when they embody attributes that are seen to be deeply discrediting (Goffman, 1963). Goffman's conceptualisation of stigma is relational rather than attributional; it is not the attribute itself that is the 'problem', but the relationship between the possessor of the attribute and others (Goffman, 1963; Elliott et al, 1980). An attribute that is discrediting to one group, may not be to another, because stigma's power comes from the symbolic interaction between those with a particular attribute and others without, or "normals" as Goffman refers to them (Goffman, 1963).

Tyler (2020) builds on Goffman's work and argues that stigma is not incidental or a by-product, but a deliberate and manufactured form of classificatory violence 'from above' – a form of violence by which one group are sorted from others by sites of power, institutions or structures, and which works to devalue certain people as part of a broader 'machinery of inequality' (2020: 27, 260). Drawing heavily on Foucault, Tyler conceptualises of 'stigma machines'; mechanisms through which the corrosive effects of stigma are pressed upon a person in concerted efforts to immobilise, wound, humiliate and/or dehumanise in interactions with others (2020: 260). Anderson (2011) notes that objectification is also a key feature of dehumanisation – reducing members of the 'out-group' to passive objects. Dehumanisation then 'transforms them into valueless objects which may then be ‘acted upon’ by perpetrators’ (Anderson, 2011: 54). Such a definition speaks to many sex workers’ experiences.

Stigma, as a social science concept, has been applied across time periods, geographical locations, and groups of people. This includes sex workers, who experience multiple forms of violence and discrimination. Whore stigma, also known as whorephobia, is the fear or the hatred of sex workers, but sex worker activists argue that it is more than just sex workers who are directly affected; whorephobia encompasses wider beliefs of who or what we assume sex workers to be (Shaffauser, 2010). Such stigma includes paternalistic attitudes that deem sex workers offenders against decency, a public nuisance, spreaders of disease, or unskilled victims who do not know what is good for them and so need to be rescued (Schaffauser, 2010; Mac and Smith, 2018; Pheterson, 1993). To think of sex workers as ‘bad women’ produces a spoiled identity, predicated on outdated models of gender, and strengthened by the implication that sex-working women defy societal norms of femininity (Balfour and Allen, 2014; Dodsworth, 2012). The socially constructed deviant otherness found in society impacts the lives and relationships of sex workers in almost every area, and though the terminology used to describe those who work in the sex industry may have moved on from ‘whore’ to ‘sex worker’, the resulting denial of full social rights remains, in many ways, the same (Overs and Hawkins, 2011; Lister, 2017).

Bowen et al (2021) have highlighted that systemically disempowering sex workers through criminalisation and structural discrimination creates the ideal conditions for stigma to flourish on both an institutional and inter-personal level. Sex worker rights advocates argue that, despite the unacceptable high levels of violence against sex workers across the globe, violence in sex work is not inevitable. Rather, the connection between stigma and violence against sex workers is underpinned by objectification and dehumanisation of this population; a preventable and reversable attitude (Sanders, 2016; Agustin, 2013; Stardust, 2017; SWARM, 2018; Amnesty International, 2020).

In addition to the criminalisation of aspects of the sex industry and state sanctioned heavy handed police presence, radical feminist rhetoric plays a role in the stigmatisation and dehumanisation of people who sell sex. This is where Tyler's (2020: 27) definition of stigma as violence 'from above' is useful as a conceptual tool. The 'nose-holding disapproval' (Angel, 2022: 58) found in radical feminist rhetoric regularly imagines and names the sex industry as a "flesh trade" (Ditum, 2021), and women who sell sex as "commodities" and "products" (Taylor, 2021), who are "getting their thongs in a twist" (Bindel, 2017: 41) if they put forward reasons for worker rights or decriminalisation. Wielding an objectifying and dehumanising gaze on the very women whose self-objectification is punishable, and imagining and referring to sex work as a 'flesh-market', and sex workers as objects to be traded within that market very often have hugely negative consequences for sex workers, especially the most vulnerable (O'Connell-Davidson, 2003). Criminalisation, as well as the accumulation over time of stories and visual depictions of their occupation have transformed "flesh and blood humans into objects and things" (Tyler, 2020: 125). Dehumanising sex workers to the place of objects is how some of the most abusive and violent clients rationalise and justify their own behaviour, as well as validation by abusive partners, family members and state agents (Platt et al, 2018). The stigmatised and criminalised status in society is used as a point of leverage and justification by those who cause sex workers harm

(Doezma, 2001; O'Connell Davidson, 2003; Sanders and Campbell, 2020; Phipps, 2013; Kinnell, 2008).

Public condemnation of sex work as a way of earning a living increases the tensions faced by sex-working mothers, making the integration of a worker–mother identity more difficult, and compromises them being seen, or them seeing themselves, as 'good' or 'normal' mothers (Ma et al, 2018). For sex workers who are mothers, the tensions of constructing an identity compatible with idealised motherhood are compromised further by stigmatisation, criminalisation, and the perceived physical or emotional risk to themselves (Sloss & Harper 2004; Dodsworth, 2012; Sanders et al. 2009; Rivers-Moore 2010). Women who violate social norms, such as mothers who sex work, are often subjected to social sanctions ranging from those found in informal interaction to those from formal institutions such as the legal or child welfare system (Jenson and DuDeck-Biondo, 2005; Sanders and Campbell, 2014).

Stigmatisation of sex work is not exclusively from those outside of the sex industry profession. Toubiana and Ruebottom (2022) argue that more than one occupational community can exist within an occupation, and that as such, heterogeneity and hierarchy within communities ought to be examined. The sex industry hierarchy is colloquially known as the 'whorearchy', and segregation is along perceived social and legal lines ranging from phone sex operators, strippers, porn performers, dominatrixes and full service sex workers (Knox, 2014). Academic research on the whorearchy is scant, but the term is frequently used within sex worker communities (McNeill, 2012; Knox, 2014; Vixxx, 2019; Herrmann, 2022). While agreed definitions are contested, ultimately sex worker hierarchy is arranged according to social class, perceived income, services offered to clients, as well as the ability to manage risk and safety, and physical contact with clients and police (Vixxx, 2019; Bernstein, 2007a).

The conceptual tool of the whorearchy challenges dominant assumptions that members of a stigmatised occupation develop a strong sense of belonging through occupational cultures and ideologies, and that stigmatisers are found exclusive outside of the occupational group (Toubiana and Ruebottom, 2022). Instead, the whorearchy is evidence that sex workers reproduce the same stigma that they experience from others. For example, in research inside strip clubs, some strippers voice their disgust at colleagues who dance closer to clients than themselves (Grandy, 2008). Clare (2022) has noted that the whorearchy does not solve or diminish the problem of the whore stigma but simply passes it on to others (Herrmann, 2022). Due to the growing and multifaceted ways that sexual commerce operates, these occupational boundaries of phone sex operator *or* stripper *or* full service worker are unlikely to be static. Nevertheless, within sex worker circles, the further away from sex work a worker may claim to be – such as a stripper who does not have sex with her client – or the further away from the police – such as a full service worker who operates indoors rather than on the streets – the higher you are to the top.

Conclusion

The aim of this literature review was to map what is known about the nature and the prevalence of sex work, and to trace the historic factions within feminism and the various understandings of, and responses to, the sex industry. By looking back to the second wave feminist activism, this chapter explored how factions within the feminist movement played a substantial role in the politicisation of the sex industry and how best to respond to it. Sex worker stigma has been theorised extensively, and this chapter has shown how radical feminist rhetoric and the concurrent criminalisation of sex workers weave together to be complicit in maintenance of sex worker stigma with real and material consequences felt from both outside and within the sex industry itself. The following chapter builds on a number of issues raised in this chapter, expanding on the role of feminist advocacy in making the issue of violence against women a political issue, the subsequent criminalisation of various types of violence, and the emphasis on crime control in the state's duty to protect women.

3. Domestic abuse and the construction of violence

Introduction

This chapter discusses domestic violence and abuse (DVA) and the laws and policies which govern and criminalise it. This chapter begins by mapping out the current legal status of DVA in this country: how DVA is defined, who it may affect and how it may manifest. This is followed by a discussion on the prevalence of DVA, focusing on who may be more prone to experiencing it and why this may be. The second section of this chapter provides a brief history of the construction of laws and politicising of DVA. In so doing, tensions in the definitions and understandings of DVA will be explored, such as how feminist activism coalesced with state intervention and crime control. In tracing this historical relationship, this section also examines the pushback from Black and Asian British feminists during the second wave and the influence of intersectionality on theorising about DVA. This middle section ends by using an intersectional lens to note the discursive shift from 'battered woman' to 'victim/survivor'. The final section of this chapter is focused on the intimate and familial relationships of sex workers, and highlights the difficulty in researching sex-working victims of DVA. The figure of the 'pimp' – oft cited but rarely defined – has become the stand-in for any working relationship between sex workers, and the meanings of 'pimp' will be explored in this section. This chapter ends by considering the reasons why people may choose to stay in abusive relationships and homes, and the barriers which may prevent them from leaving.

3.1 The current landscape of domestic violence and abuse

Domestic violence and abuse (DVA) is a term used to refer to a single incident, or a pattern of behaviour, that is used by someone to control or obtain power over their partner or family member. It can happen at any point in a relationship, including after the victim/survivor and perpetrator have separated or moved apart (Refuge, 2022). Until 2021, there was no single statutory definition of DVA in England and Wales. Instead, constituting what domestic violence and abuse (DVA) was, and where it might occur, had been defined in government policy documents, and in guidance for agencies such as the police and the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). In July 2020 the Domestic Abuse Bill was passed by the House of Commons becoming law in 2021. With the new Domestic Abuse Act (DAA) there is now a statutory definition which draws together the latest understandings and definition of what domestic abuse is, and who it refers to.

3.1.1 DVA in law and policy

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 defines "domestic abuse" as

> (2) Behaviour of a person ("A") towards another person ("B") is "domestic abuse" if—
>
> > (a) A and B are each aged 16 or over and are personally connected to each other, and
> > (b) the behaviour is abusive.
>
> (3) Behaviour is "abusive" if it consists of any of the following—
> > (a) physical or sexual abuse;
> > (b) violent or threatening behaviour;
> > (c) controlling or coercive behaviour;
> > (d) economic abuse (see subsection (4));
> > (e) psychological, emotional or other abuse;
> > and it does not matter whether the behaviour consists of a single incident or a course of conduct.

With regards to raising awareness of the issue of domestic violence and abuse, the DAA 2021 makes significant headway, marking what Burton (2023: 6) names as the “endpoint on the journey towards more inclusive legal definitions of domestic abuse”. There are a number of reasons for this positive position. Legally speaking, domestic abuse as a concept applies to those aged 16 or over, with those under the age of 16 to be recorded as victims of child abuse through either witnessing or experiencing the effects of DVA (DAA, 2021; Bekaert et al, 2022). Secondly, the DAA reflects a contemporary understanding of abuse that is not limited to physical violence and names a variety of forms that abuse can take, including more of the ‘non-physically violent’ aspects of domestic abuse, including economic abuse, threatening behaviour, and technology facilitated abuse such as digital stalking. Thirdly, the new statutory definition also includes single incidents as well as a ‘course of conduct’. This recognises the encompassing nature of domestic abuse with attention to the entire sequences of distinct acts as well as the accumulative effects of many different acts, behaviours and suggestions, which may not appear overtly abusive when considered in isolation (Rawcliffe, 2023).

In terms of the types of relationship covered in this act, the DAA states:

> (1) For the purposes of this Act, two people are “personally connected” to each other if any of the following applies—
>
> (a) they are, or have been, married to each other;
> (b) they are, or have been, civil partners of each other;
> (c) they have agreed to marry one another (whether or not the agreement has been terminated);
> (d) they have entered into a civil partnership agreement (whether or not the agreement has been terminated);
> (e) they are, or have been, in an intimate personal relationship with each other;
> (f) they each have, or there has been a time when they each have had, a parental relationship in relation to the same child (see subsection (2));
> (g) they are relatives.

As well as identifying distinct types of abuse, the DAA 2021 lists the various dynamics in which DVA can manifest. DVA is often used interchangeably with ‘intimate partner violence’, but the new statutory definition has a broad remit including family members, ex-partners, and co-parents. Somewhat controversially, the new definition is gender neutral, and in December 2020 the government announced plans to ‘de-link’ their Domestic Abuse Plan from the Tackling VAWG Strategy, setting up instead a separate Domestic Abuse Strategy (Refuge, 2021; MOJ, 2021). In March 2022, after pressure from a number of women’s organisations and specialist DVA services, the government changed course and re-integrated domestic abuse as part of their wider VAWG strategy (Refuge, 2021). As such, the passing of the DAA 2021 into law is part of the government’s 2021-2024 strategy to end Violence Against Women and Girls (hereafter VAWG). The VAWG strategy is a UK government initiative established in 2010 to tackle all forms of violence against women and girls through prevention, protection and prosecution (Home Office, 2016). VAWG constitutes behaviours, crimes and incidents which are committed primarily, though not exclusively, by men against women and include DVA, rape, sexual abuse and other sexual offences, stalking, harassment, trafficking, coerced/forced pregnancy or abortion, forced marriage, ‘crimes of honour’, female genital mutilation, prostitution and pornography, elder abuse and child-to-parent violence (Gill, 2011; Coy, 2017; CPS, 2019; Home Office, 2021; Holt, 2021)

The passing of the new Act has great implications for police, agencies, and other frontline organisations, as well as research. Such a broad and encompassing definition of the term ‘domestic abuse’ can be helpful for examining the complexity of DVA in all of its forms and manifestations, across the populace (Rawcliffe, 2023).

It is not uncommon for some victim/survivors to not recognise their experiences as DVA at the time it was happening, or to only recognise their experiences as abuse after the end of the relationship, and so, the breadth of this new definition may help to capture the nuances and grey areas, not discernible under previous definitions (Donovan and Hester, 2010; Gill, 2004; Francis et al, 2017).

Yet, the breadth of what 'domestic abuse' is represented to be may also gloss over key distinguishing features, as well as prevalence data, between, for example, child to parent abuse, and intimate partner abuse. Holt and Lewis (2021), for example, contend that conflating violence from intimate partners, and violence from children, is producing dominant representations of child-to-parent violence; representations which, with DVA's criminal construction and response, can have damaging consequences for families who need help. Additionally, many statistics on DVA only include victim/survivors up until the age of 59; while more recently, the CSEW has extended the age parameters to74 years, anything over is constituted as "elder abuse" rather than "domestic abuse" (Lombard and Scott, 2013) hiding potentially large numbers of victim/survivors. The new Act then, by combining all types of domestic, intimate partner, and familial abuse as one type of social problem, risks flattening out rather than enriching a deeper understanding of DVA.

The gender neutral conception of DVA in the DAA 2021 has been contested by some who fear that the new Act fails to engage with the broader cultural and social conditions in which male dominance and violence is sustained (Bishop, 2022). Disregarding a gendered approach suggests, to some, a "watering down" of the government's response to a type of violence which is disproportionately aimed at women (Aldridge, 2020: 1824). It is not only that women are statistically more likely to experience violence and abuse in intimate relationships and by members of her family, it is that the gender-role expectations prevalent in society enable it to happen in the first place (Dobash and Dobash, 2004; Stark, 2007; Walby and Towers, 2018; Beetham et al, 2021; Bishop, 2022).

3.1.2 The prevalence of DVA and who is at risk

Domestic violence and abuse (DVA) is a salient problem running through society, and one of the most lasting claims about DVA across policy and advocacy is that no one is immune from it; DVA can affect someone of any race, gender, sexuality, or from any religious or socio-economic background (Lombard and McMillan, 2013; Safelives, 2015; Day et al, 2018). The existence of DVA is recognised as an established feature across the world and from the early days of feminist organising to contemporary frontline services, a main focal point of feminist praxis is raising awareness to the nature and prevalence of DVA, especially the gendered nature of it (Nixon and Humphreys, 2010; Alridge, 2020).

The most recent Crime Survey for England and Wales (2023) report that the majority of DVA victim/survivors - 80 percent - are women, and this gendered majority is reflected in global reporting also (Amnesty International, 2020; WHO, 2021; Action Aid, 2022) . Women and girls are overwhelmingly victimised and men are reportedly the main perpetrators (Holt, 2021). Women are more likely to die in the home, more likely to be raped or sexually assaulted by someone they know (UN, 2018), and while so-called ‘honour’ killings cut across ethnic, class, and religious lines, the victim/survivors are almost always female (Gill, 2011). Global statistics from the World Health Organization (2017) estimate that 30 percent of women have experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime and that 38 percent of female homicide victims have been killed by a male intimate partner (Alridge, 2020). Women are more likely to have sustained physical or emotional abuse or violence, resulting in serious injury or death, and in England and Wales, on average, two women a week are murdered by their partners or former partners (Oppenheim, 2019; Femicide Census, 2020; Burton, 2023). The terms 'gender-based violence' and 'violence against women and girls' are often used interchangeably since most gender based violence is perpetrated by men against women (Council of Europe, 2019; Holt, 2021).

Estimates suggest that globally, one in three women and one in eight men will experience some form of DVA in their lifetime (ONS, 2017; WHO, 2013; Dempsey, 2016). The UK Office of National Statistics (ONS) collates data from multiple sources including the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW), Home Office Statistics, Crown Prosecution Service, SafeLives charity and Women's Aid (McMahon, 2022), and in their most recent report, reported that 1 in 5 adults aged 16 or over had experienced DVA since the age of 16. For the year ending March 2022, 1.7 million women and 699,000 men aged 16 years and over had experienced DVA in the previous 12 months (ONS, 2022). The ONS further reports that there is a year-on-year increase in DVA-related crimes which are reported to the police, with the latest figure being 7.7 percent higher than the year ending March 2021, and 14.1 percent higher than the year ending March 2020. Whilst gendered violence is recognised worldwide as an endemic problem it is also still characterised by its (at times) hidden nature (Lombard, 2018), and yet Stanko (2006) argues that DVA is 'denied' rather than 'hidden'. Measuring and recording the prevalence of gender-based violence remains an ongoing challenge which provokes methodological debate, notwithstanding the new creation of the statutory definition created in the DAA (2021).

While prevalence and crime surveys are not consistent in the way that they respectively define and ask about experiences of domestic violence, when taken together, they do reveal that violence from known men is a feature of many women's lives, and in far greater numbers than in men's lives (Nixon and Humphreys, 2010; Lombard and McMillan, 2013; Home Office, 2023). Not all women are affected equally, however. Violence perpetrated by intimate partners and family members has been disproportionately associated with victim/survivor's vulnerability and inability to protect themselves due to their poverty, health, or their stigmatised social status; those who are located at the intersection of numerous structural inequalities face additional issues and pressures which compound their risks of DVA (Fernandez-Esquer and Diamond, 2013; Day and Gill, 2020).

The British Medical Association (BMA, 2014) report that the odds of being a victim/survivor of DVA in the past year were two-fold higher for those with physical disability and three-fold higher for those with mental illness-related disability, when compared to those without disabilities. In the most recent Office of National Statistics findings, it is reported that disabled women are over twice as likely as non-disabled women to experience DVA (ONS, 2019). Around 14 percent of disabled adults experienced DVA in the last year compared to 5.5 percent of non-disabled adults the same age (Safelives, 2017; ONS, 2019). For a disabled person, the abuse they experience is often directly linked to their impairments and perpetrated by the individuals they are most dependent on for care, such as intimate partners and family members. DVA in this case, for example, may manifest as being ridiculed for their impairment, experiencing medical exploitation, withheld care or chemical restraint (Hague et al, 2008; McCarthy et al, 2017).

Although DVA is experienced across all socio-economic classes, research has suggested that women living in households with an annual income of less than £10,000 were more than four times as likely to have experienced partner abuse in the last 12 months than women living in households with an income of £50,000 or more (CSEW, 2021; NICE, 2023; Home Office, 2023). These findings suggest that those who are classed as socio-economically disadvantaged suffer increased risk of DVA, perhaps due to financial strain and reduced access to social support (Home Office, 2023; Fahmy et al, 2016). However, as with all findings, issues of attrition and visibility affect quantitative measuring. Research is limited on DVA in wealthy households (combined income of £100,000 a year), meaning there is almost no comparable research for wealthy families or couples. Weitzman (2000: 8) has argued that by reinforcing the narrative that those in lower income households are more likely to experience DVA, those in higher income households may "buy into the myth that domestic violence only afflicts the underprivileged" and not disclose, not report, or not recognise their experiences as DVA.

Research and advocacy have been drawing attention to same-sex DVA since the beginning of the feminist second wave, but the discourse which has been constructed and strongly maintained, is that of a male abuser and a female victim/survivor, as seen above. While prevalence rates for same-sex domestic violence vary because of methodological issues related to recruitment and definitions of sexual orientation, what is known is that rates of same-sex perpetrated abuse are considered to be slightly greater than heterosexual prevalence rates (Badenes-Ribera et al., 2016; Stiles-Shields and Carroll, 2015). Donovan and Barnes (2019; 2020), trouble the gender binary by demonstrating the ways that sexuality and non-normative gender identity can be weaponised in ways not necessarily possible in heterosexual cisgender relationships, such as threatening to out a partner, deliberately misgendering, or undermining a victim/survivor's LGBTQ identity or experiences. The potential for LGBTQ abuse is derived from a societal and political context in which discriminatory, demeaning and stigmatising stereotypes and assumptions continues to thrive, and where LBGTQ people still face oppression (Donovan and Barnes, 2020; Donovan and Hester, 2014). This axis of power which Donovan and Barnes name as identity abuse (IA) is used to punish, control and torment, as well as to deter help-seeking behaviours such as calling the police, engaging in specialist services or disclosing to a family or friend (Donovan and Hester, 2011; Donovan and Barnes, 2020). Yet, codifying all LGBTQ under one umbrella fails to take account of the ways that, for example, transphobia manifests, or the ways that female perpetration may differ from male perpetration. NICE (2014) report that 80 percent of people who identify as trans, which they state to include including cross-dressers, transgender and transsexual people, and other gender-variant people, have experienced DVA from a current or former ex-partner, which is far higher than self-identified gay, lesbian or bisexual people at 38 percent (NICE, 2014). Queer, same sex, and trans experiences of DVA cannot be accurately understood if all grouped together, but regardless, gender non-conforming and non-heterosexual people are consistently found to be at higher risk of DVA than heterosexual people, even if the prevalence is somewhat unknown (BMA, 2014; Stiles-Sheilds et al, 2015; Barrett, 2015).

3.1.4 Current state responses and interventions to DVA

Domestic abuse is one of the most under-reported crimes with an estimated 20-25 percent of victims reporting to the police (NCDV, 2022; CSEW, 2016; Senior, 2020), though these may only account for one fifth of the likely total (Day et al, 2018; Weir, 2020). For those who do report to the police, inconsistent interpretations and enforcement of laws pertaining to DVA makes analysing possible deterrent effects difficult (Barrow-Grint, 2016). The amount of DVA cases ending in conviction is small, about 4 percent of reported cases, and there is no evidence to suggest that arrest acts as a deterrent for chronic, more violent domestic abuse perpetrators (Hester and Westmarland, 2005; Hester, 2012; HMIC, 2014; Day, 2018).

With DVA defined as an issue of criminal justice, policies have been created which reinforce state control in an effort to help. Since the 1990s, there has been a plethora of policy initiatives aimed at developing criminal justice approaches to domestic violence, such as positive action[4] for arrest, and initiatives for increases in prosecution and conviction (Hester, 2005; Gibbs, 2019; College of Policing, 2018). Hester (2005) notes that many of these policy initiatives have been aimed at reducing attrition, where domestic violence cases fail to make it through the criminal justice system and do not result in criminal conviction. As such, policies have emphasised the criminality of DVA, such as strengthening protection orders for victims, prosecuting breaches of non-molestation[5] orders (Family Law Act 1996) or restraining orders[6] (Protection from Harassment Act, 1997), and making common assault an arrestable offence (Domestic Violence Crimes and Victim Act, 2004). In 2016 the UK government commissioned a dedicated strategy to end violence against women and girls (Home Office, 2016). This strategy took a distinctly criminal offence approach, with the main aims of the strategy to prevent violence, support victim/survivors and improve prosecution rates (Home Office, 2016). The effectiveness of these reforms in practice is continually contested, even though recourse to the law remains one of the central planks of policy responses on how best to prevent and respond to violence against women (Mackinnon, 1991; Barlow and Walklate, 2018; Walklate et al, 2018; Beetham et al, 2021).

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[4] Positive action in policing means that officers should consider the DVA incident as a whole and carry out a thorough investigation, which does not necessarily rely on the evidence of the victim to ensure that the victim and any children are safe. This may mean arresting a person suspected of an offence, where the power to arrest exists, or taking other positive steps to ensure safety, such as organising refuge accommodation or organising the fitting of a panic alarm (CPS, 2017)

[5] A non-molestation order is a civil remedy and issued by the courts on application to prohibit an abuser from using or threatening physical violence, intimidating, harassing, pestering or communicating with the victim. An order could prevent the abuser coming within a certain distance of the victim/survivor, their home address or even attending their place of work. It could also include their children in certain circumstances. An order will also prevent an abuser from instructing or encouraging others to do any of those actions.

Whilst legal and social policy initiatives in the UK have usefully brought DVA into the public domain to encourage more victim/survivors to call the police, this is happening at a time when many people have no-one else to call *except* the police because other avenues are closed (Sanders-McDonagh et al, 2016; Kumar, 2019). By emphasising criminal justice intervention, governments may feel justified in cutting funding to other avenues of support – something seen in the year on year defunding of women and victim focused services (Kumar, 2019; Gent, 2022; Women's Aid, 2023). As such, the immediate interface between victim and professional support is likely that of a responding police officer (van Wormer and Keeling, 2015; Day and Gill, 2020). There is a consistent heavy focus on criminalisation employed by the state, and so there is a risk that a reliance on criminal justice approaches for some areas of VAWG will be perceived by the public, or victims themselves, as heavy handed and unnecessary, which has the potential to undermine strategies to prevent or respond effectively to VAWG (Beetham et al, 2021). For marginalised victims especially, research has found that public sources of help, particularly the police, are typically perceived to be unsafe or unreliable (Holt and Gott, 2022). For LGBTQ victims, for example, evidence shows that they worry police will not understand the particularities of same-sex domestic violence, or that they will be unsympathetic in their response because of institutional hetero-sexism (Donovan and Hester, 2011; Beetham et al, 2021). Immigration status is reported to prevent women from black and ethnic minorities (BAME) from approaching criminal justice authorities (Strid et al, 2013), and institutional racism is a barrier for many victims from BAME communities, as they can fear that when seeking help they will be subject to racist treatment (BMA, 2014). These issues in criminal justice interventions feel particularly apt when considering the social value of victims who are stigmatised further by being associated with illegal activity such as drug taking or sex-working (Kulesza et al, 2016)

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[6] Restraining orders may be made on conviction or acquittal for any criminal offence and are intended to be preventative and protective rather than punitive. The guiding principle is that there must be a need for the order to protect a person or persons. Restraining orders can only be made in respect of the defendant (not the victim or any witness) (CPS, 2022).

Mounting evidence shows that current interventions are inadequate in reducing recidivism beyond arrest; they are rarely effective in preventing DVA; and they are often not what victims want (Hester, 2005; Bates and Taylor, 2019; Williams and Walklate, 2020). Positive action, for example, exists on paper as an approach, but an inspection from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMIC, 2015) found that this has not been translated into effective practice on the ground. As such, other policy initiatives have been introduced which emphasise that police and other agencies ought to increase partnership working to support and provide safety for victims (Home Office, 2000; Hester, 2005; Bates and Douglas, 2020). One of the objectives of this partnership working has been the introduction of Independent Domestic Violence Advocates (IDVAs) in 2005 and Specialist Domestic Violence Courts (SDVCs) in 2006. The role of the IDVA is important in multi-agency work as they are independent of any one agency, and they work to bridge the gap between the complexity of the court and the inexperience of the victim, representing the victim at the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARAC), which uses a multidisciplinary approach to addressing domestic violence (Safelives 2014; Robinson, 2016; Day et al, 2018). MARACs were introduced in 2003 and mark the shift away from "ineffective and disempowerment" state models, and toward flexible and multi-agency working, designing to be more effective in adapting to complex cases and more personalised forms of service delivery (Harvie and Manzi, 2011: 80). MARACs are attended by the police, probation, housing, children's services and other statutory and volunteer led agencies, and the goal of MARACs is to provide a forum for sharing information and taking action to reduce future harm to victims of DVA in response to long-standing problems in policing and prosecuting domestic abuse cases (Pickles, 2007; Robinson, 2016; Day, 2018).

Even with seeming initial good intentions, however, it has been argued that multi-agency approaches have veered from their intended outcomes (Harvie and Manzi, 2011). A victim's experiences of DVA and help-seeking are highly individualised, and any number of factors will determine which services will be needed, by whom, and at what time (Day, 2018; Walsh, 2023). Multi-agency approaches require the inclusion and exclusion of certain agencies, with certain institutions and voices valued more at the expense of others to ensure this state centred approach; police, for example, lead the MARAC process (Safelives, 2014).

Robbins et al (2014) highlights the shifting power balance between criminal justice and statutory agencies and activist-led, voluntary, front line services.

3.2 Constructing violence, victimhood, and survival in DVA

Violence against women and girls has always existed, but was discursively shaped in a particular way during the second wave. What may now be understood as ‘abuse’ and ‘violence’ was conceptualised and defined materially during this time, discursively centring the criminal justice system through arguments for the necessity of reform (Serisier, 2018). This section will trace the journey of these arguments, showing the malleability of these constructions. Terms such as ‘abuse, ‘survivor’ and ‘victim’ are constantly defined, re-negotiated, argued and policed, and contentions are explored through this section.

3.2.1 How DVA became criminalised

The specific phenomenon of violence against women substantially predates the emergence of laws against it, because state intervention against violence within the home is comparatively modern (Munroe, 2013). In 1853 the Aggravated Assaults on Women and Children Act was passed giving judges the power to imprison men who beat their wives, and in 1857, the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act was passed. This allowed a woman to petition for divorce if her husband had been adulterous *in addition* to treating her with cruelty, or having deserted her, or having committed incest or bigotry. Though the standards for petitioning a divorce were much lower for men than for women (men only had to prove adultery) forty percent of petitioners were women, compared to the one percent pre-reform (D'Cruze, 2000; Hamilton, 2022).

Despite these legal changes, a life free from male violence was still very much out of reach for many women, who did not have the means or social support to live independently and away from the abuse (Day, 2018). It was not until the next century, during the second wave of feminism between the late 1960s and the early 1980s that violence in the home was conceptualised, problematised and responded to as 'violence against women' (Munroe, 2013). Erin Pizzey, who established the first women's refuge in the UK has written of the anger and hostility exhibition by some who would claim that 'women like to be beaten', or that they somehow 'deserve it' (Pizzey, 1982). Yet, in the face of this pushback, there was a growing feminist movement and 'violence against women' came to be understood as a manifestation of wider socio-political structures; an organic extension of the cultural prescriptions taken by men that were cherished in society, which privileged men and marginalised women (Stark, 2007; Dobash and Dobash, 1979). Feminist activism during this time highlighted the high prevalence of physical and sexual abuse within domestic settings, and the ideologies relied upon by perpetrators and the state to normalise, uphold and justify such violence (Munroe, 2013; Gruber, 2020).

The Violence Against Women and Girls movement, as it came to be known, was concerned with more than violence against women in the domestic setting and focused on eradicating all gendered subjection including prostitution and pornography, economic disparity between the sexes, reproductive rights and discrimination, and rape (Coy, 2007; Mackay, 2015). Strategies during the second wave of feminism were focused on the perceived political and state indifference toward domestic abuse, and one of their aims was to create physical spaces away from the home, such as safehouses and refuges for women who had escaped their violent partners (Pizzey, 1982; Harne and Radford, 2008; Kelly, 2019; Day. 2018). These refuges existed as temporary emergency accommodation for women and children leaving abusive homes, available on request with a focus on long-term and short-term safety planning. The refuge movement simultaneously provided emergency accommodation for women, and challenged men's economic dominance over women by allowing women's spaces to be self-sufficient and agentic (Day, 2018). At its core, the refuge movement was an anti-state grassroots movement, explicitly recognised as non-hierarchical and peer-led, and established away from the (seemingly patriarchal) government, namely because they had to be: the government had legally allowed domestic abuse and gender discrimination with impunity. Women in these spaces could share experiences and gain support, an activity known as 'consciousness-raising', and learned that what they were living with were not individual problems but pervasive throughout society (Harne and Radford, 2008). Facets of their social and personal life which had not been subject of social and political theorising came to seen as worthy of political analysis; domestic labour, the family, and intimate relationships were amongst issues previously deemed unworthy of political consideration (Stanley and Wise, 1983; Rogers, 2010).

Some feminists have observed that much of the intellectual and political activity which focuses on preventing and responding to violence against women that has taken place from the 1970s ought to be understood by reference to the second wave (Chesney-Lind, 2006; Richie, 2000; Walklate, 2008). Today, second wave feminism is often remembered – accurately or not - for its contribution to policing, punishment and prosecution (Gruber, 2020). Indeed, feminism, through academia and through advocacy, has played a huge role in shaping criminal justice responses to the various forms of violence committed against women (Women's Aid, 2020; Kelly, 1999). Such responses included the Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act (DVMPA) being passed in 1976, and later the Matrimonial Court Act of 1978. Both Acts equipped the police with the clear powers to arrest in suspected cases of DVA, as well as civil protection and restraining orders to prevent the perpetrator from being in the vicinity or making contact with the victim (DVMPA 1976; DPMCA, 1978; Chung, 2016; Maidment, 1983).

Feminists who had campaigned for the criminalisation of DVA had done so believing that a change in the law would be perceived as normative condemnation of domestic abuse, elevating DVA to the seriousness of any other violent crime (Hester, 2012; Harne and Radford, 2008). Yet, if much of the second wave feminist movement was in reaction to the patriarchal state, it is unfair to attribute the push for legal and political change entirely with them. During the time of feminists' second wave organising, along with other social movements of the late 60s throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the effects of neoliberalism were being felt beyond their directly financial policies, into housework, sexuality and reproductive rights (Duggan, 2003; Fraser, 2013). Radical feminism, one strand of feminist activism during the second wave, emerged, in part, in opposition to the neoliberal capitalist classes which feminists perceived as androcentric and encroaching deep into their personal lives. Yet, despite radical feminism's successes, there was also a "disturbing convergence" of some of its ideals with the demands of the emerging new forms of individualism under capitalism (Fraser, 2013: 210). Along with the fragmentation of second wave feminism (explored in the previous chapter), came the selective incorporation of some of its strands into the larger, androcentric governmentality. This meant a positive and willing participation of feminist activists incorporated into the organised power of the state (Fraser, 2013). Policymakers, and grassroots activists, once at odds, now coalesced in calls for police intervention and arrest policies in response to domestic violence and abuse (Fraser, 2013; Goodmark, 2018)

Walklate has referred to this convergence as the ‘criminalisation thesis’: an alignment of voices calling on tough responses to crime with feminist voices campaigning for all types of violence against women to be taken more seriously by the state (see Walklate, 2008; Williams and Walklate, 2020; Walklate and Fitz-Gibbon, 2021). This ‘thesis’ grew in prominence during the 1970s as some feminist voices were campaigning for the general deterrent and incapacitation effects of arrest and imprisonment, concomitant with governmental disparagement at welfare for being too “soft” on crime (Newburn, 2007; Williams and Walklate, 2020; Gruber, 2020). While this “unholy alliance” between feminism and the capitalist classes was more discernible in the US than in the UK, and as such has been theorised in more depth within a US context, it is undeniably recognisable in the problematisation of, and response to, violence against women in England and Wales from the 1970s onwards with the constant recourse to law (Walklate, 2008; Williams and Walklate, 2020). There has been a continued commitment to this pro-arrest stance with ever-harsher capitulation to criminal law in response to DVA, increasing pressure on police forces to arrest, and the setting up of dedicated units and specialist officers to respond to domestic violence and abuse (Hoyle, 2007; Williams and Walklate, 2020).

3.2.2 Black feminism and intersectional theorising on DVA

Patriarchy, or the overall subordination of women to, and by, men, is one factor in shaping understandings of DVA, and was a predominant target of many second wave feminists (Figes, 1970; Dobash and Dobash, 1979). The feminist political subjectivity which was formed during the second wave was based on the assumption that all women constituted a gender-based class that was unified by a common oppression. The experiences of white women, the majority of the second wave organising in the UK, came to be encoded as universal “women’s experiences”, but such orienteering obscured the very different problems faced by working class, Black and Asian, and migrant women (Murphy and Livingstone, 1985; Bryson, 1992; Rogers, 2010). Black British feminist activism was distinct from white radical feminism; the former had their roots in the Black Power movement, and political Blackness constituted a core part of their mission (Thomlinson, 2017). In the UK, subaltern groups such as the Brixton Black Women’s Group (formed in 1973) and the Organisation for Women of Asian and African Descent (founded in 1978) were different from earlier white feminist formations in that gender oppression was not necessarily primary; these collectives were focused on the place of women within Black, post-colonial, and often working class, radical struggles (Thomlinson, 2017).

While feminist activists of the second wave emphasised the ‘everywoman’ account – that is, every woman is vulnerable to violence from men - the ‘everywoman’ was essentially “a white middle class woman” (Richie, 2000: 96). Black feminists have historically pointed out that there are wider matrixes of domination and highlight how gender belies other axes of power such as race, sexual identity or class, which can also play a part in oppression (Collins, 2000). White feminism’s gendered understanding and managing of DVA often depends on categorically distinguishing between men and women, it is associated with a zero-sum notion of power; that men have it, women do not, and men wield it over women at their will (Campbell and Mannell, 2015). Assessing only a gendered facet results in a one-dimensional articulation of domestic conflict and belies how power can be mediated through varying societal forms of oppression (Lukes, 2005; Campbell and Mannell, 2015). As one feminist wrote in *Mukti*, a multi-language Afro-Asian feminist magazine in the UK,

> For us, the issue of race affects every facet of our lives – Black women whose reality is about survival, not comfort/luxuries/ privileges. Even if we happen to have a 'real home', or hold down a 'decent' job what does it mean if at any moment, we and our children can and are killed (often with impunity) merely for being Black/alien/'other' (Mukti *4*, 1985 in Thomlinson, 2017: 16)

While the everywoman narrative propelled the social and political agenda, it was the remit of this 'everywoman' that highlighted some of the broader limitations of radical feminist principles and the contradictions in its practice (Murphy and Livingstone, 1985). For radical feminism to assert that women's gendered oppression is the primary oppression means that this position overrides race and class oppression; all women, therefore, in spite of class or race differences, are bound to each other by their overriding common interests as women (Murphy and Livingstone, 1985). While white feminists acknowledged race, Crow (2000) notes that race was articulated differently between Black and white feminists at the time. Crow (2000: 4) argues that white women constructed race as "other" with "little reflection on whiteness" and privileged sex as the primary based difference in hierarchy. As such, much of radical feminism's analysis did not successfully incorporate race and class analysis, and this was especially apparent in radical feminism's recourse to law (Richie, 2000). "If the white groups do not realise they are in fact fighting capitalism and racism" Beale wrote in her 1969 book *Double Jeopardy*, "we do not have common bonds" (Beale, 2008: 174).

Christie (1986: 18) has theorised that the socially constructed ideal victim of a crime is a person or group who, when they experience crime, "most reality are given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim". There is a perceived legitimacy and innocence of the ideal victim and, within a systemically racist society, the ideal victim is racially coded as white (Christie, 1986; Long, 2021). Black women were not, and are not, only fighting for women's rights; they are simultaneously and relatedly campaigning for freedom from police harassment and brutality. The racialisation of the 'ideal victim' meant that then, as now, police disproportionately treated women of colour who report abuse as provocateurs and mutual combatants, rather than as victims (Jacobs, 2017; Gruber, 2020). Further, with the ideal victim being racialised as white, ultimately Black men became the 'ideal offender' (Long, 2021). While, for many radical feminists, their private issues must necessarily become public discourse, hooks (2000) argued against the public/private divide which was central to second wave feminist theorising of violence as being hidden within the domestic sphere. Instead, hooks contended that violence acted upon Black bodies, through discrimination, harassment, exploitation, threats of violence, and actual violence experienced in places of work, schools, and the streets, is inextricably linked to violence in the home. When the public/private divide is assumed as a social reality, public abuse from the state is concealed. The public/private divide then, is a white woman's reality; Black women have always suffered in public.

Many Black women had difficulty seeing white women as their feminist sisters (Thomlinson, 2017; Franklin, 2022), and Collins (1986; 2000) questions the ontological value of unifying all women as oppressed or as sharing a unique perspective. While schisms and divides were part of Asian and Black feminism organising, nevertheless, Collins argues (1986; 2000) that Black women have their own distinctive ways of producing and validating knowledge, with one important example of this being Crenshaw's theorising on intersectionality (1991). To Crenshaw, violence against women of colour is not able to be subsumed within the boundaries of gender relations only. There are multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is structured, and the experiences of women of colour exist at the intersections of structural racism in a way which is not distinct from, but in addition to, sexism (Crenshaw, 1991; Gill, 2013). Crenshaw (1991; 1993) further argues that the burdens of gender oppression are compounded by discriminatory practices that women of colour in particular face within institutions such as employment or housing and these patterns of subordination intersect in women's experience of domestic violence. Therefore, argues Crenshaw, using the "unaltered framework" (1991: 1244) of white women, often middle class, to analyse their experiences, or build intervention strategies, will be of limited help to poor women of colour.

It was Black feminist theorising which questioned the radical feminist supposition positing that, as patriarchy organises society in a male supremist order, when laws are changed to hold men accountable, such as with DVA, patriarchy will tumble with it (other citation; Gruber, 2020). Many of the second wave feminists who were pushing for criminal legal reforms perceived the police as a reluctant, sexist, but potentially neutral metering of justice and intervention acting on behalf of new laws designed to protect women. Black women pointed out that criminalising gendered violence exposed them to greater risks of state violence and control, and that structural sexist, racist or classist bias could not be done away with through more laws (Olufemi, 2020; Goodmark, 2018). Feminist political practice, even in the name of gender warfare or welfare, should not mimic patriarchy through inattention to individual or marginalised need (Mills, 1999).

Similarities can be drawn here between Black feminist campaigning and the calls for decriminalisation by sex worker activities (discussed in the previous chapter). Feminists who call for greater police presence into the lives and workspaces of women do not inhabit a body which is criminalised, as sex workers are, or constructed and read as inherently criminal, as Black bodies often are (Campbell and Mannell, 2015). hooks' public/private theorisation is applicable to the hypervisibility of sex workers, also. Sex workers are constantly visible – constantly being imagined and constructed – and thus, if their existence is contingent only on their work and not existing outside of it, this may mean that violence experienced in private, in the home and away from work, is concealed.

The theorisation of sex workers, disabled women, the working class, the LGBTQ community, especially trans women, and other marginalised groups has been deeply influenced by Black feminist theorising on DVA, especially intersectionality. Racial, gendered, dis/abled, sexual and class based oppression do not occur simultaneously, but are inter-related and mutually reinforcing (Collins, 2000; Gill, 2013). These debates have challenged the invisibility of marginalised people, and the problematic nature of specific identiy categories, as well as highlighting how the absence of theoretical frameworks struggle to account for how intersecting social divisions, such as class and race, affect different groups within particular contexts (Hindmann, 2011; Gill, 2013; Day and Gill, 2020). The critique of white women's centrality in the feminist movement has been an ongoing battle, but counteraction from marginalised women show that women are not reducible to their most marginalised characteristic, nor are they unified by their perceived common gender. Black feminists and feminists of colour were the first to call for feminism's wider engagement with global structures of economic and social equality

– racism, colonialism, and capitalism – arguing that only through attention to these interlocking structures of oppression can there be an end to all violence against all women (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 2000; Hill Collins, 2000; Hall, 2015; Thomlinson, 2017).

3.2.3 The move from a 'battered woman' to a victim of violence

Before the terms 'victim', 'survivor', or even 'victim/survivor' came into common parlance, those who experienced domestic abuse were referred to as 'battered women', if they were referred to at all (Ferraro, 2003; Goodmark, 2008). This phrase was premised on both the gendered and physical assumptions of domestic abuse, as well as notions of 'learned helplessness', a concept developed to describe an assumed psychological condition where women perceive their circumstances as unchangeable and thus themselves with no choice but to tolerate the abuse (Walker, 1977; 1983). As a consequence, Walker argues, the 'battered woman' believes that there is nothing that she can do to alter the situation in which she finds herself; a concept which has been used to explain why she may violently attack or even kill her partner, rather than try to leave (Walker, 1983; Dutton, 1993). Goodmark (2018) has argued further that Walker's theories have historically been used to justify interventionist state policies on the grounds that women subjected to abuse were so passive that they could not be expected to act for themselves.

It is no longer appropriate in the United Kingdom to use the phrase 'battered woman' because helplessness was not, and is not, why people stay in abusive relationships a lot of the time. It is more commonly accepted now that many women in abusive or violent relationships have agency and regularly show resistance – at times violent, but often not (Hayes, 2013; Stark, 2007; Gondolf and Fisher, 1988). Resistance can be physically fighting back as well as every day acts of resistance like ‘foot-dragging, evasion, false compliance, feigned ignorance, and sabotage’ (Scott, 1985: 34). Stark (2007) notes that victims create ‘safety zones’ which are moments of autonomy within the oppression, such as diary writing, playing with their children or going to work, where they can retain a sense of self. Narratives of passivity in mainstream discourse may remain, but in academia researchers are moving beyond them, showing the help-seeking behaviours such as calling a friend or reporting to the police (Hayes, 2013; Callaghan and Alexander, 2015). Constructing women in abusive relationships as helpless, and calling them ‘battered’ is unhelpful, because it is inaccurate, deeply stigmatising and often untrue.

Dunn (2005) argues that in order to raise awareness of DVA, claims makers have historically had to construct those affected as ‘victims’, emphasising their innocence and blamelessness. For those who have experienced abuse, acknowledging the pain, hurt and powerlessness which has come with their experiences can mean that identifying as a victim may be an important act of a person’s journey of healing (Kelly et al, 1996). The legal definition of a victim is a person who has suffered harm, including physical, mental, emotional harm, and economic loss, directly caused by a criminal offence, and so, identifying as a victim may also recognise the criminality and illegality of the abuse, which in turn can validate calls on the state to respond (MOJ, 2004). Grievance and trauma are common foundations for collective identity and political mobilisation, and the VAWG movement has demonstrated that suffering is social, political and collective, rather than merely subjective and individual (Jacoby, 2014). Best (1997) also notes how attempts to draw attention to social problems often emphasise the large numbers of people affected; in this case, the social ubiquitousness and pervasiveness seen in the rates of domestic abuse. In this way, collectively labelling people with victimhood status can imbue them with political power to incite moral outrage, invite intervention, and empower statehood (Bumiller, 2008).

Yet, Stringer (2014) notes that over the last few decades, there has been a concerted movement away from the language of victimhood. A ‘victim’ has become an emotionally loaded term to denote passivity and weakness, with some scholars implying it is “not politically correct” to use for this reason (Walker, 2009). Baker (2008) found that there is a strong tendency for some women who have experienced violence or sexual assault to emphasise personal responsibility and resilience in order to distance themselves from notions of weakness or the dreaded ‘victim’ status. The backlash to the perceived negative connotations and implications of powerlessness and self-pity meant that advocates, activists and researchers sought out an alternative that drifted away from this seemingly damaging portrayal and instead placed emphasis on empowerment and recovery (Hepworth, 2022).

In what Serisier (2018: 177) labels the “core narrative of speaking out”, a victim transforms herself into a survivor through her act of speaking out, breaking the silence and reclaiming subjectivity and agency after a potentially de-subjectifying experience of violence. This is not surprising, argue Kelly, Burton and Regan (1996), because the concept of 'survival', and its associated referent 'survivor', was developed within the women's and consciousness-raising movements to shift the stigmatising meanings which were attached to 'victim'. The strive to minimise feelings of weakness and vulnerability by emphasising strength and agency, however, implies that being a victim is a state of mind, and one which can be overcome in time. The notion of phases or development positions individuals as either 'victim' or 'survivor', and this misrepresents both material and emotional reality, however. All sexual and domestic violence and abuse involves an experience of victimisation, and if individuals do not die as a consequence then they have physically survived (Kelly et al, 1996). In the setting up of two identities, those who, for example, experience lifelong harassment from an ex-partner or permanent ostracization from an abusive family, may feel no choice but to resist both.

The term ‘victim/survivor’ has been more recently coined to acknowledge the ongoing effects and harm of abuse, as well as honouring the resilience of people who have experienced violence (Kelly et al, 1996; Wistow et al, 2016; McGlynn and Westmarland, 2018). FORCE: Upsetting Rape Culture, an activist collective, argue additionally that the term victim/survivor has been used to express the intersectional experiences of the most marginalised groups affected by abuse. These groups, such as people of colour, gender-non conforming people, drug users, and sex workers rarely conform to the ‘ideal victim’ stereotype; they most often risk having their experienced undermined by victim-blaming discourses. These can further complicate the already traumatic experience of sexual assault or domestic violence and abuse. If DVA and victim discourse is gendered, and racialised as white (Morrison 2006), victim/survivor acknowledges both the reality of vulnerability and triumph as well as the need to acknowledge various connected oppressions.

There is no universally agreed or acknowledged term for those who experience domestic violence and abuse, and in their attempts, scholars and activists are homogenising a broad and varied array of experiences, outcomes and responses. This thesis uses ‘victim/survivor’ to acknowledge harm and suffering, as well as the various acts of resistance, even if those who experienced violence did not survive their ordeal. Intersectional theorising has been instrumental in teaching that there can be no single name or label as there is no single-issue struggle, and this is because we do not live single-issue lives (Lorde, 1968).

3.3 Sex work, relationships, and abuse

Intimate relationships - be they romantic or familial - impact multiple domains in a person's life, including money, health, wellbeing, socialising and political engagement. Relationships have the capacity to provide support and a sense of feeling valued with a promise of stability, whilst, in romantic relationships especially, idealising tacit monogamy, possession and sacrifice (Hayes, 2014; Warr and Pyett, 1999). In literature of social exclusion and marginalised communities, the private life and home can provide a much-needed refuge from the health-damaging experiences of stigma and discrimination in the public realm (hooks, 2000; Jackson et al, 2009). As sex workers navigate various erotic and sexual interactions through their working life, these personal relationships can exert real influence in how they do their job, how they think about their occupation and how they perceive themselves so a nuanced understanding of them is crucial. (Bradley-Engen and Hobbes, 2010).

3.3.1 Intimate and family relationships while sex-working

The previous chapter highlighted issues that sex-working mothers faced and showed how motherhood and the need to care for and provide for a family is a strong incentive to begin sex-working (Sloss and Harper, 2004; Dodsworth, 2014). There is very little research away from the focus on sex-working mothers which explores sex worker family dynamics, especially where children are involved. What research does exist often emphasises family estrangement, abuse, or otherwise negative experiences as a significant contingency on entering the sex industry (McCaghy et al, 1994; Pearce, 2009). Research shows that, although by no means a homogenous group, routes into selling sex for children and young people are very clearly related to poverty, abuse in the home, losing contact with family and social networks; peer pressure; sleeping rough; drugs; debt, homelessness, running away, or being in – and leaving – local authority care (Phoenix, 2002; Pearce, 2009; Chase and Statham, 2005). For LGBTQ people who enter the sex industry, the experience of being thrown out of family homes or leaving because of a lack of acceptance or sexual bigotry, was one that resulted in LGBTQ people having nowhere to stay and turning to sex work as a form of survival (Browne et al, 2010). This form of prostitution has been re-branded as 'sexual exploitation' for those aged under 18, and Phoenix (2002: 353) has argued that this 're-branding' occludes the material and social realities that structure under 18s entering the sex industry. While vulnerabilities of those under 18 are unique, the material conditions may be the same as adults.

For workers who are migrants to the UK, the relationship between sex work and families is different. Instead of sex-working to survive after leaving their family, many sex workers migrate in order to repay various debts and to sustain their families at a distance (Oso Casas, 2009; Gutiérrez Garza, 2022). Some research into families of sex workers suggests that it is family love and their need for remittances and gifts, which keep workers in the sex industry, often in violent or dangerous conditions (Oso Casas, 2009). In contrast to those who were expelled from family bonds, for some workers, it was love which deeply influenced their decision to sex work.

Research into the intimate lives of sex workers is scarce, but the literature which is available often shows high levels of tension associated with having a private sexual relationship while engaging in sex work, often due to stigma which is internalised and weaponised within the intimate dynamic. Warr and Pyett (1999) examined the difficulties experienced by sex workers with sustaining a private relationship while engaging in sex work. They found that almost all the 24 sex-working women in their study did not use condoms in their private relationships in order to maintain a distinction between sex with clients and sex with private partners, even though half of this sample had contracted an STI at home. For these women, condom use carried very strong associations with work, whilst non-use of condoms signified private, intimate sex, and so was worth differentiating with their partners in this way, even though it put their sexual health at risk (Warr and Pyett, 1999). These findings were similar to those in Bhattacharjee's (2013) research on sex workers in India; for female sex workers, the long-term health costs of not using condoms are outweighed by their partner's negative and suspicious opinions of condoms. For these women, there were clear difficulties associated with their working in the sex industry while having a private sexual relationship, with tensions arising from issues of jealousy, resentment, disapproval and disrespect from partners specifically due to the nature of their work. Similarly, Bellhouse et al (2015) in their study of 55 sex-working women found that most (78%) reported that, overall, sex work affected their personal romantic relationships in predominantly negative ways, mainly relating to issues stemming from their partner's jealousy or inability to trust, their consequent lying about their work to protect their partners' feelings, and subsequent guilt at doing so.

Many sex workers find it distressing having to explain to their partner the complexities of their work, choosing secrecy or silence instead, but the emotional labour of hiding work from a partner can also be exhausting (Matos and Haze, 2019).

The strategy of hiding sex work from a partner due to fear of their reaction can be deeply difficult, and at times overwhelming (Jackson et al., 2009; Janseen et al. 2022; Warr & Pyett 1999). Such stresses are due to a sense of inauthenticity and living in constant fear of “being outed” – individuals disclosing the details of their working to other people without permission – and the negative repercussions which may arise because of this. Partners, and outsiders to the sex industry generally, commonly hold beliefs which stigmatise the sex industry and those who work in it; a reflection of wider public discourse (Bahri, 2910; Bradley-Engen and Hobbes, 2010; Jansson et al, 2022; Bellhouse et al, 2015).

A person who is in a romantic relationship with a sex worker and who benefits financially from her employment, in the same way as any other partner of person in paid employment, is not necessarily exploiting the situation. However, a prominent finding in literature documents male partners appearing to have no issue living off the profits of their sex-working partners, whilst simultaneously weaponising the stigma and shame about their job to control and abuse them. For example, Bradley-Engen and Hobbes (2010) reported that 54% of the strippers they spoke to had experienced partners who made them feel guilty about their occupation even though they expected her to be the sole or primary financial provider. In a recent study of sex-working women in Mexico, women explained their partner’s violence as a result of the women earning more than their partners (Ulibarri et al, 2018). For the sex worker’s male partners, there existed a double bind: a clear dependence on, and resentment towards, women financially supporting the couple in a society where a man’s performance of ‘correct’ heteronormative masculinity is judged on his ability to provide for his partner. Phoenix (1999) found that sex workers believed their boyfriends became potential pimps because of their involvement in sex work; by workers being willing to share their earnings with their partner, the boundary between partner and exploiter becomes reconstituted. For many interviewees, the change between boyfriend and pimp came when the boyfriend got “greedy” and felt entitled to money that he had no place in earning (1999: 52).

May, Harocopos and Hough (2000: 3) draw a spectrum on which to consider partners of sex workers; at one end are those who “grudgingly acquiesce” to the money sex work provides while supporting and protecting their partner, and at the other are those who manage or direct their partner’s sex work and control his or her income. Between these two points, however, lies a murky overlap between ‘pimping’ as an exploitation of someone else’s labour, and someone who is financially abusive controlling and taking advantage of the sexual labour market through their partner. These particular forms of financial and economic abuse of sex workers is hard to decipher in the absence of clear research on intimate relationships or exploitative working conditions. Rather than intimate partners being separate to coercive managers and bosses, offenders and victims are often related in some way, or have close, intimate relationships (Verhoeven et al, 2013). If pimps are qualitatively defined by their behaviour toward sex-working women, such as Davis’s (2013) definition of someone who fully controls the income and general working activity of those involved in selling sex, the line between pimps and other colleagues may seem clear cut. With caricatures and stereotypes of pimps prevailing, however, the line between a boyfriend and a pimp remains murky.

The large number of ways that people engage in transactional sex is matched by the wide range of dynamics involving their partner and money. It is clear that from a crime perspective, ‘pimping’ does not fit into an easily defined category and so may risk both opportunities to identify potential victims, as well as risking the removal of agency from others. A partner's violence may be primarily calculated to coerce someone into commencing or continuing in sex work, but sex work is not the only occupation where there are violent dynamics surrounding victim/survivor's earnings (Sanders, 2015; Showalter, 2016). A victim/survivor's involvement in the sex industry does not necessarily mean she is being sexually exploited; their experiences may be categorised as laying closer to economic and financial abuse where one party is a sex worker. Understanding sex workers' private relations is hampered by the common 'pimp' stereotype as being a man with no emotional relationship to the sex worker and discursively constructed as criminal, when the reality seems closer to a complex and confusing entanglement of fear, love, loyalty, protection and extortion (Kinnell, 2008).

3.3.2 DVA in sex worker relationships

Reliable statistics on DVA prevalence are difficult to produce, and assessing the prevalence of abuse in sex worker relationships is even more quantitatively difficult to discern. Regardless of occupation, however, violence and abuse is a common part of many relationships (Lombard and McMillan, 2013), and as noted earlier, many sex workers face difficulties when trying to manage their job and intimate relationships.

Even though sex work activists fight to de-exceptionalise their work and de-stigmatise sex work to be recognised as a valid form of labour, the stigma of sex work is perpetuated in heterosexual perceptions of romantic relationships. These stigma management strategies are a form of emotional labour, additional to the emotional labour expected of them as girlfriends, partners or wives (Bahri, 2019).

Sex workers often feel responsible for managing the tension in their relationship even though many do not believe there is anything wrong with their work (Bahri, 2019; Bradley-Engen and Hobbes, 2010; Colosi, 2010). Hayes (2014) has pointed out that the responsibility of maintaining an intimate relationship is gendered and falls predominantly on women and thus, the emotional labour of neutralising jealousy and resentment is naturalised for the women. This emotional labour is additional to the extra work required on top of the constant management of stigma which sex workers face (Bahri, 2019). Many sex workers may conceal aspects of their work to their partners to ease tensions and reduce jealousy, possessiveness or control (Matos and Haze, 2019). In this way it seems that stigma management is a form of abuse management: withholding information in order to reduce potential or perceived potential harm from their partner.

Sanders (2016: 104) has shown how the "discourses of disposability" across institutions position sex workers as "noncitizens, as rubbish, not to be cared about, or indeed, there to be violated". Colosi (2010: 161) found that it was not unusual for strippers in her fieldwork to become involved in "high-risk relationships"; the majority of the dancers in Colosi's research were either in, or had been involved in "abusive or 'complicated' relationships" (2010: 161). Bradley-Engen and Hobbes (2010) also reported that exotic dancers in their study reported that, for them, romantic involvement is a significant source of stress, and is strongly related to their occupations. Though all women prioritised "kind treatment" in a relationship, nearly all dancers reported that their relationships were lacking, and a recurrent theme was a pattern of "pattern of abusive, exploitative, degrading, or stressful romantic relationships" (Bradley-Engen and Hobbes, 2010: 70).

At times sex work parodies the most intimate aspects of relationships, and, as sex work relies upon the performance of normative relationship structures – one-on-one, reciprocated attraction, nudity and seduction - many of the partners of sex workers are unable or unwilling to conceive of sex work as a *performance* of intimacy. Possessiveness and a need to control partner's bodies and sexualities, are well documented in domestic abuse research (Follingstad et al, 1990; Monkton-Smith, 2021) and it ties into theories on ownership and entitlement over partner's bodies. Bradley-Engen and Hobbes (2010) found that for some partners of the dancers in their study, access to a dancer's body is the exclusive right of her partner; it is not her own to display, share, or sell. Thus, when women engage in exotic dance, partners feel violated, and take it out on their girlfriends by way of sexual violence for selling what they see as their possession. These partners empathise with the customer, not their partner.

Indeed, in any relationship partners may be unsatisfied with characteristics related to a partner's occupation, without being categorised as abusive. Additionally, sabotaging attempts at work are also well documented in the domestic violence and literature (Postmus et al, 2020; Swanberg and Macke, 2006; Swanberg et al 2005; Showalter, 2016). What the research has shown is that controlling, shaming, or vindictive behaviour in sex worker relationships are inherently related to the job itself (Bahri, 2019; Colosi, 2010; Warr and Pyett, 1999; Murphy, 2015; Bradley-Engen and Hobbes, 2010). Being involved in sex work allows partners to identify sex work as deserving of poor treatment and internalised stigma means that some women in the literature demonstrate that they succumb to the 'shaming' of their partners (Bradley-Engen and Hobbes), or, the women normalise their partners' jealousy, indicating that it was natural (Murphy et al, 2015), even if they enjoy their work and see no reason to stop. Jansson et al (2022) posit that sex workers believe their partners may have trouble comprehending the labour that goes into doing sex work or why sex workers choose to work in the sex industry compared to other jobs available to them, demonstrating further how participants focus on the sex part of the work rather than the work part.

Many of these stories are already being told, and knowledge is being shared, throughout sex worker communities, outside of the academic realm (see Tits and Sass, 2014; Stryker, 2012; Syre, 2015). Research into the romantic and personal lives of sex workers is crucial given the growing academic interest in the effects of stigma on the health and wellbeing of sex workers (Macioti, Grenfell and Platt, 2017; Matos and Haze, 2019; Kim and Schmul, 2019). This comes with risks, however. Tyler (2020: 212) theorises that sociological writing on “the stigmatised” often, despite its best intentions, reproduces the stigma it ostensibly seeks to analyse, and treating sex workers as exceptional in research sensationalises their work. Differentiating sex work by constantly researching them and their work contributes to their objectification and may inadvertently reproduce the institutional stigma which is replicated in their relationships.

3.3.3 Reasons to stay and barriers to leaving

This section is divided into two parts: while resisting the stigmatising discourse of ‘why did she stay’, the first section explores the practical and emotional reasons why someone might feel compelled to remain in an abusive relationship. The second section explores barriers, both real and perceived, of victim/survivors seeking help and support in managing, or leaving, their abusive relationships or family relationships. Through the discursive move from ‘battered women’ to ‘victim/survivors’, there was a move to acknowledge both the harm and suffering, as well as the various acts of resistance demonstrated by those living with DVA. While remaining in an abusive relationship or home may mean living with violence, humiliation or pain, leaving often comes with its own risks which can often end in fatality. Staying, then, can be considered an act of resistance against the abuse in keeping themselves alive. Victim/survivors are not consenting to the abuse, they are exercising agency *within* the abuse.

There is significant research showing the fatal risks of leaving an abusive partner, with the US National Centre for Injury Prevention and Control (NCICP) reporting a 900% increase in the potential for homicide after leaving a relationship where there is control and violence. In the UK, the Domestic Homicide Review (DHR) reported (2022) that for 73% of victims, the perpetrator was a partner or ex-partner and in 9% of these cases, it was indicated that a separation had or was taking place. Not all attempts at separation end in fatality. Monckton-Smith (2021) has shown that the most prevalent category of stalking is an ex-partner, demonstrating the ways in which control and harassment can continue even after the relationship has ended. Roberts (2005) found that participants in his study who experienced stalking were most likely to have experienced controlling behaviour and denigration from their former partner during their relationship, concluding that stalking is a variant or an extension of domestic abuse.

Staying in an abusive relationship or household can also mean that there is no risk of losing child arrangement cases (Hunter, Barnett and Kaganas, 2018). Research has illustrated how ex-partners’ requests for contact with or custody of children can be a way of trying to re-assert power and control over the mother through repeated court hearings (Radford & Hester, 2006). As well as depleting time, finances and resources, while women were away from their ex-partners they reported living every day with anxiety and fear about their child's safety during contact visits and the possibility of being taken back to court by their former partner at any time (Birchall and Choudry, 2018). Local authorities consider the protection of children from domestic abuse as part of their child protection role, meaning a parent's fear of losing their children can prevent them from disclosing the abuse (Local Government Association, Cafcass, & Women's Aid, 2006). In the UK, The Family Rights Group (2014) reported that mothers were told by social workers that they risked their children being put into care in order to protect them from further incidents of domestic abuse.

Regardless of how resistance manifests – as violence or compliance - ultimately these acts of resistance are survival strategies for those living with violence. Gondolf and Fisher (1988) argue that coping with abuse is a survival strategy as much as attempting to leave and, at times, coping with abuse may include strategic passivity and placation (Irving and Liu, 2020). Whilst it may seem that a victim's actions are passive, this passivity is often instrumental in their safety planning; those who live with domestic abuse are constantly engaging in complex resistance work, often in highly constrained and potentially unsafe environments. While people who live with DVA are not obligated to explain their actions to anyone, there are many reasons why women opt to stay in abusive relationships. If the risks of attempting to leave can potentially involve murder, or losing agreed child arrangements, it may be safest to stay in the relationship. As well as the risks of leaving there are other reasons why people choose to stay: economic dependency (Sharps-Jeff, 2015), drug dependency (Gadd et al, 2020), and importantly, love.

Often, out of a range of potential consequences, staying may often be the safest choice.

Even with all of the criminal justice initiatives aimed at reducing attrition, there remain a range of reasons why those experiencing DVA may not attempt to disclose, or remaining within the criminal justice system from report-to-court (Francis et al, 2017; Dolan and Conroy, 2021; Donovan and Hester, 2011; Overstreet and Quinn, 2013). A large part of feminist advocacy work has been in arguing that DVA ought to be treated the same as non-domestic assault in the eyes of the law, but others argue that while the two are legally identical, they are sociologically distinct (Hoyle and Sanders, 2000).

Although some have heralded the union of anti-DVA movements and criminal justice for legitimating and expanding awareness of women's experience of abuse, some feminists have argued against the criminalisation of social problems all together (Bumiller, 2008; Simon, 2007). Goodmark (2018) and Coker and Macquaid (2015) argue that framing DVA as a criminal issue rather than within a human rights, economic, or public health framework, limits the potential for understanding the depth, breadth, causes, and consequences of DVA, as well as limitations on the scope for ending it. Others have argued that criminalisation has not benefited all women, arguing that increased criminalisation has a range of consequences for marginalised populations such as women of colour, drug users, women with disabilities and sex workers (Mills, 1999; 2003; Goodmark, 2018; Bumiller, 2008; Kim, 2013; Mehrotra et al, 2016; Beetham et al, 2021).

Boethius and Åkerström (2020) note that, statistically speaking, being in an abusive relationship is not uncommon, and given that violence is both illegal and - in contemporary society - publicly condemned and morally questioned, it can seem like a paradox that many who experience violence do not disclose the abuse and seek help. Yet, a fear of repercussions from the abuser, self-blame for the abuse, or a lack of confidence in the outcome are all significant reasons why someone may not disclose, formally or informally (Francis et al, 2017). The reliance on criminal justice remedies and the professionalisation of the grassroots social movement often incites fear in victim/survivors (Kim, 2013). Fear is a significant factor in considering disclosure: fear of Social Services involvement; fear that disclosure will not be believed; fear that disclosure will result in further violence; fear of disruption to family life; and fear of the consequences for immigration status (Rose et al, 2011; Huntley et al, 2019). Wydall and Zerk (2017) have also reported that victim/survivors fear that disclosing abuse may result in the loss of their community or friendship group, or that the outcome of their disclosure would be taken out of their hands and they would be further disempowered.

Muir (2022), has argued that within the VAWG sector, understandings of violence are universalised under a white, cisgender hegemony. One of the implications of this is that current service responses are broadly designed, located and resourced around the needs of these ‘known victims’; overwhelmingly heterosexual, white working-class women, who experience violence from a current or former intimate partner (Harne and Radford, 2005; Walby and Towers, 2018). Additionally, specialist services for BME victims of DVA have pointed out that partnerships between domestic abuse organisations and criminal justice agencies fail to take account of the fact that many women, especially minoritised women, tend not to want the proposed remedy of the criminal justice system (Day, 2018). A husband serving six months in prison for assault meant six months of financial crisis for many working-class families (Goodmark, 2018; Williams and Walklate, 2020; Gruber, 2020). Social stigma and ostracism may prevent middle-class families from calling the police, as well as the very real prospect of more violence when the couple are reunited (Williams and Walklate, 2020; Gruber, 2020). Women of colour may be reluctant to advocate for police intervention, unable to choose between their commitment to feminism and the struggle with their men for racial justice (Potter, 2006). Queer, gay, or gender-non conforming couples have often been the target of violence and discrimination from the state; calling on the state as guardians or intervenors in violence may feel like a false promise (Lamble, 2013).

For marginalised victim/survivors, these reasons are compounded by assumptions, often true, that criminal justice, or DVA organisations and services, are structured around the needs of white, English speaking, cis-gendered, heterosexual and able-bodied women, and as such, may not be appropriate for their needs (Hague and Mullender, 2006). In Gill's (2004) study of South Asian women who had experienced DVA, she found that that many were "doubly victimised", as leaving an abusive partner or family also meant exclusion from a community that might otherwise offer protection. For male victims, self-perception and societal perception of masculinity are also important factors in these fears (Huntley et al, 2019). Yet, focusing on the marginality of victim/survivors, or their perceived reasons for not seeking help, individualises the solution to DVA by laying responsibility, in part, with the actions of the victim/survivors (Bumiller, 2008; Mehrotra et al, 2016). Neoliberal policies work to decrease the role of the government in providing social services, focusing instead on the individualisation of problems and privatisation of services with a heavy reliance on individual responsibility and accountability (Mehrotra et al, 2016). As such, the rolled-back neoliberal state limits its roles to ensuring freedom of capital and places the emphasis upon the individual victim/survivor to make ‘good’ decisions to prevent or end their abuse, often meaning a capitulation to criminal justice interventions (Bumiller, 2008).

Conclusion

This chapter opened by mapping the current landscape of domestic violence and abuse in England and Wales, legally, socially, and politically, showing how the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 is a culmination of 40 years of law and activism. The contention of the current gender neutral, non-physical and criminal justice focused Act was also explored in this opening section. This chapter then looked back at the history and construction of DVA within the feminist activist movement; after showing how second wave feminist problematised DVA, this chapter documented the pushback from BAME feminists of the second wave, documenting the impact of intersectional theorising. While intersectional theorising has been instrumental in reorienting how DVA is spoken about and understood, dominant narratives of heterosexuality and patriarchy remain. The construction and maintenance of DVA as a criminal issue necessitates a criminal justice response, and this chapter demonstrated how the criminal discourse aligns with neoliberal individualisation. This chapter ended by assessing the research on sex workers’ family and intimate relationships, showing the importance of these relationships on sex workers’ entrance into the sex industry, self-perception while working, and potential barriers to leaving.

4. Methodology and research design: researching sex work and domestic abuse

Introduction

While research into domestic violence and abuse (DVA) has its roots in feminist activism and advocacy (see Chapter 3), the past forty years of research onto the sex industry has moved from being conducted within a medical framework, to being shaped by feminist methodologies. In practice this means a growing effort by researchers for their work to be socially and politically transformative, toward gender equality in particular.

This thesis is influenced strongly by intersectional theorising, and is underpinned by a feminist and scholar-activist praxis to address the broad issue of how sex workers experience domestic and familial violence and abuse and their help-seeking behaviours. Utilising a qualitative approach, semi-structured long-form interviews with 15 sex workers were undertaken to address the aims of this research project, which are:

1. To develop an understanding of sex workers' experiences and perceptions of sex work, and of familial and intimate partner violence and abuse.
2. To explore sex worker's discourses of abuse and victimhood.
3. To understand why sex workers may not disclose their experiences and where, if anywhere, they do disclose and seek support.
4. To produce recommendations for feminist advocates, researchers and academics, sex worker rights organisations, domestic violence and abuse organisations, policy makers and practitioners to better support sex working victims of domestic and familial abuse.

This chapter opens by mapping the current methodological issues in sex work and DVA research, and explains the scholar-activist approach to this research project. It then moves to explaining why the combined usage of critical realism and intersectionality as the theoretical framework best responds to the issues under scrutiny. The final section details the research design, focusing on the execution of the study.

4.1 Methodological Literature

After opening this section by discussing terminology, I examine the various methodological approaches and challenges of researching sex work and DVA and discuss how language and definition can impact research, political action and exclusion. I conclude this first section by bringing to the forefront scholar-activism and discuss the relevance of my politics and relationship with the sex working community on this research project.

4.1.1 The research landscape of sex work research

The definition of 'sex work' used in this thesis refers to a deliberate and agentic economic exchange of money for sexual services; 'sex worker' is used to refer to someone who engages in that exchange. As shown throughout the literature review (Chapters 2 and 3), there is no uncontested or widely accepted explanation of these terms. At times I use 'sex industry' to refer to the wider industry encompassing consensual sex-related activity, as well as the rubric under which to speak about those who sell, and are sold or traded, for sex; the latter category including coercive violence and force, as well as opportunistic trading for money, drugs, or somewhere to sleep. The terminology used in this thesis may read by some as an attempt to sanitize what is often a coercive and exploitative type of activity, and, as Hewer (2019) argues, the term ‘sex-work’ linguistically situates the sale of sex within the ‘legitimating’ structures of employment (Kempadoo & Doezema, 1998; Scoular, 2015). As such, including transactional sex within the rubric of ‘the sex industry’ is a way to engage with the sexual exploitation and abuse aspect of selling or buying sexual labour, as well as recognising agency and that some people can and do choose to sell sex for money.

From its inception, ‘prostitution research’ has been framed by perceptions of safety and danger (Brents et al, 2005). Within this framework, sex workers were constructed as a threat to social stability and public health, or as victims of male power and sexual violence; prostitution was understood as a ‘problem’ to be ‘managed’ (McNay, 1992; Graham, 2021). Meanwhile, lingering tropes of sex workers as ‘vectors of disease’ informed research which has often focused on sexual health, substance misuse and HIV (Sawiki et al, 2019). However in recent years, a reframing has taken place thanks to the permeation of activism and advocacy into academic research. This reframing has led to a stronger focus on harm-reduction, with an emphasis on responses to the potential harms and dangers, aside from medical issues, associated with sex work. Activism-informed research is more likely to be based on sex worker-led models and focused on individual needs (NHRC, 2020). Under this ontological re-framing away from the medical model, or sex work as necessarily gendered oppression, academic literature has begun to reconceptualise sex work as a specific gendered relation under capitalism (Beloso, 2012). Due in part to the amplified focus on harm reduction, and the inclusion of sex workers in the research process, the case for decriminalising sex work as a vital safety measure has been strengthened (O'Neill, 2010).

Though there has been a notable shift in decriminalisation advocacy across academic research (Scrambler and Scrambler, 1995; Brooks-Gordon et al, 2021; Armstrong, 2021), deep political divides in sex work theorising remain. This often results in researchers outlining their political position throughout their work, advocating along a spectrum from full decriminalisation to an outright abolition of the sex industry entirely (Vuolajärvi, 2019; Stabile, 2020; Sanders and Campbell, 2014; see also Bindel, 2017; Jeffreys, 2017). Weitzer (2005) notes that ideology and political agenda contaminates knowledge production, and O'Neill (2010) has argued that any attempt to understand sex work must be clear about the ways that selling sex is constructed along discourses of deviance and social control; discourses which shape ideological interventions in law and policy. Indeed, ideological debates often centre on the concern that researchers may mobilise evidence to substantiate a set of a priori assumptions about the sex industry (Dewey et al, 2018). In this way, research on and about the sex industry necessitates legitimate political advocacy as well as knowledge production, and what constitutes ethical or meaningful research must come from both academia and grassroots activist communities (Dewey et al, 2018; Scarlet Alliance, 2009; ESWA 2023). Research which fairly represents the needs and the voices of sex workers is vital because, to sex workers around the world, the stakes have never been higher (Jeffreys, 2009; Miren, 2015). It is within this political context that this thesis emerged, as a piece of work that is located at the intersections of academia and grassroots sex-worker led activism.

Alongside the ostensible progress for sex workers and sex worker rights activists found within research, conflict and tension remains between researchers and sex working communities for a number of reasons (Holt, 2020; Jeffreys, 2009; Agustin, 2013). Research on the sex industry which is seemingly supportive of sex worker rights, or which advocates for the decriminalisation of the sex industry, often conceptualises sex work as exceptional, queer, or a sexual orientation (Kingston and Smith, 2020; Khan, 2019). Theorising about commercial sex as a kind of intimacy, albeit it “bounded” (Bernstein, 2010b) or of men who pay for sex as subversive and thus, queer, (Pendleton, 1997; Smith et al, 2015; Khan, 2019) emphasises a focus on the *sex* of sex work, of indulging in a sexually explicit culture usually closed off to outsiders (Bernstein, 2010). These positions are worth noting because, whilst they are advocating for sex worker rights and decriminalisation, such research exists in stark contrast to the wider sex worker rights movement which fights to de-exceptionalise sex work as a form of labour, and to unite it within the global workers’ movement (ECP; ESWA; SWARM; Hall, 2019).

As a researcher I have insider status which informs my approach and as such I utilise sex worker produced ‘grey literature’ such as blogs, zines, and websites, situated within broader academic trends. Although sex workers have been able to publish in academic journals or collections, voices outside these academic spaces are often ignored (Herrmann, 2022). In order to truly reflect and engage with sex worker voices, it is necessary to include these non-traditional sources. Though this thesis draws upon insights from across disciplinary fields, including sociology, criminology, feminism and queer theory, the epistemological approach of this research de-exceptionalises, as its starting point, the work of sex work, instead situating it as one feature within the broader context of participants’ lives.

4.1.2 The research landscape of domestic and familial abuse

With the political importance and increasing criminal justice scope of DVA comes a responsibility of research to be reflective of the problem. In practice this means being inclusive of marginalised and vulnerable populations to ensure robust findings, prevalence rates and statistics, and to draft recommendations (Green and Morton, 2021). While there have been many steps forward in producing knowledge about the breadth and scope of DVA, methodological challenges remain.

Chapter 3 closely reviewed the politics of language pertaining to DVA, and this section further reviews the research challenges caused by these issues. Moving and shifting terminology is a constant in intersectional feminist praxis, yet unclear working definitions can stifle or regress research aims. When designing the participant call out for this research, I considered how narrow definitions, or potentially stigmatising language in the recruitment, could mean lower recruitment or reporting rates, or possibly that potential participants may not identify their experiences within the operationalisation of “sex work”, “domestic violence”, or “familial abuse” (see Kelly and Radford, 1990; Donovan and Barnes, 2020; Bender, 2017; Swallow, 2017; Sanders, 2007). Donovan and Barnes (2021: 35) have pointed out that the various definitions and understandings of DVFA shift temporally and geographically, which may be further complicated by encompassing familial abuse along with intimate partner violence as this thesis does. Holt (2015) highlights the issues of replicating definitions of intimate partner violence and mapping them onto particular forms of violence within the family; is this particular occurrence a *family conflict* or *gender-based violence*? In line with governmental policy, thesis refers to domestic *and* familial violence and abuse as DVA; encompassing both but acknowledging a sociological distinction.

There is often a caveat in literature, that DVA affects women across racial, social class, and cultural backgrounds, and that no woman is immune from it; but Black feminist thought has challenged the primacy of gender as an explanatory model of domestic violence (Sokoloff and Dupont, 2005; Potter, 2006). Kanuah (1996) argues that attempting to generalise domestic abuse by claiming that it affects all women across race, nationality, religious or sexual orientation is “not only a token attempt at inclusion” but also “evidence of sloppy research and theory building” (1996: 40). While acknowledging that no one is immune from domestic abuse, research nevertheless overly focuses on heterosexual white women who are engaged in services (Richie, 2005). Multicultural and multiracial scholars and activists claim that domestic violence neither affects all women the same nor treats gender inequality as the only or primary factor in determining domestic violence (Volpp, 2005). The false unity of the “everywoman” based on this notion shapes the epistemological foundation of research, with intervention strategies and campaigning based on the needs of this perceived person at risk; a woman, usually white, usually able bodied and very often middle class (Richie, 2005; Hague et al, 2011). Further intersectional theorising is needed.

4.1.3 Scholar-activism

Remi Joseph-Salisbury and Laura Connelly (2021) use the term ‘scholar-activism’ for the praxis of academics working within, and against, institutions in the pursuit of social justice. Scholar-activists are academics who take an explicitly political standpoint in their work with a very clear goal and purpose. For research to be truly scholar-activist in its approach, collaboration through partnership and alliances, as well as critical reflection, are all required throughout the research journey (Kagan, 2023).

Personal experiences of working in the sex industry can provide valuable insights which support the knowledge production process; as such, researchers and practitioners emphasise the potentially transformative power of including current or former sex workers in research (O'Neill, 2010; Kim & Jeffreys, 2013; Dewey et al, 2021). As well experiencing domestic abuse, I have been embedded within sex worker activist communities since 2014, long before I even began thinking about this research. This history was felt throughout the planning, designing and implementation of this project, and so, this research is a form of scholar-activism; a way of working that tries to change lives by combining the features of academic integrity and political activism (Borras and Franco, 2023; Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2021). I did not work alone, however. I checked in throughout with friends in the sex worker community, colleagues who work in domestic violence and abuse organisations, and organisers within sex work advocacy, by sharing work and early findings. It felt communal by the very nature of how the project came together and is defiantly scholar-activist in its approach to on-the-ground politics, transformative knowledge production and accountability.

4.2 Theoretical and analytical framework

Although data can tell us something about what is going on in the world, it is rarely self-evident or a direct reflection of reality; it needs to be read and analysed through a particular lens to give it meaning (Willig, 2013; 2023). For this research project, the theoretical and analytical lens is underpinned by i) the philosophical principle of critical realism and ii) a framework of intersectionality iii) feminist approaches to research. Each of these will be discussed in turn.

4.2.1. Critical realism

Given the debates around sex work and the dominant narratives on DVA (see Chapters 2 and 3), the appeal of social constructionism lay in its emphasis on social and historical variability of meaning, and the importance of discourse and language in making sense of the world (Matthews, 2014; Burr, 2015). Feminist social constructionism especially values the multiplicity of meaning, and the process by which participants arrive at them as a way of identifying the power effects of discourse (Bischoping and Gazso (2016). As social constructionists reject positivist notions of 'knowledge' and 'truth' – meaning is constructed, not discovered – such a position can be useful, but it is sometimes accused of slipping into constant relativism where there are no foundations (Haslanger, 1995; Gray, 2004). While language does indeed construct our social realities, these constructs are limited and enabled by materialities, or are felt corporeally, and so they are not reducible to discourse nor quantifiable simply through language (Sims-Schouten et al, 2007). By treating all materiality as sites of text, including the human body, social constructionism risks obscuring or downplaying the significance of its aspects. If the body can be anything, argue Cromby and Nightingale (1999), it may as well be nothing.

The critical realist approach to interrogating the social world, however, is both discursive and non-discursive, and so may be able to account for the perceived ontological gulf noted earlier. Interrogation, for critical realists, is repositioned from the beginning by presenting an account of a sense of self, which is prior to, and primitive to, our sociality (Spencer, 2015). The crux of critical realism is that social phenomena, be it actions, texts, bodies, or institutions, exist regardless of interpretations of them. In critical realism emphasis is therefore placed on the constitutive role of meaning and language, but there is an underlying truth that is amenable to explanation and research should be concerned with identifying the social causes and effects of the object under study (Sayer, 2004; Parr, 2015). In critical realism, language constructs our social realities, however, these constructions are theorised as being shaped by the possibilities and constraints inherent in the material world (Sims-Schouten et al, 2007). The effect of abuse on the body, for example, is undeniably felt. The pain is independent of its discursive construction.

To approach the problem of the body, or the production of particular material effects on the body, the critical realist position asserts the independent properties and powers of human agency and society and is firmly anti-reductionist; knowledge is always about something, independent of what is comprehended through simple observation (Holt, 2009; Mackinnon, 2015). Such return to materiality means that participants' stories and agency can be understood meaningfully without overstating their personal responsibility for their hardships, because the relationship between humans and the world can never be severed (Archer, 2016; Spencer, 2015). As people we interact with the world and its structures too much to be proofed against them, and, as a consequence, there can be an avoidance of feeding into the dangerous political discourses that advocate individual responsibilisation (see O'Malley, 1992, 2016). Ultimately, critical realists focus on embodied practice (Spencer, 2015). A critical realist approach, therefore, feels a more ethical approach than social constructionism because it enables a respect for the participant's lived and felt experiences. This is by recognising the material effects which particular structures of inequality have on people's lives and which they must negotiate, such as access to resources and opportunities (Holt, 2009).

4.2.2 Intersectionality

Intersectional theorising has amplified the need to dismiss gendered claims of universalism (see section 3.2.2). However, Nencel (2017) has noted that within studies of the sex industry, similar debates on subjectivity are virtually absent. Nencel (2017) further contends that the political identity of ‘sex worker’ reduces all differences and emphasises commonalities, universalising the experiences. While this umbrella term of sex work is useful in political organizing, it can be confusing and obfuscating in the research process without clear delineation of the object of study. Sex industry research engages with a broad spectrum of behaviours, actors, socio-economic environments and cultural beliefs (Dewey et al, 2018). There are huge differences in experiences between workers from dungeon dominatrixes to webcam performers to outdoor full service workers. These differences may be along gender, race, class, education and sexuality axes, but also in their legal status, stigmatized status and proximity to risk, violence and arrest. An intersectional framing may more accurately identify the various forms of socio-cultural privilege and oppression upon which economic labour or exploitation is predicated (Beloso, 2012). Thus, flattening out differences under the collective identity of ‘sex worker’ constrains knowledge production within specific parameters which may support political objectives, but do not always reflect the everyday lived experiences of sex workers (Ruiz and Nencel, 2011; Jones, 2015; Nencel, 2017).

Much of the intersectional theorising, inspired from Crenshaw, draws upon a structuralist approach to subjectivity. Informed by various systems of oppression relating to race, class, gender and sexuality, the intersections of certain categories seem to affect identities in a fixed or static way (Martinez et al, 2014; Mckibbin et al, 2013). Martinez et al (2014) point out that the use of mathematical tropes to portray structural conditions – Venn diagrams of overlapping marginality, axes of power, matrixes of oppression – is clearly reflective of a positivist legacy.

While neat and visible categorisations seem counter to the interpretivism of critical realism, Gunnarson (2011) notes that categories such as race or gender are not neat and absolute but in constant transformation and only relatively autonomous from each other. Critical realists accept that causal powers emerge from structural categories and positions to explain how agency can interact with, reproduce, or attempt to change these structures (Martinez et al, 2014). With this orientation, intersectionality as a concept works well with critical realism: both show the material effects of power and discourse without reducing everything to text. Intersectionality calls for the recognition of the effect of multiple oppressions on a person and critical realism provides the tools to identify the structures.

Some scholars claim that intersectionality has been co-opted or misappropriated, arguing that intersectionality has become a ‘catch-all’ or ‘empty shell’ term to consider the pluralism of identities, rather than a prism to uncover, critique, and dismantle interlocking systems of oppression (Salem, 2018; Bilge, 2013). Buitelaar (2006: 261) argues that when participants tell their stories, they speak from “different I-positions” meaning that the narratives vary depending on audience, and these I-positions differ in relation to gendered, classed, racialised or other marginalities. Thus, intersectionality is a core part of doing this thesis and is explored and utilised by examining how participants position themselves as minoritised subjects in relation to their stories. To *do* intersectionality, one must critically engage with how the experiences of the researcher come to the conclusions of who experiences abuse, what needs to be researched, and why; further, it is necessary to both listen to the narratives of participants and take their stories seriously, and to analyse how gender, class and other identities intersect in the construction of meaning (Christensen and Jensen, 2012).

4.2.3 Feminist approaches to research

Oakley (1998) writes that when academia was challenged by feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, feminists' argued that academia was based around the biases of "masculine knowledge"; this was categorised as research shaped by, for example, positivism, scientific objectivity, and measurable statistics. As the perceived biases of "masculine" knowledge and women's subsequent invisibility in research were revealed, the argument quickly developed that "positivist, quantitative research methodology" (Mies 1983:120) cannot be used uncritically to represent women's lives.

From the 1970s until today, there are feminist critiques against these quantitative methodologies as explicitly anti-feminist, arguing that they implicitly support sexist values by being structured around pre-existing answers; that relations between researcher and researched are intrinsically exploitative; that the resulting data are superficial and overgeneralised; and that quantitative research is generally not used to overcome social problems (Oakley, 1998; Westmarland, 2001; Caprioli, 2004; Spierings, 2012). Accordingly, early feminist methodology texts all celebrated qualitative methods as best suited to the project of hearing women's accounts of their experiences (Stanley and Wise, 1983; Oakley, 1998; Westmarland, 2001). Qualitative methods include participant observation, unstructured or semi-structured interviewing, focus groups, life history methods and ethnographies (Oakley, 1998; Cresswell and Poth, 2018). Not all scholars outrightly reject quantitative methodologies as anti-feminist in researching VAWG; for example, statistical evidence on prevalence and what works to end VAWG is in high demand from governments (Stauffer and O'Brien, 2018; Leung et al, 2019). Regardless, for this thesis, quantitative methodological and analytical approach would not be conducive to meeting the research aims of this thesis. As the research aim was about sex worker experiences, quantitative methodologies would not adequately reflect the subjective range and complexities of participants' experiences. Instead, an approach that offered sufficient flexibility and scope to uncover participants' voices and capture the subjective realities of their lives was more suitable, and for this reason a qualitative methodology was employed.

Qualitative research is concerned with meaning; that is, how people make sense of the world and how they experience events, rather than a scope of prevalence, or a search for the "truth" (Willig, 2023). Instead of using predetermined response categories or standardised quantitative measures such as surveys, predetermined choices on a questionnaire, or ratings scales, qualitative research emphases open, exploratory research questions which allow unlimited description or thematic options, and the chance to discover something new rather than confirming what was already hypothesised (Elliott and Timulak, 2005). Qualitative research involves close attention to the interpretive nature of inquiry, and emphasises the importance of meaning, as well as the political, social, and cultural context of the study and researchers alike (Roller and Lavrakas, 2015; Parr, 2015; Cresswell and Poth, 2018).

To explore sex workers' experiences of domestic and familial abuse, interviews are an appropriate method of qualitative research, using story-telling as a method of knowledge production and meaning-making. While interviewing is one means of conducting an interview, Oakley (1981) posits that a feminist interview is non-hierarchical with rapport, and the interviewer investing their identity and personality into the conversation. As a feminist researcher, I am not simply hearing the story being told, but analysing how these stories are produced through, or constrained by, other stories being told, and the contexts within which participants make sense of, and narrate their lives with the resources available for them to do that (Woodiwiss et al, 2017). A feminist approach contends that stories are shaped as much by the listener as the teller and are told contextually, rarely being straight forward, or recounted in a linear way (Woodiwiss et al, 2017). Feminist researchers often view storytelling as a process of co-construction, with stories being woven into the interaction of telling, listening, conversation and rapport (Fraser and MacDougall, 2017). Participants only need discuss what they wish to which may feel especially issue with particularly 'over-surveyed' groups such as sex workers (Overcash, 2003; Phipps, 2015). Qualitative interviews allow participants to be the authority over their experience and their knowledge during the interview, meaning that the interview is not simply a retelling of events, but what Bryne (2003: 42) names as a "production of the self". Further, by allowing participants to read over and edit their transcripts (discussed later in this chapter) they are further empowered to maintain authority over their story and how it is told.

Since Oakley's (1981) rejection of the traditional 'model of rapport' as mechanistic, masculinist and hierarchical, much has been written on developing non-exploitative relationships in interviewing (Esim, 1997; Thwaits, 2017; McGregor et al, 2023). Being aware of, addressing and reducing power imbalances between researcher and participant is now a core part of feminist qualitative research (Armstrong, 2012). One way of attempting to reorient pre-existing or perceived power dynamics is to encourage rapport and create genuine connection between those seeking information from those holding it, or between those who are 'in charge' of the interview with those who are merely 'in' it. There is a tension here of which feminist researchers and scholars should remain critical, as the idea of good feminist rapport can clash with the necessity of "getting the data" (Thwaits, 2017:1). Duncombe and Jessop (2003) draw parallels between researchers doing rapport and the kinds of emotional work that women are expected to simulate (see Hochschild, 1983). If rapport is a performance by the researcher, then this may seem at odds with the intended open and honest feminist approach, especially when participants might feel taken advantage of in the interview setting or seduced into sharing more than they were planning on (Thwaits, 2017; Duncome and Jessop, 2003). Feminist researchers have highlighted the special kind of naivete adopted when researchers maintain a pretence of ignorance about what interviewees say in order to encourage them to speak at length (Kvale, 1992; Duncombe and Jessop, 2003; Green et al 1993; Thwaits, 2017).

Based on my own history and position, and the feminist values guiding this work, I took the role of an "active interviewer", meaning rather than raiding data from participants as a kind of "smash and grab" (Wadsworth, 1984) it was a communicative interaction between myself and the participants (Smith and Elger, 2014). Rapport, empathy and connection are necessary – not to 'fake a friendship' as Duncombe and Jessop suggest – but for basic emotional support when potentially upsetting, traumatising and difficult memories and topics are being spoken about at length. I find the notion of 'faking friendship' in order to elicit more detailed responses from participants an unfair parallel to draw, especially in this case when my participants are used to feigning intimacy and connection in order to draw in greater capital from paying clients. Rather, I believe that showing connection, empathy and care is not incongruent with maintaining boundaries as a professional and indeed, one of the reasons I believe paying participants is so vital for ethical research is because of the shifting power dynamics in the room. Further, the idea that I am in a position of power due to my class, education level or social and financial capital perpetuates the false notions of the supremacy of these categories, as well as patronises the participants who may not feel unequal to me based on how educated or financially secure either of us are. I went into every interview believing that the participants had something that I wanted them to share with me, and the cachet of that something lay with them, not me.

4.2.4 Critical reflexivity and researcher positionality

A key component of qualitative research is how researchers position themselves in their study, and how their background may inform their interpretation of data as well as what they might have to gain from the research (Cresswell and Poth, 2018). Critical reflexivity or the 'presence' of the researcher is important in qualitative research because it encourages the researcher to consider ways that they are implicated in the research (Cresswell and Poth, 2018; Willig, 2021). While not all researchers engage in reflexive practice, others claim that it is necessary to monitor the impact of their own experiences and beliefs on their research, and argue that constant reflexivity is integral awareness of the strengths and limitations of knowledge generation (May and Perry, 2014; Berger, 2015).

`   Researcher reflexivity is a major strategy for quality control in qualitative research, and constant reflection on ones' position in relation to the research has transformed the question of subjectivity (Subramani, 2019; Berger, 2013). Collins (2000) has articulated the need for researchers to interrogate their positionality in the field of study, calling researchers to reflect upon their identities in relation to various social hierarchies. In this sense, reflexive research is an opportunity for what Berger (2013: 12) calls "two studies in one": researching the subject, and researching one's subjectivity.

Far from trying to hide my own involvement in this project, I frequently reflect on my own position with respect to the context of this work. As someone with lived experience working in the sex industry, as well as lived experience of abusive relationships, I am not making any claims to impartiality. I recognise that my background and current position shape my interpretation, and as such, position myself within the research to acknowledge how my conversational style affected the stories shared, and how my interpretation of the data impacts the stories of participants' own personal, cultural, and historical experiences (Cresswell and Poth, 2018). While I use my participants words, I am accountable for the interpretation, and so it is necessary to be transparent about the context in which I come to this research.

Positionality is especially important in sex work research. The phrase "nothing about us without us" is used widely within the sex worker's rights movement to emphasise the importance of sex workers being involved in decisions and knowledge production about their lives (Provost, 2013; Dziuban and Stevenson, 2015; Armstrong, 2022). My ‘insider’ status as a sex worker and a sex worker rights activist was an important asset for conducting this research, and I was open about this with my institution, with participants, and in all participant recruitment. It never occurred to me to hide my sex working history from the institution where I researched or from potential participants. While there may be legitimate and important reasons for concealment, my not being transparent about lived and experiential knowledge felt contrary to the academic principles of integrity, openness and reflexivity (Armstrong, 2022).

Dobson (2009) notes that insider researchers have claimed that their position can help to generate more in-depth and revealing data because of the greater potential for meaningful rapport between researcher and researched than those who are ‘outsiders’ to the community they are studying. My insider status helped to create a trusting relationship between myself and the participants, and also provided me with deeper insight into the participant responses, due to my knowing specific terminology or protocols around the sex industry. My history of sex working and the position it put me in was noted by a number of participants.

One participant told me, “I find it interesting that you’ve got a personal passion for it, but you can also see it from an academic point of view as well.” Another participant said,

> It's nice to talk to somebody about it where, like, if I talk to somebody in my life about it who hasn't engaged in sex work, like I don't have a lot of people in my life who have or researched it academically or whatever. So it's just nice to be able to have these conversations with someone on the same level.

During this research, a PhD student at a different university told me they were struggling with recruitment in their study on sex work and asked me how I managed to “get” so many participants. The only answer I could give which felt genuine was that if they did not know any sex workers, or none could vouch for them, they probably should not be doing the research. This response is in line with other writings on researching marginalised communities, such as sex workers (see Phipps, 2015; Jeffreys, 2009).

4.2.4.1 Emotional impact of the research

Vicarious trauma, also known as secondary trauma or emotional burnout, involves the exposure to traumatic memories, thoughts, feelings, or behaviours of others (Evces, 2015). Vicarious trauma is described as the “emotional residue” which results from hearing about, and being witness to, the pain, fear, and terror that trauma survivors have endured (ACA, quoted in Williamson et al, 2020: 56). Research into vicarious trauma more commonly shows the effects on frontline workers or helping professionals, such as nurses, therapists, or sexual and domestic violence advocates (Branson, 2019), but there is a growing awareness that researchers, and those involved in the research process, are deeply emotionally affected by the work that they do (Liamputtong, 2007; Dickson-Swift et al, 2009; Williamson et al, 2020).

Williamson et al (2020) argue that it is not uncommon for people who have experienced gender based violence to gravitate towards an active role in this topic of research, including undertaking related research. Similarly, sex work research has increasingly amplified the voices of researchers with lived experience of working in the sex industry (Goldenberg et al, 2021). People involved in research often do so because they feel a connection with the research area (Brannelly and Barnes, 2022). While the insider view is valuable and can lead to more in-depth and nuanced findings, researchers are often urged to create distance, maintain objectivity and avoid emotional engagement (Brannelly and Barnes, 2022). If research is focused on trauma or suffering and the researcher has experience of this, it may also trigger upsetting memories or emotions (Williamson et al, 2020).

During my ethics application I noted that risk of upset or triggered events, but felt confident that I could manage them. I maintained good contact with my supervisors throughout; I was, and remain, in therapy, and during my training for domestic and sexual violence advocacy, I had multiple trainings on how to manage possible triggers or vicarious trauma, including strategies on boundaries, self-care and decompression after work.

I felt I built up a strong rapport with participants and could deeply empathise with their experiences in many ways. Like my participants, I had experienced coercive, controlling, isolating and humiliating treatment from ex-partners, and as with some participants, I had had ineffective and, at times, harmful interactions with the police and other frontline services. While these experiences were a source of camaraderie and connection, some stories from participants deeply affected me. There were times I had to step away from the data and focus on reading around methodology, or redrafting the literature review. Distance from the data helped, but I also went to my therapist a few times, unable to shake images or stories from my mind. Such empathic response was validation of my care toward both participants, and the subject matter that the research focused on. When I felt sad, or angry, or overwhelmed with worry, I reminded myself that my relationship with this project was not simply theoretical, it was personal and deeply political.

4.3 Research Design

4.3.1 Participant recruitment

Researchers have acknowledged the difficulties of engaging participants in DVA research due to the hidden nature of the abuse, the isolated lives of many people experiencing it, as well as their underreporting and fear of speaking out (Francis, 2016; Donovan et al, 2006; Ellard-Grey et al, 2015; see also section 3.3). The seeming isolation of this population is further exaggerated for those who are further marginalised by, for example, living in remote or rural places; being disabled; migrant victims of DVA; drug users and sex workers.

Sex workers are among the most marginalised groups, and researchers have noted their reluctance or refusal to engage in research (Platt et al, 2020; Shaver, 2005; Dewey et al, 2021; Campbell et al, 2021). Sex working, compounded with their experiencing DVA, can be a major research challenge. Here was where my own experience and biography informed my choices around participant recruitment. I initially posted on social media, and my callout was shared many hundreds of times on social media by sex workers and sex worker rights activists, which verified my position as someone doing research pertinent to the sex worker community. Further, I posted recruitment callouts on a number of online sex worker only spaces, most of which I had been a member of for a few years, long before the research was formulated. I chose these recruitment methods so that participants could be entirely self-selecting and I believed I had enough connections to not require a gatekeeper. I invited most of the participants via two recruitment methods.

i) Invitations to participate on sex worker online forums, and various sex worker only Facebook groups and shared posts; spaces where I had a platform and had used for a few years prior. I also posted on Twitter and

Instagram to invite participants, and hoped for word of mouth chain referral, which happened very quickly.

ii) Invitations through email and postings via community programmes and networks including English Collective of Prostitutes, Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement and the European Sex Work Alliance.

Due to this possibility of language impeding research pathways, I gave examples of what DVA could look like, or how it could be experienced, and did not specify between partners, ex-partners or family members. The examples are based on examples from the NHS website, Women's Aid, and Victim Support[7]. I wrote in the recruitment call out (see Appendix 2 for call for participants):

> "Domestic violence or abuse are broad terms, and can include any of the following:
>
> - Name-calling, insults, threats or intimidation to you, your friends, pets or family; destroying or threatening to destroy your personal belongings, home or car.
> - Sulking, guilt-trips, threats or punishment because of your work, actions, looks, friendships or activities
> - Stalking, isolating, following or controlling you, including making unreasonable demands for your attention, stop you going to work, belittle you or blame you for the arguments or their bad mood
> - Physical aggression such as pushing, burning, punching, grabbing, choking or holding down
> - Made unwanted sexual demands, coerced, forced or pressured you to have sex or hurt you during sex?"

Methods of recruitment to studies of abuse frequently include gatekeepers who are often key stakeholders in research (McGregor, 2023). "Gatekeeper" is a term used in research to refer to individuals, organizations, and groups that act as intermediaries between researchers and participants and have the power to grant or withhold access to the participants for study, particularly for those deemed “socially invisible” (Sanders, 2006; Sinha, 2017; Sandhu et al, 2023). Recruiting through organisations can mean that participants have access to support services and any potential risks of taking part, or being exploited by a researcher, are potentially mediated, however. When gatekeepers from domestic violence services are utilised, there may be efforts to frame how domestic violence supports and services are perceived, and as a result, only particular clients may be informed about the research by the gatekeepers, and then subsequently opt to take part (Vearey, Barter, Hynes, & McGinn, 2017; O’Brian-Green and Morton, 2021). Further, many people who experience domestic abuse, especially those who are criminalised or marginalised, do not access services or outreach projects at all, choosing to disclose to people in their friendship or social networks rather than professionals (Women’s Aid, 2014; Boethius and Åkerström, 2020; Mantler et al, 2021). Sinha (2016) has outlined potential ethical issues which arise when organisations are used as gatekeepers to participants which include potentially having to interpret data to keep in line with the political stance of the organisation, or being asked to donate money to the organisation rather than the participants. Additionally, having worked at an organisation which provides outreach for sex workers, I am aware that staff are overworked, under-resourced and time-limited on a day-to-day basis without having to take the needs and considerations of an external researcher onto their workload.

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[7] Victim Support is an independent charity dedicated to supporting victims of crime and traumatic incidents in England and Wales.

To emphasise that DVA happens across the gender spectrum, I wanted to speak to at least one person who identified as a man so a story about male DVFA could be told. I emailed a men’s organisation whom I had corresponded with in my activist capacity, and asked if they could circulate my email. Several participants got in touch, with two finally agreeing for an interview. As a thank you I donated £250 to the organisation. A friend who had been a street-based sex worker told me that a friend of hers would like to be interviewed, but as her friend had no social media and no online presence or email address, our mutual friend shared my phone number with this person who called me and we arranged a telephone interview.

15 participants were interviewed, and 15 was not an arbitrary number. I wanted a deep, rather than broad, data yield which could be analysed in depth. While each story told me something new – I coded as I went – by the end of my fifteenth participant I had reached data saturation and was not coming up with new codes. Baker and Edwards (2012) acknowledge that it is impossible to specify the number of interviews necessary to complete at the projects inception, but suggested that it is advisable to stop adding cases when the researcher is no longer learning anything new.

4.3.2 Data Collection

I interviewed participants using semi-structured long-form interviews Liamputtong (2007) suggests that in-depth interviewing allows researchers to access complex knowledge, and the semi-structured nature means that participants can freely and fully articulate their experiences and opinions while allowing researchers to remain focused on the research topic. While I referred to an interview schedule (see Appendix 3) I opened all interviews by asking participants to tell me about their history sex working; this was to base an understand in their relationship to work. I then moved to asking who they wanted to talk about.

My research aims were focused on how participants experienced DVA so it was important to keep the questions as open as possible. Using my experience working in outreach, I knew to ask open ended rather than closed, or leading questions. I asked questions such as *"Can you describe a typical day?"* or *"How did you two meet?"* These open questions allowed participants to use their own language and to direct the conversation toward what felt most pertinent to them. I did not conduct a pilot study, but I had worked with many sex working victims of DVA through my previous job, and I utilised my training to lead the order of conversation.

My own experience, and experiences that I had seen with friends or service users at my previous job, had shown the ways that sex work and DVA were interconnected and it was important that my questions reflected this to ensure there was data for analysis on the relationship between these two aspects of their life. For some participants, depending on the nature of the conversation, I asked quite specific questions such as, *"Was there ever pressure to work, or not work?"* or *"Did you feel responsible for your partner's feelings about your job?".* While these questions may seem leading, they were based on what I had witnessed and experienced firsthand and these experiences in particular may be taken for granted, or not considered abusive, by participants. Throughout the interviews I refrained from using the word "abuse" in my questions much as possible, instead asking if participants could talk me through a particular day, or when they started to think that their relationship was "not OK". Though participants were self-selecting, I worried that using language like 'violence' or 'abuse' rather than more open ended, reflective style questioning, would lead to participants feeling protective of, or frightened of, the perpetrator, and so they may not want to respond. It would also allow participants to use whichever language they felt comfortable with, giving space for me to mirror their words to help them feel more comfortable.

One of my research aims was focussed on how participants spoke about their experiences, not simply what those experiences were. In the interview I made a point of asking about language, and so toward the end of our conversations I asked, *"When you hear words referring to people in abusive relationships such as 'victim' or 'survivor', what do these words mean to you?"* and *"What words would you use to describe your job?"* Concepts such as "sex work" and "domestic violence and abuse" are contested and I did not want to assume that participants were comfortable using these words to describe their situation, even if they had self-selected for the research study on "Sex workers' experiences of domestic and familial abuse". I closed all interviews by asking participants if there was anything they wanted to add, or if there was anything I may have missed. I then asked the socio-demographic data (see below), and ended by asking payment information and asking if they wished to see a copy of the transcripts so they can read over and edit anything.

All interviews took place between 22rd November 2021 and 22nd February 2022. Two interviews were conducted face to face. Having completed the ethics review with the stipulation that " If the interviews do take place face-to-face, ideally it would be in a private setting – my home or theirs", one of the interviews took place in the participant's home and another asked if she could come to my home town so she could visit the beach for the day. She and I met at a café on the beach, and there were parts of the recorded interview which were lost to noise from the wind, musicians and people. We later moved to a quiet park and kept the microphone between us and the participant mentioned that she liked being able to smoke throughout the interview as it was all outside. It was outside the sanctioned forum, but in line with the original research ethics review and proposal, confidentiality was guaranteed (McCormack et al, 2013).

The rest of the participants conducted interviews online. At the beginning of 2020 the Covid-19 pandemic began, and throughout 2020 the country was in and out of lockdown. In many ways pandemic restrictions opened up routes of fieldwork. Zoom and telephone calls became commonplace and there felt little need to offer to meet participants in person, mitigating risks of safety, expenses and anonymity. While face-to-face fieldwork was not banned by governmental or university policy at this time, the shift to hybrid and online working and meeting had become commonplace and the proliferation in video conferencing tools, such as Zoom or Skype, presents new opportunities for researchers as a convenient alternative to in-person interviews (Gray et al, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic forced many researchers to rethink their approach, and though not all types of research lend themselves to online alternatives, for this project, the option of interviewing participants over Zoom presented a number of advantages (Howlett, 2021; Oliffe et al, 2021). Sex work is, for many workers, highly secretive and there were a few participants whose sex working was kept from people in their lives. Being able to speak online, with no phone number, real name, or face became a legitimate option for participants; additionally, the ability for us both to conduct interviews in the privacy of our own home may have offered a more comfortable setting from which to speak about sensitive topics. I was able to include participants from all over the country, including remote places, in a relatively short space of time, which would have been potentially costly and time-consuming if I had had to organise travel and accommodation (Herrmann, 2022).

The final list of questions (see Appendix 3) dovetailed into two separate sets of questions for sex workers who had experienced violence either within the family, or with an intimate partner, with the option of picking from either list if I interviewed people who had experienced both. The list was neither exhaustive nor compulsory but to be used as a set of prompts. I had hoped that the interview would be more of a conversation than me simply checking off questions to ask. I tried to keep the conversation as free flowing as possible, which meant that though I informed participants I might take notes, after the first interview I stopped doing this. This was so I could totally remain focused on what they were saying, knowing that I could relisten or read over the interview at any point.

Toward the end of the interviews, before I stopped recording, I asked participants to complete a socio-demographic data questionnaire (see Appendix 4). Scheffer (2011) argues that without the inclusion of socio-demographic information, researchers may risk “absolutism”; assuming that the participants under study are the same regardless of gender, ethnicity or sexuality.

Name	Age	Current region	Gender	Sexuality	Ethnicity
Aino	28	Finland	Non-binary	Bisexual	White British
Anna	46	South of England	Female	Asexual	White
Arnall	33	North of England	Male	Bisexual	White
Bethan	19	Wales	Female	Lesbian	White
Elle	Did not disclose	Scotland	AFAB but does not fully identify as female	Queer	White Jewish
Georgie	48	North of England	Female	Straight	White Irish
Helen	46	North of England	Female	"Never been with a girl but would try it"	White British
Isla	27	North of England	Female	Bisexual	White British
Judy	"Middle aged"	England	AFAB but does not identify fully as female	"Liberal"	Han Korean
Kassie	27	North of England	Female	Lesbian	White
Lisa	25	South of England	Female	Bisexual	White
Morgan	21	North of England	Female	Lesbian	Caribbean and British, mixed
Reese	33	South of England	Female	Pansexual	White
Sean	36	North of England	Male	Asexual	White
Thea	41	Midlands	Female	Bisexual	White

Table 1: Demographics of interview participants

4.3.3 Paying sex workers for their time

Historically, research focusing on sex work and sex workers has been considered exploitative by the participants, and many sex work organisations have questioned the usefulness of research about their communities (NSWP, 2014; Jeffreys, 2009). Research shows that many sex workers feel used and that researchers only consider their own needs and not the needs of the participants (Jeffreys, 2009). Further, whilst some literature suggests paying potentially vulnerable participants might incite coercion, evidence also shows that worries about undue inducement can be reduced by careful assessment of risks as well as attention to eligibility criteria and to the informed and voluntary consent of research participants (Grady, 2005; Head, 2006). Regarding those who have experienced DVA, asking them to share their experiences without payment felt exploitative. I paid a transcriber during the research process, recognising the value of her time and experience, and DVA survivors are ‘experts by experience’ (Taylor and Clarence, 2021; McGregor et al, 2023). In line with feminist approaches, I considered it unethical to *not* pay. Paying neutralised, or worked toward neutralising, the potential power discrepancy by showing gratitude for their contribution of time and work. It also demonstrated that I am not the only person benefitting from their involvement in the research. I paid all participants £50 per interview, meaning that two of the participants were paid £100 as I spoke to them twice. Two participants refused payment; one saying they were unable to accept money from a fellow sex worker, and the other asking me to donate it to a domestic abuse organisation in their name, which I did. I paid all participants out of my own money with most people accepting a bank transfer and one person asking for an Amazon voucher so they could maintain their anonymity.

4.3.4 Data analysis

All conversations were audio recorded with signed consent from participants. Two interviews were transcribed verbatim by myself, and the rest (13) by an external transcriber. Once the transcripts were returned, I removed or altered names, locations, job titles, or any other potentially identifying information. I had made a decision to keep discursive markers (hesitations, ‘umm’s, ‘you know’s, head nods) in the transcripts, but removed them from quotes embedded in the thesis. To mitigate any potential risk of over-sharing and to ensure accuracy (see section 4.2.3.2) I asked participants during the interview if they would like to see a copy of it before I began coding. Five said yes, and, via email, I sent participants a copy of the transcript of our conversation. There were a few who requested edits or removals of certain information and I complied with all requests, with no questions asked. No participants retracted or withdrew from the process.

The analysis included both thematic and narrative analysis, as suggested by Øverlien et al (2019) in their research of DVA; narrative analysis to understand the violence in the situation and time in which it took place, in addition to the strength of the thematic analysis to systematically describe and organise the data in its whole. In broad terms, a thematic analysis asks "what" happened, and a narrative analysis asks "how" and "why". I began by reading each transcript a number of times to familiarise myself with the stories being told, and I drafted brief timelines for each participant to try and locate events in their story. This was not to locate 'the truth', but to structure a story from their experiences, which were often not told chronologically. I coded two interviews by hand using pen and highlighter, and then uploaded all of them to Nvivo, software designed for the analysis of qualitative data, and continued coding on there.

The first round of coding consisted of 'open coding' meaning that I formed themes and codes as I went by, rather than starting with a list of prepared codes (Cresswell and Poth, 2018). While I knew I was looking for stories and commonalities between experiences, I did not know what counted as a theme or a 'code'. There are plenty of researchers who suggest steps to help analyse data (see Braun and Clarke, 2006; Silverman, 2013; Willig, 2021), but coding is very much a learn-by-doing skill. Coding involved reading the interview text on the screen, highlighting key sections of text, and ascribing codes to these text sections in a sequential manner (Maher et al, 2018). It was a line by line coding, with some text being coded multiple times, e.g., the same piece of text being coded as both *media representations of sex work* and *racism.*

Nvivo allowed me to compare across participants as I was able to highlight all text under a code on one screen, meaning I could compare the ways participants spoke about *post-relationship abuse* or *family violence*. I was also able to compare codes within the transcript of a single participant to compare themes which were brought up in the conversation. Some themes were common across the transcripts, such as *help-seeking, turning-point* or *thoughts on sex work.* During analysis, some themes were identified while also attending to the intersectional aspects of the participants lives, for example in terms of gender, social class, disability or sexuality. Examples of these themes included *homophobia, paying off debt, struggling with health* or *class dynamics*. As a researcher, I played a role in generating data from participants, and some themes only emerged due to my prompting in the interview, such as when I asked what language they used to describe themselves or their experiences, or whether it occurred to ask anyone for help or support; thus, some codes were very close to statements in the raw data (Øverlien et al, 2019). Through the entire writing-up process, I was constantly reading and re-reading transcripts and finding vital snippets of information and dialogue, long past when I had ceased the formal coding procedure. Coding was not a linear or contained process, and much of it continued through the writing up stage (Braun and Clarke, 2006). However, by the end of the first few readthroughs of the transcripts, the codes were developed around four broad themes: *experiences of the sex industry*; *experiences of domestic and* *familial abuse, whilst working in the sex industry*; *sensemaking and self-identification*; and *interventions, support and help seeking*. These broad themes became the findings chapters.

A common concern in the reporting of qualitative data is the risk of anecdotalism; that is, a few specially selected stories supporting the researchers argument have been selected from the data, rather than a critical examination of the data as a whole (Seale and Silverman, 1997). To mitigate these claims, methodological rigour is necessary. Rigour generally refers to processes followed to ensure the quality of the final research product and the methods taken to demonstrate legitimacy or soundness of the research process (Laher, 2016). Ensuring rigour in qualitative research is not codified but suggestions have been made to ensure validity of findings. In this thesis, I used detailed transcription techniques, including note making and journal keeping throughout, and employed the use of software such as Nvivo to help steady the analytic process. I resisted generalised or universal claims and I used all quotations in as much context as possible.

4.3.5 Ethics and vulnerability

Ethical issues have affected every stage of this project. As guided by feminist and scholar-activist social values, there was an emphasis on care and responsibility toward participants and the wider sex worker community (see section 4.3.1), over outcomes. Decisions about ethics ran throughout the entire research process, from conceptualisation and design, through to data collection analysis and dissemination (Edwards and Mautner, 2002). Social researchers who investigate sensitive topics or work with vulnerable populations have a responsibility to ensure that their research meets institutional ethical criteria as well as adhering to social values, particularly with regards to informed consent, confidentiality, and the safety of participants (Liamputtong, 2007; Huysamen and Sanders, 2021; Herrmann, 2022).

As I did not have access to using the gatekeeping organisation's own safeguarding measures and risk assessments, ethical processes had to be robust in order to ensure the safeguarding of the participants— who were approaching me directly through social media—as well as the safety of myself as the researcher (Sandhu et al, 2023). Such processes included risk assessments approved by the university, and I ensured that there was an information sheet and consent form for participants (see Appendix 1) as well, following the university's safety at work policy. These are important ethical considerations when undertaking research using digital communication technology, without the 'safety net' that gatekeepers can provide (Edwards and Mauthner 2012; Sandhu et al, 2023).

There is no clear cut definition on what constitutes vulnerability or who 'the vulnerable' are, but Liamputtong (2007) writes that the term is underpinned by notions of diminished autonomy and increased risk of negative social outcomes. Some researchers include as vulnerable those potential participants who are impoverished, disenfranchised and/or subject to discrimination, subordination and stigma (Nyamathi,1998; Liamputtong, 2007; Parr, 2015). While not all sex workers can automatically be classified as vulnerable, because of the partial criminalisation of their labour, the stigma of their work, social isolation and resulting weakened social networks, sex workers often fit this definition (Sanders et al, 2009). Those who have experienced DVA are also not necessarily vulnerable, but they may be perceived that way by researchers, even if they do not self-identify as such (Liamputtong, 2007). The more pertinent risk with those who have experienced DVA are threats or potential further abuse from their partners or families as a result of participating in the research project (WHO, 2001). Additionally, participation in this research may be upsetting, triggering or traumatising to participants. Several procedures were in place to minimise the possibility of this and then to deal with incidents if they occur. Throughout interviews I checked in with participants asking if they were OK to continue, or if they needed a break, and I asked all participants if they felt safe to talk with me. All participants were informed that they did not have to answer any question and that they could stop the interview at any time. I had collated a list of local and national support agencies for domestic abuse as well as sex worker outreach for participants in case they requested further support. All participants were contacted two or three weeks after the interview to see how they were doing, and a number told me that they found the process useful.

Conclusion

This chapter opened by mapping the current landscape of research into both the sex industry and domestic violence and abuse (DVA), exploring definitions, challenges, and areas of contention. In so doing, I positioned my own praxis within the literature and advocated a scholar-activist approach to enable research to be politically and socially transformative, and is both in service, and accountable, to the communities it works with.

As argued through this methodology chapter, and indeed this thesis, research into sex work and domestic violence and abuse must incorporate an intersectional lens to explore capitalism and class, as well as gendered and sexualised oppressions. A critical realist approach was also necessary given how one of the research aims was to understand both the material and discursive contexts work to shape participants' experiences of abuse while sex working.

This chapter also outlined the design, procedures and analytical stage of the research process. I explain my methods of recruitment and the decision to bypass gatekeepers and organisations, instead relying on word of mouth and social media. I also outline ethical concerns for both participants, and myself regarding insider status, and end by noting the impact that this research had upon me.

4.4 Participant Profiles

Below is a summary of the participants interviewed for this research project: all of the names used are pseudonyms to protect anonymity, and identifying features or characteristics have been removed or changed.

Aino

Aino had been living with their ex-girlfriend in the UK, but was living and working in Finland with their new partner when we spoke. Aino is non-binary and their ex-girlfriend is trans and both of them were sex working during their relationship. During the Covid-19 pandemic Aino and their ex-girlfriend moved in together. Aino responded to the call out after seeing the recruitment call out in a sex worker only social media group.

Anna

Anna and I know each other through sex work activism, which is how she knew about the research project. She had been sex working on and off for the past 28 years and though she was still sex working when I interviewed her, she has since quit the sex industry. She began sex working at 18 having been “groomed” into the industry by an older couple she met while nannying in a foreign country in the early 1990s. While Anna is a staunch advocate of sex worker rights, she also considers sex work to be “abuse” and told me that “buying consent is somewhere on the rape spectrum”. She met her ex-boyfriend at 18, when he was 36, and it quickly became violent. Years later she dated another man, also abusive. She has not been in a relationship since.

Arnall

When Arnall and I spoke he was living in a refuge for men and had recently changed his name by deed poll as a way of separating himself from his family. He emailed offering to be a participant after a men’s charity he was involved with circulated my recruitment call out. He was sold for sex by his sister, mother and grandfather which began “before I can remember, literally before I could even walk”. Both Arnall and his abusive ex-boyfriend sold sex, and it was his ex that he was staying safe from in a refuge. Selling and being sold for sex had occurred throughout most of Arnall's life, though he differentiated the times between being sold for sex, and choosing to sell it at various points throughout his life. Of the latter he spoke positively, calling it "a liberation". When pressed on this he said that he found it liberating, not because of the money, but the "having control over somebody else rather than being controlled."

Bethan

Bethan had moved in with her ex-boyfriend and his parents when she was 16 and he was 24. He advertised Bethan's sexual services online on a sugar daddy/sugar baby website, and coerced her into going on dates with men met on these websites, and then he took the money off her when she came home. Bethan was with him for two years, but when we spoke she was out of the relationship and living with her parents, with whom she has a difficult relationship.

Elle

Elle responded to the recruitment call out on Twitter, and though she had sex worked in the past, she was not sex working when she was with her abusive ex-boyfriend. Elle had mentioned to her ex-boyfriend that she was thinking about sex working, and she told me how he would deliberately seek out women who sex worked because she claimed he saw them as "vulnerable".

Georgie

Georgie saw the recruitment call out on an online forum for sex workers. We spoke about her current relationship with a man who, Georgie said, did not know that she had been sex working for the previous three years. The relationship went through periods of "calm", and periods of intense fear and violence. No one in her life knew about both the sex work, and the abuse, and she told me a few times during our conversation "how helpful it's been just to have a conversation about my life in all of its completion. It's so compartmentalised, and there's an awful lot of judgements towards service providers who are in relationships and the partners don't know." Georgie had been with her partner on and off for fifteen years, and they were together when we spoke.

Helen

Helen learned about the project through a mutual friend who told her. She was not sex working when we spoke, but had been a street based worker on and off for about 10 years, primarily to pay for her heroin and crack habit. She began sex working after a divorce, but had stopped and was in full time employment when she met her ex-boyfriend. He became violent and abusive and, after a watching a documentary about sex workers in the local area, began forcing Helen to sell sex for money to buy drugs. She was out of the relationship when we spoke, and was making plans to get back in touch with an outreach organisation to help manage her addiction.

Isla

Isla saw the recruitment call on Twitter. She was not sex working when we spoke, but had been in the past, beginning when she was 17 and living in a hostel. She had moved into the hostel after home became "unliveable" with her mother. Her mother has also been a sex worker and regularly went on drug binges, something she "introduced" Isla to when Isla was 15. Isla was no longer using drugs, nor sex working when we spoke. She had moved away from where she grew up, was enrolled in university, and had no contact with her mother.

Judy

Judy is a migrant woman from Asia living and working in the UK. She saw my call out on an online forum for sex workers. She described herself as having a "professional background" but hating "traditional models". Judy had been sex working throughout her last relationship which she described as being abusive, and ended after he attempted to strangled her and Judy called the police.

Kassie

Kassie saw the recruitment call out on Twitter. She was "introduced" to sex work at sixteen by an older man she knew, and she later met a man who she alternated naming as her boyfriend and her "boss", the latter when he forced her to sell sex and took the money. She left this relationship by running away to a different city and enrolling in university. After a client attacked her in this new place, she moved into a refuge for a little while, a place she described as "horrendous, to say the least". Kassie supported sex worker rights but worried about the discourse normalising sex work and obscuring "the dangers behind it".

Lisa

Lisa saw the recruitment call-out on Twitter. She was 25 when we spoke, and had been sex working since she was 19, and entered with help from people in the sex industry who she knew through her commercial work in the arts world. Lisa's stepdad had stalked her online, eventually outing her to Lisa's friends and family, and lying about her sexual health and working practices. The effects on Lisa's mental health were profound, with Lisa saying "it broke me completely". She was engaged with a sex worker outreach project in her local area, whom she described as "wonderful people".

Morgan

Morgan found the recruitment call out through a mutual friend. Though she told me about working "underneath a pimp" who had coerced her into having sex with his friends for money, the abusive dynamic she focused on in the interview was with her parents. Morgan is the eldest of three, and her youngest sister has a learning disability which makes her violent and sexually aggressive. Morgan and her sisters often went without food, baths and somewhere to sleep, making do with sofa cushions on the floor as rats ran past them in the night. Around twelve or thirteen Morgan started selling sex to buy food for her and her sister. Morgan was in her early twenties when we spoke, and was still sex working, and though the relationship she has with her parents was still strained, she told me that she knew her parents loved her "more than anything".

Reese

Reese was in her early thirties saw the participant call-out on Twitter. She had been sex working for about ten years, beginning with stripping and was currently a full service escort. Reese told me how boyfriends would always become possessive, and she would leave stripping, then go back to it when she was single. Reese spoke about two different relationships which she was no longer in, and in both of them her boyfriends had focussed on her sex work as a source of contention and strife. As Reese says, “I had somebody that was very anti what I did but would also cry anytime I would bring it up and they would get really upset and it was my fault consistently. And then I had somebody that was very pushy, quite aggressive about it.”

Sean

Sean emailed me after seeing the recruitment call out, circulated by a local organisation he was involved with. Sean spoke about a six year relationship which had ended two years ago. While Sean told me he was in a healthy relationship at the moment, and had undergone quite a lot of therapy, he still seemed to be battling and making sense of what happened to him. He considered his ex-boyfriend an abuser, but also spoke of him as a victim, unable to do anything different and under control of forces he could not escape (I was not sure if they were physical or metaphorical). Sean still occasionally gave his ex-boyfriend money but they did not maintain consistent contact.

Thea

Thea was a dominatrix who saw the recruitment call out through Twitter. She was going through a divorce when interviewed, and spoke about both her abusive mother and (soon to be) ex-husband. Though Thea was not involved in sex worker organising, she spoke about the strong community she had found in her local BDSM scene and how much they had supported her, emotionally and financially, when she decided to leave her husband.

5. Sex Working: Definitions, reasons for entry, and experiences

Introduction

This is the first of four chapters which report on the findings from 17 interviews with 15 participants. This thesis broadly focuses on participants’ experiences of domestic and familial abuse while they were either sex working, or otherwise involved in the sex trade. One of my research aims is to develop an understanding of how sex workers narrate their experiences of abuse, and the impact abuse has on their work.

In order to contextualise forms of violence and recognise the complex interplay between sex work and domestic and familial abuse, it is important to first understand participants' own definitions, understandings and experiences of sex work. This will enable a much more nuanced approach that moves beyond problematic framings of the sex industry as inherently abusive. It will also create space to tease out understandings of domestic and family abuse of sex workers as related to, but distinct from sex work, rather than located within it.

There are many ways and many reasons for entering the sex industry, and no clear binary between choice or coercion. It is a broad and blurry spectrum between rational free choice and force, and even along this spectrum, positions are rarely static for participants. While I divide the experiences of some participants into 'hard' and 'soft' landings into the sex industry, this chapter adds to the body of work which rejects defined binaries between work and abuse, and explores nuance in agency, choice and financial decision making.

5.1 The many facets and forms of sex work

This section broadly examines how participants define sex work and what it encompasses. The referent 'sex worker' has significant political consequence, as well as being a broad and contested term, so it is helpful to discuss how participants identified with the concept. As discussed in the Methods chapter, for the initial call for participants I did not provide a definition of sex work, enabling participants to decide their eligibility based on their experiences. During the interview, I asked participants to tell me about their history in the sex industry, leaving it to them to decide what they meant by 'sex work' and how much to tell me.

Of the fifteen participants, thirteen had had full penetrative sex in exchange for money, also known as working ‘full service’. Only two, Elle and Thea, had never worked full service, with Elle working as a stripper, and then as a webcam performer, and Thea webcamming and as well as working as a dominatrix. Of the thirteen full service workers, all had worked indoors meaning they had worked either from their home, a working flat (also known as a brothel or parlour) or in their client’s home or hotel (known as an ‘outcall’). Four – Kassie, Helen, Arnall and Morgan – alternated between indoor and street-based sex working, the latter of which involves soliciting clients in particular areas of their locale. Keeping the definition of sex work open in my initial call out enabled exploration of how participants moved through different factions of the sex industry depending on particular challenges over time; a phenomena acknowledged but rarely explored in detail in wider sex work literature (see Sanders et al, 2018; Hester et al, 2019).

5.1.1 What is ‘sex work’?: complex positions

Participation in sex work was not limited to one kind of sexual act but changed depending on the individuals' circumstances. Nine of the participants had worked in many areas of the sex industry, with only six– Anna, Georgie, Helen, Isla, Judy and Sean – working in only one area of the industry during their time working. This hybrid way of sex working is reflected in the broader literature (Sanders et al, 2018; Toubiana and Ruebottom, 2022). Elle, for example, moved around the sex industry, factoring work changes into both her health needs and her future planning. She started with online sex work, saying:

> I started doing like mostly [online] fetish stuff really, and then when I left uni, I needed money to move away, I started stripping and then when I finally moved to Birmingham, a good three years ago I moved with the intention

> that I would probably be doing either stripping or other kind of sex work, and I ended up finding a dungeon and working as a switch and then primarily a domme [dominatrix] until the pandemic.

Aino had a similar story, saying: “I’m twenty-eight now, so eight years of full service, in person stuff, with assorted like side hustle kind of selling nudes, Only Fans, all that kind of shit.”

Elle’s and Aino’s narratives show the fluid nature of the sex industry; that one can move swiftly from one form of work to another. ‘Sex work’ then, is the umbrella term which connects these various and varied ways of working.

All participants had their own relationship with the term ‘sex work’, with some choosing it and others rejecting it. According to sex worker rights activists (see Chapter 2), sex work/sex worker is the most politically neutral, and thus the most appropriate term to use when talking about people who engage in transactional sex. Sex worker rights activist Emily Warfeld (2022) argues that ‘sex worker’ is a reflective term and preferable to others such as ‘prostituted person’ or ‘prostitute’ for two main reason: the first is Leigh’s (1997) argument that ‘sex work’ as a term emphases the labour and agency of the worker rather than their character or identity. The second reason is that by using a non-specific umbrella term which refers to the whole sex industry, workers can be vague if they do not wish to disclose how they work, where and by what means. This point was reflected in the data when Isla said, “I think [it] almost avoids certain phrases as well. Maybe as of like a way of not being detected, because a lot of people wouldn't even know what you were talking about.”

When participants were asked directly how they described themselves and their work, their responses were varied and broad. Some participants were uncomfortable using the term ‘sex worker’ and relationship with the term was based on personal circumstance. Kassie explained:

> It’s tricky, and I often found that when I was working, I’d switch, like sometimes before a booking I’d call myself a prostitute and afterwards I’d say sex worker, I’d switch how I felt about it depending on my experience at the time […] [Now] I’d say I sell and have been sold for sex. I try to be as neutral as possible. I say the act rather than define the term. It’s a really simple way, there’s no political attachment to it, I want to try and be as balanced as possible, to kind of make sure that other people have space to talk.

Kassie both sold sex in an agentic way, and, as explored in more detail in the next chapter, “was sold for sex” by a man who alternated between being her boyfriend and being her “boss”. Instead of statically associating with the identity of sex worker, Kassie instead positioned her identity by explaining herself through the act of selling or being sold for sex, telling me that she alternated between saying “prostitute” and “sex worker” based on how she felt. For her, simply using the referent ‘sex worker’ glossed over how sometimes she had agency, and sometimes she did not. Aino also “didn’t consider” that they were a sex worker when they spoke about how they began selling sex, but that changed as time went on:

> I was on the kink scene and sometimes I would accept like money from guys to do certain acts or for somewhere to stay, for dinner, that kind of stuff. But I didn’t really consider myself a sex worker yet.

The type of casual labour which Aino is describing here is similar to what Morris (2018) conceptualises as ‘incidental sex work’; a form of casual, unplanned commercial sex.

The sex work movement and its political orientation gives priority to political and labour rights, something which is not always a priority or a frame of reference for participants. For Aino, “exchanging sex for useful things” was not necessary political, nor the basis for identity. The explicitly political context of ‘sex worker’ as a term was raised by Anna. She began selling sex in the mid-1990s, long before she got involved in sex worker rights activism and became familiar with current parlance. Talking about her early years sex working, she said:

> It was such a different time. There was no sex worker rights movement. There was no internet, like I'd never met a sex worker. I wouldn't use the term ‘sex work’. I don't even know where it all came from. We're literally talking like the mid-nineties. There was no sex worker rights movement.

Anna also highlighted the complexity of her involvement in sex work at that time. While her views are currently quite political and she is active in supporting sex worker rights, she originally had a different engagement with sex work:

> I had a very different associations with sex work than I do now. [Back then] it was like some weird part of me like wanted that to happen because it was this horrible thing. It felt very like deliberately enacting abuse type scenario.

Anna’s reference to sex work being abusive is a deliberate removal of it being considered work. Her past associations with it were not as a political identity, but as an act of self-harm. This view is similar to Morgan, who also considered the transactional sex she engaged in as a form of abuse:

> It sounds SWERFy but I do see it partly as self-harm. So like everything was so bad, I’d go and see these men and afterwards I would feel better. If I got upset, I used to cut myself as well, so I have a history of self-harm, and that’s when I started… instead of doing that, I was like going to see men who I knew would rape me, basically I was getting raped very, very often at that time.

As well as naming ‘sex work’ as a type of abuse, both Anna and Morgan talked about deliberately putting themselves into harm’s way through sex work. Both considered selling sex to be, not work, but a form of harm, or a risk to their safety. Fredlund et al

(2017) have explored the experiences of young women who sell sex, and found that for some, selling sex is used as a way to self-injure, in much the same way as cutting or burning the skin. Fredlund (2019) further argues that adolescents in their Swedish research cohort sell sex as a way to control poor mental health, and that sex more broadly is a means of emotional regulation. The research on sex as self-injury is scant, but Anna and Morgan's stories add to this developing conceptualisation. Sean also described his experiences as abusive, yet used the term 'sex work' to talk about them. Sean said that he had toyed with calling himself a sex worker: "In order that I feel that I had some agency within this situation, I will have identified as a sex worker."

For Sean, Aino and Anna, the term 'sex work' offers a notion of agency and choice, even though the site of transactional sex was deeply abusive for all of them. Using the term 'sex work' in these contexts, as Kassie described before, glosses over the traumatic circumstances of their time in the sex industry, and so while all three used the term, there remained a hermeneutic issue in adequately finding the language to do justice to their experience.

Participants' framings are more complex than the arguments about 'prostituted women' from anti-sex work radical feminists who position those who choose to be in the industry against those who are forced into it (citations). Participants like Anna and Morgan sought out the sex industry themselves rather than being coerced or forced into it. In the case of Anna, her opinion of sex work changed over time and her language changed to reflect this. The associations were that sex work was not a job, not worthy of employment rights or a political movement behind it, and Anna and Morgan sidestepped any clear referent other than 'abuse type scenario'. These stories problematise the distinction often made between ‘sex worker’ and ‘prostituted person/prostitute’ (see Chapter 2), showing that some people identify as neither, use neither, and dislike both.

While radical feminists position sex work as a form of abuse rather than work, others frame sex work within the rubric of labour, employment and work. Supporting this, some participants talked around their sex working, not using explicit language to refer to the sex of sex work. Georgie, who kept her sex work a secret from most people in her life – save for one security buddy[8] – spoke about her work in an indirect way:

> Do you know what I say? I say to my security buddy, *I’ve got a job of work to do!* A job of work. *I’ve got a job come in that I’ve accepted!*

Helen also removed any reference to sex when she said, “Just work, I just say work.”

Terminology surrounding the sex and adult entertainment industries is contentious and often emotionally charged because it can open up larger questions of affiliation, politicising and self-identification (Bell, 1994; Sanders et al, 2009; Overs and Hawkins, 2011). None of the participants used the term ‘prostitute’, ‘prostitution’, or ‘prostituted person’ to describe their time working. There was even disdain for the term, with Isla saying “I hate it.”

However, the term sex work was not widely endorsed either. Though some participants were comfortable with the term, many participants did not like ‘sex work’, and either rejected or distanced themselves from it. Sex work is uniformly an umbrella term, but it is also a deeply political identity and referent, and this will be explored more in the next section.

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[8] A buddy system is when colleagues pair up and take some responsibility for each other's safety and wellbeing. There is no formal protocol for how a buddy system works, but for sex workers it is often a friend, partner or fellow escort who checks with the person working before, during and after the booking. Additionally, sex workers share name, phone number and location of clients as well as what to do if the working buddy is not in contact at the agreed time.

5.1.2 Sex work community and the internal stigma hierarchy

This section explores how participants explained their sex working by comparing themselves to others, and shows how the shared identity, and unifying terminology of 'sex worker' does not negate how community organising can be overshadowed by stereotypes and assumptions of other work practices.

Participants would often shore up their definition of sex work by comparing themselves to other people and other styles of participation in the sex industry. For example, Thea stated that she was not "full service" as she did not have sex for money. Instead, she worked in the fetish and kink scene as a dominatrix, and stressed that her decision to work in this way was a choice. Thea asserted this choice by comparing her "empowered" self to those who "do get trafficked from other countries to other countries to provide sex for money for the benefit of other people*";* what she perceived as victims of sexual trafficking, in other words. Lisa reinforced this hierarchy in a similar style, saying:

> I do work as an artist occasionally and basically a lot of people I work with did sex work. It wasn't like sold into it if that makes sense, but like I kind of just thought, oh I'm interested in this, I'm going to have a go.

This was partly about defining their view of sex work, which involved identity work that improved their social position and view of their work. For Lisa, the term 'sex worker' is "an umbrella term" and lots of things "come under that". This was something that she witnessed first-hand when she was involved in a sex worker outreach project and “there were a lot of street workers and non-street workers and then you’d get the occasional porn star coming to visit.” The encompassing term of sex work was important to Lisa who told me she had met some sex workers who “are against other kinds of sex workers”, a position that Lisa strove to not take because one “never knows what will happen in the future”. Lisa mentions are examples of the whorearchy, the internal stigma hierarchy within the sex industry. Academic research on the whorearchy is scant, but the term has been used in sex worker communities since about 2012 (McNeill, 2012; Knox, 2014; Vixxx, 2019; Herrmann, 2022). While agreed definitions are contested, ultimately sex worker hierarchy is arranged according to money earned, limits and boundaries with clients, and physical contact with clients and police (Vixxx, 2019). The more money earned and the least physical contact with clients, the higher you are at the top, and the more contact with police and less boundaries with clients, the closer you are to the bottom.

Sykes and Matza (1957), in their theorising of stigma management, refer to this rhetorical practice as ‘social weighting’, actively selecting referent others within the same stigmatised group with which to compare oneself and elevate. In this study, many participants stressed their agency and choice by drawing on stereotypes of what others may imagine sex workers to be and positioning themselves as distinct from that, as Thea and Lisa did. In considering the social identity of people who engage in kink, Wignall (2022) argues that stigma management is one aspect of this identity work but combines it with Tajfel and Turner’s (1986) notion of ‘positive distinctiveness’, where this comparing is as much about finding the good in one’s own identity as it is in stigmatizing others. This presents a more nuanced account that recognizes both the management of potential stigma and attempts to de-stigmatise themselves through the creation of a positive social identity.

Social hierarchies can be appealing psychologically because they can help resolve individual needs for stability, as well as being useful organizationally because it is effective for the coordination of activity (Magee and Galinsky, 2008: 256). Marginalised communities often create internal hierarchies that are based on the different levels of societal stigma that members of the community experience (Grandy and Mavin, 2011; Toubina and Ruebottom, 2022). Sex workers also perpetuate (both intentionally and not) the stigmatising notions related to their work which have been inflicted on them by others. This is evident through some participants' attempt to manage the stigma they are faced with by differentiating themselves from other workers with more discreditable characteristics (street-based sex workers, exploited or trafficked sex workers, substance users, ethnic minorities, and so on) (Biradavolu et al., 2009; Benoit et al, 2018), alongside taking pride in their activity in certain contexts. Reese for example, told me, "On the whole, it's been great, like as a job. The job itself is fantastic. I really do enjoy my work." While Reese did not go into detail about which parts of the job she loved, and I did not ask, she is shoring up ideals of what sex worker rights activists Mac and Smith (2018) name 'The Erotic Professional'; a sex worker for whom material need is incidental and attraction and love of sex is key. When Judy, a migrant woman from Asia, was asked about her history in the sex industry, she said:

> Well, I'm pretty sure it's not vastly different from white, Caucasian women entering this industry. I don't particularly find anything any different. It's not like I have been trafficked or anything. So I suppose the motivation was money really.

Here, Judy is comparing herself to what she perceives as other people's reasons for selling sex. She is centring the white Western experience, saying she is no different from white women, and positioning herself in opposition to how she assumes other people may perceive her: as a victim of trafficking.

Conversely, instead of favourably socially weighting herself, some participants compared themselves negatively to what they had originally imagined sex work would be. Helen, for example, said:

> I used to think, *Great, I'm getting money, having sex, I can do what I want.* But I think really it's because I wasn't in a good place in my mind, in my head […] It makes you feel used. Dirty, and used. At first, I thought, *I'll do it just because I might meet someone*. I were thinking *Pretty Woman*, or something stupid like that. I think that's how my mind was at that time.

Helen had imagined sex work could be what Dalla (2000) refers to as the "Pretty Woman Myth" that sex workers – of any gender - could leave the industry through meeting a client who will materially provide for them.[9] Helen is drawing on a prominent discourse of heteronormative romantic love and familial stability: that a man would take a woman away from sex work and provide for her because he falls in love with her and wishes to elevate her from her life before him. Both Helen and Judy's narratives show the power of discursive constructions of sex workers in narrating their experiences. While evidence has shown that migrant workers are represented in sexual commerce in the UK, the construction of migrant sex workers as 'backward, helpless and inferior' (Doezema, 2001: 24) upholds the trafficking myth which Judy refers to. To define herself, Judy explains her choices by positioning herself in opposition to the discursive construction of migrant sex workers, even though her reasoning, "money", was the same.

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[9] Some sex workers may partially exit the sex industry after finding a client who can financially provide for them. This is a complicated relationship which is not quite an intimate relationship, nor is it typified as a working relationship either. It often means that instead of advertising and taking on new clients, they will be earning an income from one client and remain exclusive to them.

5.2 Reasons for sex working

This next section is show the various reasons and paths participants assessed in their decision to begin selling sex. For some, it was a matter of health and ability; they felt the mainstream workforce pushed them out. For others, their inability to maintain a decent standard of living while claiming social security or looking after their family was a reason for beginning sex work. For all of them, it was because of economic need. This section will explore the narratives of participants making those decisions.

5.2.1 Sex work as anti-work

The interview schedule for this project did not focus directly on health, disability or even on reasons for participants entering the sex industry, but of the fifteen participants, five – Aino, Reese, Lisa, Elle and Georgie - named mental or physical health as key reasons why sex work was the most accessible or the easiest way for them to earn money. This section examines how entrance into the sex industry can be dictated by health, physical and mental capacity, and capability.

When theorising work and disability, sex workers rarely feature in the literature, despite growing evidence that many sex workers have disabilities and are increasingly voicing their experiences about the relationship between their health and their employability (Hacking/Hustling, 2021; Tastrom, 2019; Warfield, 2022). Jones (2022) argues that disability is a key, yet under researched, factor determining sex work participation. As a result of institutionalised ableism of the mainstream labour force, those who live with a disability, including chronic illness, struggles with mental health and/or challenges related to their neurodivergence may find working in the sex industry more accessible and, for the most part, more accommodating to their lives and needs.

Disability and health were key issues for participants in this study. Highlighting how she struggled balancing her studying with mainstream work, Elle said of her entry into online sex work: “I was a bit too ill at uni to do long shifts, so I was quite limited, but sitting in front of a laptop was ideal. So that’s how I started.” Aino also struggled with work due to poor mental health:

> I met people doing escorting. I was finishing university and so I didn’t have the loan anymore, I was trying to do vanilla jobs and I was always a bit … like I wasn’t very good at managing my mental health, so I would never stay employed in those kinds of jobs for very long. I could never keep them, so I started doing meets and I’ve been kind of doing that ever since.

Similarly, Lisa said: “I started out when I was nineteen. It’s something that I kind of always thought about getting into, I enjoy sex and I have vulnerabilities so I’ve kind of just struggled with work and stuff.” In this way, Lisa’s story echoed Aino’s: both spoke about struggling to manage ‘straight work’ as a reason for sex working, and both transitioned through various areas of the sex industry. While some participants viewed the exchange of sexual services for money as a form of work that was more accessible for those with poor health, others viewed it as a different kind of work altogether. For example, Reese says that she can sex work “whilst I look for a regular job”. In this way, she positions sex work as a stop gap; a way of earning money without feeling like she was working. Reese added that she was autistic as well as epileptic and had been diagnosed with ADHD, and found that sex work was more acclimatising of this than other forms of work:

> Sex work is a time where if I'm in the right headspace I just zip up that like work suit and I get to not be myself. So actually, sometimes when my mental health is poor, but not so bad that I can't work, I get to be somebody else for a bit.

In addition to her sentiments of sex work being not-work, Reese summed up the high income generating ability by saying:

> I can earn a lot of money for doing fuck all work. And with my mental health, it's nice to just go, I'm not feeling great, I'm not going to it for three fucking days because I don't have to.

Similar to Reese's difficulties with work, Georgie was struggling looking for regular work and believed that selling sex was easier than the constant job applications, inflexible working hours and her perceived difficulties with managers all of which she equated with 'civilian work':

> It was during that time I began to really seriously consider sex work as an option for myself […]. Civvy work was posing a threat to my mental health. The risk of coming off benefits and using my qualifications to go back to work and the very real risks that that will pose to me in terms of ending up in hospital again and possibly even losing my life.

The intersection between disability and labour is apparent in how Georgie talks about her struggling mental health and, like Reese, she thinks of sex work as income generating without necessarily 'working', and so safe for her to do. Georgie, like other participants, views sex work as different and favourable, compared to a particular idea of working. As disabled sex worker rights activists Lorelei Lee argues (Hacking/Hustling, 2021), for so many workers, "sex work is a strategy so that we don't have to work. It is a survival strategy." Sex work then, is conceptualised as what Berg (2020) conceptualises as a kind of *anti*-work – work for those who cannot or do not want to work.

5.2.2 Sex work as a response to poverty

This section examines some of the participants' stories who were not choosing between sex work and other types of work, but between sex work and what they saw as stark poverty.

Judy was explicit in her view of sex work as a rational choice to take when the alternative is poverty or financial struggle. She said:

> Well, it's not like you need to justify yourself for getting out of financial mess or do something to escape from poverty. I think essentially that comes down to poverty. I think poverty is really one of the worst things. Sometimes you become ill. And coming out of relationship, I was worse off every time I came out of relationship, I had to do something.

Here, Judy aligns her being in a relationship with her being financially disadvantaged "every time" the relationship broke down. This means that for her, it makes sense "when the woman is on the survival, I think that's when they enter the industry." Judy expanded:

> And I think some women do [sex work] for their children's education, food, for the roof over the head. What's wrong with that, to be honest? Why is there anything so special about that?

Judy's comments about women selling sex are in line with findings that, while sex work is not only performed by women, sex is overwhelmingly sold by women, who are often in low income or in care-giving roles (Walkowtiz, 2016; Rivers-Moore, 2010; Hester et al, 2019; Bowen, 2021). Judy therefore positions sex work as a rational, un-special, response to women often being the primary caregivers, as well as the most likely to be economically disadvantaged. Similarly, when Morgan spoke about entering the industry as a child, she normalises her need for money as being similar to everyone else’s need to earn a living, in much the same way as Judy does. In doing this, both emphasised that their choice to sell sex was not so unusual:

> I guess like most people, like a lot of people, when I was about thirteen, twelve, it just ended up that I needed money for food at school. So I ended up like meeting men and giving like sexual services, not sex at that time, for money, so I could go to KFC or whatever.

Even though Morgan was a child when she started engaging in transactional sex, she refers to her choice as something that “most people” would do, glossing over the circumstances in which needing money for food at was something she felt the need to seek out herself as a child.

Kassie was receiving benefits, living away from home and struggling financially. She was introduced into sex work “by a guy in a kebab shop of all things […] he introduced me to it at sixteen.” She went on:

> I was like, oh my God this is so much money, making seventy quid like an hour, I’d come back with like £200, £300 and I was living on my own, on benefits at the time, living on like forty quid a week and I had to pay for all my bills with that […] It was just like a lot of money all of a sudden I guess.

Kassie did not attach a value judgement on her sex working by comparing £40 a week on benefits to earning around £70 an hour sex working, simply noting that for the first time in her life she was earning high amounts of money, very quickly. Kassie’s circumstances for entering sex work were similar Isla. Isla had moved out of her mother’s home when she was 16 and into a hostel. She began sex working because she did not have the means, or the ability, to earn an income, without it:

> This was before universal credit and that, so this is just before I was 17. So yeah, you didn't have to pay council tax, you got housing benefit, but I imagine it's exactly the same in women's refuges, the rent is about 1,000 pound a month because of the 24 hour support and stuff. So if you actually look at your house and benefit letter, it will say it's 250 pound a week. See,

> that's it, and then you get your income support, which was 52 pound a week. And we had to pay a service charge, which was 10 pound a week. So we had to live off 40 pound a week. But you can't go out and get a job because then you'll lose your housing benefit and things like that. So it's like a huge knock on effect. And you obviously can't get a tenancy because you're not 18. So you just have to accept that you've got to live like this, you know what I mean?

Sex work, regardless of the reasons why someone entered into it, is posited as the rational and easiest choice for earning money in desperate, and not so desperate situations.

The costs of parenting and childcare were, for some participants, a key economic drive for their sex-working. There is a paucity of research on sex work and motherhood, but the research that does exist often focuses on managing being a mother, and being a sex worker, as two seemingly dual and conflicting identities (Dodsworth, 2014; Bowen, 2021; Ma et al, 2018); or the research focuses only on street based workers (Sloss and Harper, 2004). Judy's position shows sex work as a rational response to caregiving and child-raising responsibilities – a way of being a good mother - rather than a conflict of identity.

Other participants also spoke about the gendered dynamics of care giving and sex work. Thea also positions sex work as a rational career move at a time in her life when there were lots of things to pay for with limited ways of paying for them. Even though Thea was married, she felt that the costs of raising their child fell on her. Motherhood, and the financial responsibilities which came with it, put a pressure on Thea to find money quickly:

> When your kids go to secondary school, you have hundreds of things to buy and no money to buy it with […] I couldn't ask family for loans or anything at the time. Somebody had mentioned this cam site to me, it must have been

> at a fetish event, so I started doing on-line cam and chat work and managed to pay for my son's uniform.

Sex workers are rarely recognised as maternal figures, but for many who sell sex, having to sex work is contingent on their need to fulfil their role as mothers (Dodsworth, 2014; Basu and Dutta, 2011). Sex work is undertaken to provide for their families flexibly and financially in ways which other occupations are believed to simply not allow, as Thea demonstrates. Isla's mum also began sex working to support her family after she was sacked from her old job for getting pregnant:

> So my mum was a sex worker. My biological dad left when she was seven months pregnant. So when she was pregnant, she got sacked for being pregnant. It was the mid-90s and there was no job prospects as such, you know what I mean? So she'd gone on the game. Did really well, all this, she's worked in brothels, she's worked with agencies, sort of all that, and independent.

Both Thea and Isla's mum entered into sex work as a direct consequence of the financial pressure of providing for their family. Most of the participants' stories centred on it being a 'rational choice' to enter into sex work meaning that it was a choice made to meet specific goals given the constraints of a situation. Mothers who were sex workers continually pointed to sex work as being a means to provide a better lives for their children, if not themselves (McCloskey et al, 2021). Like Judy, Isla, and Thea, other participants spoke about the pressures they felt of needing money pushing them, or their mum, into selling sex.

The framing of sex work presented by some participants was as an option distinct from other kinds of work has been framed as a 'rational choice' rather than a 'free choice' (Chapkis 1997: 67). If the choice were truly 'free', most participants would have the choice to not take it – but in a socio-economic context where they feel excluded from ‘square’ work and their benefits being so low that they cannot afford to live without income, sex work became the rational choice for some of them in their circumstances.

5.3 Hard and soft landings into sex work

Underlying the partial criminalisation of sex work in the UK is the assumption that relationships between sex workers and third parties are automatically based on control over and exploitation of the worker (Scoular et al., 2019; Sanders et al., 2009). Entry into the sex industry has been shown to be more complex than a choice/force binary which glosses over class, precarity and opportunity, (Scoular, 2004; Bouwers, 2022). Without wanting to reduce decision making into a similar taxonomy, for many participants their experiences can be loosely divided into ‘soft landings’ and ‘hard landings’.

For some of the participants in this study - six of the fifteen – working with other people enabled them to have what Georgie calls a ‘soft landing’ into the industry, meaning they could familiarise themselves with what sex work could or would entail before they started selling sex themselves. Not all participants experienced this; some had what I have named as a ‘hard landing’ into sex work. Hard landings here are entries into the industry in cases when someone did not or was not able to familiarise themselves with what selling sex entailed before deciding to do it, or being expected or pressured to do it. The section will explore ‘soft landings’ and ‘hard landings’ in more detail, examining how participants entered the industry through other people’s advice, help, or involvement, or in the latter case, coercion, force or threats.

Many sex workers have to learn about aspects of the job in relative isolation due to the criminalised nature of communal working (Grenfell et al, 2016; Sanders, 2016; Platt et al, 2018). In researching third party practices, Bruckart (2018) found that for current or former sex workers, engaging in third party practices as a mechanism to provide assistance is a recurring theme. Six participants gained knowledge about sex working in a variety of ways before they started seeing paying clients.

One route to understanding the sex industry was through online researching via sex worker forums and groups. When Georgie decided to begin sex working, she said:

> I was doing all my research, reading forums, gathering info, speaking to other women, other providers. […] I started off with Google and then that got me on to, I stumbled across this forum. Then, because I'd done some volunteering for a sex work charity, I knew one of the other volunteers was a worker as well, and I started talking to her about it and she gave me loads of support, in the run up to me hosting these in calls. So I was very, very lucky that I had a soft landing into the industry with a lot of knowledge.

While this may seem a popular route, given the prevalence of the internet and its ability to provide information on sensitive topics, no other participant mentioned this. Additionally, in her role at a sex work charity, as well as speaking to the other volunteers, Georgie would have had a first-hand look at how sex workers manage safety, sexual health, administrative duties and day to day work management.

The second route was through knowing others who worked in the industry. Elle's experience was entering through knowing other sex workers. She said: "I started at uni where two of my housemates were cam girls and I needed money and they were like, '*Well there's a thing you can do*.'" Similarly, Helen had entered and left the sex industry twice. The first time she began sex working, she had been living in a women's hostel after the breakdown of a relationship and watched other women. Helen said:

> They were getting dressed up like in little skirts and tights and trotting off down to the lane[10]. I didn't know anything about the lane then. Then I found out it was sex work […] So that's how I ended up going down lane.

One participant, Thea, had a route to sex work through her involvement in the kink community[11]. She said:

> I couldn't ask family for loans or anything at the time. Somebody had mentioned [adult service website] to me at a fetish event, so I started doing on-line cam and chat work.

The stories of participants who had 'soft landings' into the industry show that for some who start sex working through someone else, they are not coerced, forced or 'pimped' as some research may suggest (see Chapter 2) but advised and helped; further, many who do the advising or helping are sex workers themselves.

While certainly contrary to the prevailing narrative of exploitation and pimping (see Chapter 2), this theme is reflected in the data here also. Some participants did experience controlling, abusive or violent dynamics at the hands of those who exploited them sexually and financially, or associated selling sex with abuse. There were participants who did not 'choose' to sell sex, but were violently coerced or forced to both as children, and as young adults.

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[10] An area known for being part of the Managed Approach in Yorkshire which allowed sex workers to solicit sex on the street without arrest or prosecution between certain hours.

[11] The 'kink community' refers to organisations which provide physical or online spaces for adults with similar interests to meet, discuss, support, educate, and/or interact and may also be known as BDSM, fetish, or other alternative sexualities.

Participants reported that family members and boyfriends were people who encouraged them to sell sex as children. For example, Bethan began selling sex at sixteen under pressure from her boyfriend. She said:

> ”I didn’t know what sugar dating[12] was, so he got me to sign up on websites. He got me to do that, sign up and talk to them and go on dates. And then he wanted the money from me…[…]… It wasn’t something that I considered before then. I was sixteen and I was in school, I didn’t know what I wanted to do, but it had never crossed my mind that sex work was an option and I didn’t really understand that sugaring was sex work. I get that now but I thought at the time, he didn’t really explain to me that I’d be expected to have sex with them, he kind of portrayed it to me as “oh they just want to go out with you and have a meal and have some drinks and stuff like that and then you’ll come home to me”. Obviously that’s not what they want.

Bethan emphasises her naivete at the time, by saying “I get that now” and “obviously” when looking back to her decision making. Research intro grooming tactics has shown that, for those entering into the sex industry under 18 years old, deception is a key tactic used to get girls to sell sex, for instance promising them that they could keep all of the money (Bullens and van Horn, 2002). Bethan, with hindsight, explained this when she said, “I was under the impression that it [the money] was being used for us, but it wasn’t.”

Hallet (2015) argues that young people who engage in transactional sex often describe feelings of instability, powerlessness or being ignored or unwanted. Feeling visible, or feeling wanted, can occur through being sexually exploited because the objectification or the feeling desired in exchanging sex is cast as something expected, acceptable or a least-worst option. Further, Scott and Skimore (2006) argue that children who are sexually exploited or who choose to sell sex are often ‘needy’ for attention, or what they perceive to be ‘love’ and they want to belong somewhere, and they are often reliant on abusive adults to meet these needs. Bethan noted this herself, when she said:

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[12] The term ‘sugar dating’, like much terminology in the sex industry, is loosely defined. Generally, as well as for the purposes of this thesis, “sugar dating” is the practice of establishing a “mutually beneficial relationship” between an older, affluent male – Sugar Daddy – and a younger, financially disempowered female – Sugar Baby.

> My family is very (laughs) no one really cared or noticed […] No one really noticed what I was doing or would have cared anyway. So yeah, it wasn’t weird to my family that all of a sudden I was in a relationship with someone who was a lot older than me […] I was like emotionally neglected as a child, and because of that, when I was growing up in my teenage years, I was always looking for attention, and looking for someone to make me feel loved and cared for.

While Bethan was under the impression that the work would consist of one thing yet later found out it was something else, the ways that coercion or exploitation can manifest in the sex industry, can look incredibly different between participants.

Anna, for example, was acutely aware of what was expected of her. Anna was “approached on the street by a guy and a woman”, and she used the word “groomed” to describe how she entered into the sex industry, even though she was over the age of 18 and she talks of maintaining agency and choice throughout. The man and woman who approached her did not explicitly say that they wanted Anna to sell sex, but she was aware of what they wanted from her. Anna said:

> [I] knew exactly what it was immediately, and I'd kind of decided already in some weird way that that’s what I was gonna do. And what I was doing, it was horrible.

Here, Anna emphasised that she had “decided” to sell sex, adding that “it felt quite abusive”. Demonstrating the mixed emotions, Anna notes that she was aware that grooming tactics were used, as the people who approached her “flattered me and gave me some money”, she was still “choosing to do it”, though she does not say why. What is notable is that most of the ‘hard landings’ were from participants who began selling sex as children. Anna is the only participant who had a ‘hard landing’ into the sex industry over the age of 18; all but one of the adults had a ‘soft landing’ into the sex industry.

In the narrative about the wider context in which Anna was drawn to sex working, she mentioned a Bon Jovi music video [at a later date, Anna clarified that the video was for the song *Someday I’ll Be Saturday Night]*. While she was nannying abroad, before she even began sex working, she would have MTV on in the background and this particular Bon Jovi song was playing all the time. In the music video there was a young girl being abused and “every time it was on, there was something that felt really resonant in it.”

> [It]was about like, as if he was a teenage girl. And it was like, *Oh, I'm only 18. I've been bought and sold*. I can't remember what the words are.

Anna was not the only participant who considers sex work to be abuse, yet asserts their choice in it. Morgan’s story was very similar. She said:

> A lot of my clients were just awful because they knew I was underage anyway, they were already committing a crime, so it was like almost like I put myself in positions where I would get attacked.

Morgan went on,

> I was quite lonely […] I think I had a group of friends but it was quite isolating, because everyone else was having a go at me for stuff. So I just wanted someone who actually care about me and like to say, *oh you’re beautiful, oh you’re this*.

Morgans feelings seem contradictory: she was “putting herself” in danger, but did so to feel appreciated and looked after.

Bethan's story echoed Morgan's sentiments. She entered the sex industry aged sixteen at the coercion of an older boyfriend, but said that it was not just the abuse from him which led her into selling sex. She told me,

> Growing up in my teenage years, I was always looking for attention, and looking for someone to make me feel loved and cared for. So while I found that with that particular man [her boyfriend], I got attention from them [the clients]. I think that even without him, I would have still ended up in the sex industry potentially because of my need to feel loved and cared for and stuff like that.

Chapter 2 traced the advances in sex work research for scoping beyond the abuse/work binary, and yet, participants construct narratives which demonstrate that they believed sex work to be abusive, which is why they sought it out. Further, some participants felt that there were some of their emotional needs being met through transactional sex. Regardless, these findings show that even while sex work has abusive or violent connotations for participants, or, abusive some of the time and caring other times, regardless, they exercised agency in working by engaging in transactional sex.

Conclusion

This chapter explored how participants defined their work exchanging sexual activities for money, what form this work took, and how and why they began sex working. Discourses about sex work shaped how participants defined how they worked, and what they saw as being included under the 'sex work' umbrella. For some, this included how sex work became a kind of 'anti-work'; income generating without actually working. Naming transactional sex as 'sex work' and naming oneself as a 'sex worker' is a political act, and this chapter showed that, while some participants identified with it, some did not, because of these political connotations. While all participants had at some point identified as a ‘sex worker’ in order to self-select for the study, this chapter shows how sex work is many things: work, anti-work, escape from abuse, or abuse itself; enacted both by other people and as a source of self-injury. There were participants who wished to distance themselves from the term ‘sex work’ due to their experiences of abuse and coercion within the industry, whereas others chose to identify with it as a political and self-defining act, regardless or notwithstanding the abuse they experienced.

This is significant because it problematises the claim that ‘sex worker’ is the preferred term by activists. Further, troubling navigations of consent and exploitation within the sex industry shaped participants ability to fully articulate their experiences. Participant’s poor health, disability, difficulties with mental health and struggles in the mainstream workforce means that sex work is often the most adaptable, easiest and more manageable form of income generation for many participants. Coercion did exist, however, and not all participants knew other workers to help familiarise them with sex work. Narratives of abuse and grooming whilst participants still maintained their agency further problematises questionable binaries consisting of work or sexual exploitation within the sex industry. This chapter has shown that for some participants, sex work was a form of abuse, but abuse which they chose to seek out, and remain in.

6. Understandings and experiences of domestic, familial and sexual abuse while sex working

Introduction

One of the research aims of this thesis was to explore sex workers experiences of domestic and familial abuse and this findings chapter will explore how participants conceptualised and understood their experiences of domestic violence and abuse while they were sex working. A key finding running through this chapter are the ways that perpetrators weaponised, utilised or exploited the criminalised and stigmatised position of sex workers through actions such as identity abuse, sexual exploitation or sabotaging their attempts at work.

Findings in this chapter are thematically organised into emotional and psychological abuse, physical, economic, and sexual violence and abuse, but while these types of abuse characterise the dominant ways abuse occurred, they are not discrete, separate incidents but patterns of abusive behaviours. Taken together, they make up a wider pattern of control isolation and degradation, and while this chapter is sectioned into typologies, for many participants their experiences fit into multiple categories. Running through all categories are the intersections between participants' experiences of abuse, and their experiences sex working. This chapter will also show how sex working and domestic and familial abuse intersected at different points for different participants.

6.1 Emotional and psychological abuse

While some scholars use the terms 'emotional abuse' and 'psychological abuse' (EPA) interchangeably (Karakurt and Silver, 2013; Tarzia and Hegarty, 2022), there are important nuances between the two. The difference between emotional and psychological abuse is, broadly, that emotional abuse affects how victim/survivors' feel using criticism, shame, embarrassment, distress while psychological abuse is intended to affect how victim/survivors think, such as their perception, attention or memory through tactics like gaslighting, manipulation or control (O'Hagan, 1995).

Both psychological and emotional abuse were experienced by participants. Regarding emotional abuse, this … Sean, for example, said that his ex-boyfriend would control Sean's image of himself as a way of humiliating and demeaning him:

> I've had lifelong body dysmorphia, quite the severe end, to the point where I hallucinate when I look in mirrors and things like that. So he's known this. So it's one of my vulnerabilities […] He would constantly cheat, make sure I found out about it, target and use behaviours like that to shame me, it would be people I would know, he would be blackmailing me to tell people about what we would do sexually, he would film things without me knowing and blackmail … and all this kind of stuff […] That was generative of my self-esteem.

Similarly, Reese spoke about the emotional abuse at the hands of her ex-boyfriend, saying that he would shame her for her sexual choices or orientations, and would make her "feel really shitty about my own personal preferences".

Psychological abuse was also used by family members. For example, Lisa believed her step-father was stalking her behaviour which engenders alarm, fear or distress (Mechanic et al, 2000):

> I was going paranoid and the thing is, I'm not a paranoid person whatsoever and all these things were happening and it wasn't till I came home again before I moved away that I realise he was stalking me, like I genuinely wasn't sure who it was. […] Usually I'm very like *I'm sure it's nothing, it's probably coincidence*, but there was like too many things and I was becoming so much more paranoid, yeah, I just became paranoid of it and I didn't know who it was.

In this thesis, I group emotional and psychological abuse together as both are concerned with the participants’ state of mind, and all 15 participants spoke about experiencing name calling, threats, humiliation, and intimidation as well as controlling, threatening or demanding behaviour, which is all consistent with the literature on EPA (O’Connell et al, 2021; Geffner and Rossman, 1998). Ultimately, EPA is a degradation of the self which lowers self-worth and interferes with independence, wellbeing and development and while it is referred to here as abuse rather than violence, this does not diminish the significance of the consequences. Typologies of abuse can imply a hierarchy of severity or suffering, but as Judy defined it:

> It's not like you are going to be physically maimed or anything like that, but it's still a form of violence that shouldn't be happening, to be honest.

The prevailing experience of EPA which participants discussed was, in many ways, directly linked to their sex-working. Sex workers are socially constructed as vulnerable, disposable, and criminal (Sanders and Campbell, 2007; Campbell, 2014; Platt et al, 2018), and participants reported how these dominant discourses both strengthened the abusers’ position and made it harder for them to leave. This was noted by Judy, who said, “I think sometimes sex work gives them an excuse. It's like validation, *you are a horrible woman*. I think they use that as an excuse to attack you”.

6.1.1 Sex-worker identity abuse

Most of the participants - 11 of the 15 - shared how they felt the ways which the social stigma and discrimination of being a sex worker directly or indirectly validated or enabled the abuse they experienced, or explained how social stigma meant that they felt prevented from seeking help while they were sex working. The weaponising of marginalisation is not unique to sex workers' experiences of domestic abuse; Donovan and Barnes (2019; 2020; 2021) conceptualise IA in their research on abuse in same sex and LGBTQ relationships, identifying how the societal context in which discriminatory, demeaning, and undermining assumptions and stereotypes about LGBTQ people are normalised. Woulfe and Goodman (2018) also name identity abuse (IA) as a subtype of emotional abuse, consisting of abusive tactics within a family or intimate partnership where the perpetrator leverages systemic oppression such as ableism, sexism, and racism to harm the victim/survivor. Such stereotypes can be and often are used by abusive partners to punish, control and torment, as well as to deter help-seeking. This thesis draws heavily on the concept of 'identity abuse' (see section 3.3.2).

Participants felt the societal context in which discriminatory, demeaning and undermining assumptions and stereotypes about sex workers are normalised, upheld particular values which intimidated participants who sex worked into being controlled. For example, Anna spoke about her ex-boyfriend's attitude toward her history sex working, something she had stopped doing before she met him:

> He would be very like, "*It's okay. As long as you admit it [sex working] was a mistake."* That was like the line. I had to admit that it was a mistake and it was like a bad thing that I'd done.

The next three sections will examine IA more closely, and in turn look at: how and why participants kept their sex working a secret, how sex work was a trigger for violence from their partners or family members, and the threats to out them as sex workers to other people in their life.

6.1.1.1 Using sex work as a tactic of abuse

Sanders and Campbell (2007: 793) highlight that stigma of sex workers and their proximity to violence which sex workers sit within a "discourse of disposability", reinforcing the cultural message that sex workers are not valid citizens. Though these discourses have been researched in relation to client or police violence against sex workers (Kinnell, 2008; Sanders and Campbell, 2007; Mac and Smith, 2018; Graham, 2017), there is little research on how 'discourses of disposability' affect intimate partner or family dynamics. Many participants spoke about the ways their partner would abuse them for sex working, yet at the same time, as sex work is an economic activity, their partners had no qualms with being financially supported by their partner's money. This is in line with research on strippers' relationships, where Bradley-Engen and Hobbes (2010) and Bahri (2019) both reported that partners of strippers seemed to condemn the dancer's occupation, while reaping the financial gain.

There were a number of participants who were coerced into selling sex for the financial benefit of other people, and then were insulted and called names for it. For Helen, even though her ex-boyfriend was violently forcing her to sell sex to bring the money home for drugs, he concurrently punished her for doing so:

> If I look back, he became even more aggressive, and more controlling with me when I were doing it [sex work]. I think he wanted the money. I don't know if he really did want me to do it or not.

When she would come home from working, he would insult her with vile and degrading names, "He used to say, *you fucking filthy little prostitute, you Paki shagger, you fucking filth … little slag*." This was similar to Bethan, who was also coerced into selling sex by her ex-boyfriend. She spoke about how his mood would worsen after she came home from work:

> He would like encourage me and say, before I would go, he would be in a good mood, saying *oh you look so pretty, you're going to do so well*, just trying to make me feel like confident and like I could do it. And then when I'd get home, either that night or that next morning or whenever, he'd obviously be in an off mood with me and then probably by the end of the day then he'd have exploded and called me all kinds of names. He'd call me a whore, he'd call me a slag, he called me a slut. Those kind of names over and over.

Society's condemnation of sex workers and the position of sex work as not-work and sex as "slags" "sluts" or "whores" was "used against" participants to punish, insult and degrade them once money had been earned.

This abuse was also apparent with participants who had a partner who also sex worked. Both Aino and their partner were sex working when they met and started dating, and Aino's negative experiences in previous relationships meant they felt hopeful about their new one:

> I'd had partners feel resentful that I could earn more in an hour than they could, in theory, […] and so I was excited at the prospect of finding someone I was attracted to, who was also a sex worker, because I thought that that would stop these things from happening […] I thought it would keep me safe.

Instead of Aino and their partner bonding over a shared experience and creating a safe space together:

> All these sort of demographics because I thought it would keep me safe, and this relationship, it was kind of used against me […] If I earned more money than her, then that would start a huge argument, more things being broken.

Aino felt pressure to earn as their girlfriend was not financially contributing and their girlfriend "was quite upset at the idea of paying rent at all". Aino, Bethan and Helen were all in impossible situations: pressured – with varying degrees of violence and coercion – into sex working, by partners who punished them for doing so.

Lisa explained how her mother would verbally attack her, particularly mentioning Lisa's sex working as a way of hurting her:

> She would come to my like house or like maybe once a month and she'd be like, *I know you're doing this, I know you're doing this and this and this and this, everybody knows you're doing this, it's disgusting*.

Lisa's mother mentioned, not only her own disgust, but other people's disgust, thus drawing on society's belief that sex work, and those who do it, are worthy of being shamed. Sex work stigma, or 'whorephobia' has been well documented and theorised in the literature, and shows how 'whorephobic' beliefs may lead some people to dehumanize and abuse their sex working partners, as well as this whorephobia becoming internalised (Pheterson, 1993; Schaffauser, 2010; Ellison and Smith, 2017; Tempest, 2019).

6.1.1.2 Threats of being outed as a sex worker

Outing, or being outed, is an issue ostensibly confined to the gay and queer community linked to the notion of the "closet" (Long, 1993). The term "coming out of the closet" amounts to publicly acknowledging one's homosexuality, queerness, or at least historical relationships or gender identity outside the heteronormative. Outing someone else, however, publicly acknowledges the sexual orientation of someone without regard to whether the person is willing to have this information known about them, often in circumstances where the revelation may be damaging (Mohr, 1993; Austen and Wellington, 1995). Outing, for sex workers, is conceptually similar to the politics and effects of outing for the queer community, and the consequences can range from losing contact with your family, friendships, your job, and losing housing (Bruckhart, quoted in Donato, 2019).

Of the 15 participants interviews, 13 were conducted remotely, and of this 13, three kept their cameras off entirely and nine used false names during their interview. This was in addition to using pseudonyms for the transcript. It did not seem a coincidence that the three participants who kept their visibility hidden, Elle, Georgie and Lisa, all told me how ‘outing’ or ‘threats of being outed’ was wielded as a source of power in their relationships, though others mentioned it also.

Elle was too scared to tell people that her ex-boyfriend had been abusive toward her because of possible consequences:

> They know I’m a sex worker, and could possibly use that against me.
> **When you say ‘use that against you’?**
> Could possibly out me to people.

Georgie’s relationship was “calm” at the minute, but she mentioned that she constantly worried about her boyfriend finding out she sex worked. When asked what she thought the consequences might be if her partner did find out, she said:

> He would out me. He would out me to people we know. He would be so wounded and so incredibly angry.

Both Georgie and Elle explored possible consequences based less on what their partner has threatened to do, and on their own fears and consequences of other people finding out that they sex work.

Isla explained that her mother knew about Isla’s sex working, and that her mum used this information to cause Isla to lose her home:

> She told my landlord I was escorting, even though I wasn't for like six months. I took a small break and that made me lose my house. She's just the most manipulative person I've ever met. She knew he [the landlord] didn't know. She knew what she was doing.

The exchange of sexual services for money is not illegal, and Isla being a tenant in a property and selling sex from that property would not violate any terms, nor would the landlord be legally empowered to kick someone out of their flat for doing it; especially as Isla had stopped selling sex by this point. Regardless, Isla clearly draws a line between the social ramifications of being outed as a sex worker, and the ability of her mother to use these social ramifications to control and abuse her Lisa was outed as a sex worker by her step-father:

> He told my dad about it, and he made fake Facebook accounts to message my friends […] it was just really harassing people. I did stop [sex work] for a while because I was like, maybe if I stop, it will stop. I kept on doing full service and then all of a sudden this link got sent out to everybody of me advertising my services, he told my mum I had HIV, when I've never tested positive for anything […] it completely shattered my relationship with her.

Being outed as a sex worker without her consent "broke" Lisa "completely". She "changed completely as a person" and tells me that she "became very vulnerable".

Outing someone as a sex worker, or threatening to do so is wielded as a weapon and is a form of violence with destructive consequences. From the stories of participants, it was to be threatened or done as a way of deliberately controlling, isolating and shaming the victim/survivor.

Threats can also include passive aggressive behaviour such as emotional withdrawal and 'the silent treatment' (Stark, 2012; Stark, 2018), something Reese spoke about in relation to her work. Reese said that she felt her boyfriend clearly hated her job and would sulk whenever she spoke about it,

> He doesn't look me in the eye and just goes silent. And when I've said to him like, *Ben, can you use your big boy words please and tell me that this is fine and that you are all right with it*, he's like, *yes*, not looking me in the eyes.

As shown in the Literature Review (see section 2.3.3), many partners of sex workers are unable to conceive of sex work as a *performance* of intimacy. Instead of empathising with his partner, the worker, Georgie's boyfriend is empathising with the customer, the paying client, and focusing on the exchange from the client's point of view, thus seeing what Georgie does as sex, rather than work. Reese's boyfriends also glossed over the material conditions of her workplace by not acknowledging what she said about her work. To raise such topics would spoil the illusion of the image Reese is selling to her customers, the party that her partner relates to the most.

6.1.1.3 Secret keeping

Research consistently shows that to avoid the 'whore stigma' and to prevent disapproval, rejection or shame, many sex workers work in secrecy and do not disclose their occupation to their friends, family, children wider network (Sanders, 2004; Bowen, 2021; Day and Ward, 2014). Many participants also kept their sex working a secret from other people in their life, such as partners, friends or social workers for a variety of reasons, such as out of fear of abuse, or to prevent further abuse Anna had told an ex-boyfriend she had sex worked in the past, before they had started dating, and his negative and shaming reaction had consequences years later:

> He was the last guy I ever told. I mean, I had a four year relationship later down the line that also coincided with doing sex work and I never told him, we lived together. I just never told anyone again.

Even though Helen was forced into sex work by her boyfriend, years after leaving the sex industry the first time around, she had never actually told her boyfriend that she had sex worked. She said, "I'd done sex work, obviously it's a bit taboo isn't it, so I'd not told him about it […] You don't talk about it." Similarly, Helen emphasises that sex work is "obviously" taboo and something to hide. By drawing on discourses of stigma and secrecy, as well as universal condemnation, Helen has internalised the stigmatised construction of sex workers in society. . Helen repeated multiple times that it took years before she could openly talk about her sex working, repeatedly saying, "You don't talk about it". Helen's desire to keep sex work a secret is to limit negative assumptions about her. This was different to Anna's reason, who also drew on discourses of sex workers, albeit different ones. The biggest reason Anna kept her sex working a secret was due to her own self-worth:

> I just always thought people would think I should be better at sex. Probably the biggest reason that I was worried, there would be a lot of, *God, who'd pay for that?*

Anna worried that people would think little of her, in comparison to what they might think of sex workers; them being highly skilled in bed and thus worthy of paying for sex, in comparison to herself, as not worthy of being paid due to lack of sexual skill or desirability. Additionally, Anna's boyfriend openly referred to sex workers as "dirty and disgusting" and Anna's decision to sell sex was something she was told by him she needed to refer to as "*a mistake*." Similarly, in one of Reese's relationships, she was told more than once:

> *You should meet my friends, but don't tell them what you do.* And I'm like, all right, cool. It's just that uncomfortable sort of thing of knowing that [they're] still low-key ashamed of you, but [they] love you.

In their narratives, these participants do not mention openly pushing back or resisting their partner's opinions of their work. Instead, by accepting their partners' disrespect of their work, and their outward acceptance that sex work is something that ought to be kept secret, or thought of as a mistake, they are reinforcing and reinstating social stigma and condemnation.

Participants often accepted disparaging discourses about themselves, and applied negative beliefs to themselves and their work, such as when Helen referred to her work as ‘taboo’, or the way Georgie keeps her life “compartmentalised” due to there being “an awful lot of judgments” about how and why women choose to sell sex. Georgie kept her sex working away from her homelife. She had been in an on and off relationship with a man for fifteen years, and she claimed that he had no idea she had been sex working for the past three years. She kept it a secret due to him being “insanely possessive” and “very jealous”. She said, “He’s quick to temper anyway, he gets angry at nothing anyway, you know, the slightest little thing. So something like this would just be seismic.” Georgie draws a connection between her own sex working and her partner’s bad temper, something found in research both on personal relationships of sex workers, and in literature on domestic abuse (Postmus et al, 2012; Wettersten et al, 2004; Tits and Sass, 2016). The explosion of anger which Georgie refers to is unpredictable and without verbal clues meaning that its constant threat can be utilised as threat to control what she does. Georgie also claimed that though her partner did not seem to have a problem with her working generally, he does not include sex work in the category of acceptable jobs for his partner to have.

> While he had no moral objection to [sex work], philosophically, he had plenty of objection, in reality, to anyone else having access to my body that wasn’t him […] he just said, *I can’t cope with it.*

These findings demonstrates how the concept of identity abuse can be applied to the experiences of sex workers. In many instances, the socially maligned position of the sex worker empowered the perpetrators to control, shame or abuse participants. This was not only through EPA, but through physical abuse, economic abuse, and sexual abuse, as the rest of this chapter demonstrates

6.2 Physical Abuse

Physical abuse is typified as any violence or intentional and unwanted contact with the victim's body in a way that causes pain, distress or injury (Women's Aid, 2023). This section on physical abuse attempts to trace participants stories through the escalation of violence by incorporating threats of violence, and violence against property within the physical abuse category. Measuring escalation is subjective and can be difficult to define, as measuring depends on the conceptualisation and measurement of severity and intensity as well as the frequency of abuse. Regardless, research frequently argues that escalation of violence is a common pattern in many abusive relationships (Johnson, 2008; Bland and Ariel, 2015; Boxall and Lawler, 2021). Within some participant narratives, they ascribed meanings to their partners' behaviours, and read threats of further harm – both implicit and explicit - into particular acts of violence and destruction.

6.2.1 Threats of suicide or physical harm

Threats of suicide and self-harm are a form of abuse where the perpetrator attempts to manipulate the victim/survivor by playing on their feelings of love and fear, as well as trying to make them feel too guilty to leave, or too scared to act in a way that the perpetrator does not like (Johnson, 2008). Eight participants spoke about perpetrators acting, or threating to act, in a way to endanger their own lives, or the lives of the participants. For Georgie, her partner used threats of suicide and self-harm as an effective "warning shot" to make sure she never brought up the topic of his inability to get an erection again. She said:

> He has erectile dysfunction, my partner, and it was never up for discussion, he wouldn't ever let me. These reactions, especially threatening to harm himself, he put a knife to his own neck and pressed it against his own skin in front of me. I had flashbacks about that for weeks and months. This was because I'd dared to discuss the fact that he couldn't get an erection.

This violent reaction was, Georgie felt, deliberate. She said it was him "schooling" her into silence by threatening suicide. His inability to maintain an erection added "another layer of complexity" to Georgie's situation as he "couldn't stand" the thought of Georgie "potentially enjoying this experience" of sex working when he was unable to perform sexually. Threats of suicide closed down communication as well as potentially showing Georgie what might happen if she did not comply. Georgie's experience shows that these violent warnings disempower her within the relationship by closing down her agency and preventing her from speaking openly with her partner.

Threats of harm were also impacted when directed at people outside of the relationship. For example, Arnall saw his boyfriend being violent toward other people, and he read that as a threat of violence directed toward himself. He said:

> That's how violence in the relationship started, it started with me viewing him being violent to other people. But then that became my warning then to not be annoying him or not be asking him too many questions or not asking for money.

Arnall does not explain what “annoying” his partner might look like, simply that it is his own perceived antagonistic behaviour which needed to be curtailed to prevent further violence.

Threats of suicide may put victim/survivors in a position where they have no choice but to respond with care, concern and support (Flannery, 2023). This was the case with Isla. Isla’s mum “was never stable” but Isla “always accepted that” about her mum and Isla’s “first memory is comforting her [mum] when she was crying”. The relationship between Isla and her mum developed from this into a familiar pattern where Isla’s mum’s mental health “got so bad she would threaten suicide”. Isla said:

> She would ring me and threaten suicide and then turn her phone off […], so I would always, wherever I was, I’d drop everything, and this would include like jumping trains to London and things like this.

The greater the distance between Isla and her mum, the less power her mum had over Isla which might be why the suicide threats came when Isla was “nowhere near her”. Eventually, the toll of constantly being on call while she was trying to manage her own chaotic life got too much for Isla:

> It got to a point where I just had so much on, with […] all of us using so many drugs all the time, that I would say to Aaron and my friends […], I would say to them, *I just wish she’d do it*, because I couldn’t handle the perpetual grief of mourning my mum, you know what I mean? And it was like, I wish she would just end her life because I can’t cope any more.

Isla did not explain whether she thought her mother was seriously at risk of suicide, or if she ever attempted it, but through these threats her mother could control and manipulate Isla into being where her mother wanted her to be: at home with her.

Threats of suicide were explicitly recognized as a manipulation tactic by some participants. For example, Aino's ex-girlfriend regularly talked about suicide, and Aino explicitly noted that they read this as a threat. Aino said:

> One day she didn't show up where we agreed to meet, and she'd been talking about killing herself, she'd been talking about killing herself the whole time I'd known her, it was often a thing used to threaten me. So I was like*, oh God she hasn't shown up when she said she would*, so I'm going to go to her house and check on her.

Though Aino read their ex-girlfriend's expressions of suicidal ideation as a threat, the threat worked because Aino said that they went over. An abuser's threats of suicide and threats of violence are well documented in DVA literature as a method of maintain power and control within the relationship (Cross et al, 2017; Mcquown et al, 2016; Stark, 2018). Aino's narrative showed that even if a participant knew it was a threat, the coercion worked regardless.

6.2.2 Destruction and damage of property

The deliberate destruction and damage of property are acts of abuse (Home Office, 2023), often intended as a threat of further destruction or of physical violence and bodily harm. Follingstad et al (1990) argue that damage to a victim's property may be an initial destructive step that escalates easily into damaging the victim themselves. Destruction of property is also a material, physical manifestation of abuse, with tangible and visible evidence. For Georgie, her partner's violence was a wakeup call, something she could undeniably "see for [her]self":

> He was damaging my property. Like the temper, I just thought that was him, you know and I kind of made excuses for him […] I would be complicit in that as well for quite a while, until my property started getting damaged, and I could see it for myself, even after he'd gone, there was the big hole in the wall that he'd punched. You know*, oh my God, he's actually damaged my stuff, that's not OK*.

When Georgie's partner moved from "just" losing his temper, to leaving physical evidence of his violent outbursts, it served as a visual and undeniable representation of both what her partner was capable of, and of something that she could no longer ignore be complicit in and explain away. Such behaviour by perpetrators may also serve as a lesson, as well as reminder of possible violence toward a person that they might be next.

Arnall's boyfriend escalated from violence against property, to violence against Arnall:

> It started from being objects, then it started to pushing me around, then he threw me up against the wall and grabbed me by the throat […] It progressed from behaving like erratically within the home and grabbing me every now and then, to physically battering me.

By using phrases like, "it started" and "it progressed", Arnall's narrative constructs his ex-boyfriend's behaviour as a trajectory of intimidation and severity. As well as destroying property as a threat of violence, some participants experienced their perpetrators targeting specific possessions to ruin because of their emotional significance. Arnall experienced this,

> He's constantly kicking or punching things anyway. Then it was breaking things, then it was smashing the TV up, then it was personal things to me, so I'm a bit spiritualist, and he'd take my crystals and he'd throw them out the window because he knew it was important to me.

Sean spoke of a sexual assault at the hands of his partner, something which he referred to as "the worst thing that ever happened to me in my entire life". He added,

> He raped me with a hammer shaft, which was particularly grievous because my dad had died and one of the very few things that I has was couple of his tools, because he was good with tools, and you know I kept some of these things, it was particularly grievous because of that.

With property damage and desecration, especially property of such personal value to the victim/survivor, the abuser is intending that the victim/survivor will suffer as well as being frightened and threatened. Damaging property of such personal significance also highlights the intentionality of the crime; that it is deliberate and has been actively considered and sought out to hurt the victim/survivor, rather than being explained away as a random or frenzied attack (Holt, 2012).

6.2.3 Physical violence and assault as control

Stark (2007) has argued that viewing violence and abuse as incident-specific and injury-based conceals the major components, dynamics, and effects of isolation, coercion and control. For many of the participants who spoke about physical violence and assault, though this level of abuse was unambiguous, it was often constructed as a manifestation of the broader effects of oppression and control. In Helen's story, for example, she mentioned 23 times that she was "beaten up" by her ex-boyfriend, but never went into any detail about what that meant, what it consisted of, or what happened during these beatings. Instead, the beatings were one of many examples of her ex-boyfriend's abuse and control. In one story, for example, Helen said:

> When he beat me up and that, he'd tell me to go [and sex work], and because I were longer than what he wanted me to be, he'd rung me I were still there, he were like, *fucking get home now!* And when I got home, he'd beat me and took all money off me, took all weed off me and kicked me out.

Similarly, in Anna's story of how she left her violent relationships, she made vague reference to the physical violence and positioned it in the backdrop of the wider dynamics of abuse. She said:

> The other thing I really remember is the night that I left him, which we were living in this attic and he'd thrown all my clothes out onto the roof, through the skylight, it was snowing and he was up on the roof, I remember thinking, "*He's gonna kill me.*" I just really thought he was gonna kill me. And I was sitting on the floor and there were stairs on the other side of the room. And I remember thinking*, "If I run and run down the stairs, I might get away. But he's really, really quick. And if he jumps back down and catches me, he's gonna throw me down the stairs."* And I remember feeling like I was in a film and like, "*What am I gonna do?"* Like slow motion. And I got up and ran and I ran out onto the snow in just like this t-shirt and pants with a bleeding mouth.

Anna's memory of the night, as she told it, is incredibly vivid: she remembered the weather, the room and the clothes she was wearing, but she did not go into detail about what had happened to lead her to thinking she was going to die, or how her mouth came to be bleeding. Similar to Helen's narrative, the physical violence served as a device for explaining the wider dynamics of how their relationships operated.

This construction of physical violence was present in Sean's narrative. Sean recalled one time in particular when his ex-boyfriend "got angry and screamy and shouty" and "the neighbours called the police eventually because they'd heard". When the police arrived Sean was arrested:

> I had testicular torsion from where he'd grabbed me, which is one of the most painful things a man can deal with. They put me in a cell, took my shoelaces off me, left me there, after about two hours I said, *I need to see a doctor*.

Sean only mentioned the physical injury he has sustained from the assault to illustrate that the police did not listen when he asked for help (discussed further in Chapter 9). As with Helen and Anna, Sean focused on the consequence of the violence, rather than emphasising the violence itself. While this may be a result of fear, or denial, or as a product of trauma (Gilmore, 2017; Serisier, 2018), result of fear and denial (Harrison 1997) or as a product of trauma (J. Gilmore 2017), for

Anna, Helen and Sean, the physical assaults they experienced may not be the significant parts of their story or not relevant to the point that is important for them to make.

While some experiences of violence were based around physical impact such as kicking and punching, participants also reported choking, an act now known as non-fatal strangulation (NFS), as a significant form of violence. Bethan, Judy and Helen were all choked by their ex-partners, and Bethan and Judy called the police after these attacks. For Bethan, her ex-boyfriend, "ended up trying to strangle" her, and she "had to call the police on him because he just wasn't letting go at all". In Judy's narrative, the day she had planned on leaving was when her partner had become violent: "Essentially I was strangled […] I think I spoke something he didn't like, I don't remember what exactly and yeah, he started to actually to strangle me and well, I decided to call the police." As evidenced in the literature, where NFS is a sign that escalation intensifies and risk of murder increases (Campbell et al, 2007; Douglas and Fitzgerald, 2020; Monckton-Smith, 2021), Judy and Bethan both took this incident as a sign to reach out for intervention. Helen also experienced NFS from her ex-partner:

> He beat me up […] it were outside in middle of road, in front of traffic and everything, he beat me up. He strangled me, I were unconscious, he dragged me in house and everything. When I come round, he were like, *wash your face, come on … come on Helen, why do you always make me fucking do this?*

In Helen's story, her use of the word "always" implies that it was not the first time her partner had strangled her; a difference between her story and Judy and Bethan's. Another difference is that it was not Helen who called the police, it was her next door neighbour who “had it all on CCTV”. I examine the success of these interventions in Chapter 9.

6.2.4 Drug and alcohol facilitated abuse

Though knowledge of drug facilitated sexual abuse is growing (see Beynon et al, 2008; Grela et al, 2018), there remains a gap in research on drug and alcohol facilitated domestic abuse. Warshaw (2019) found that there are high rates of substance use among people who experience intimate partner violence, and high rates of intimate partner violence among people accessing substance use disorder treatment programs, yet there is limited research on substance facilitated coercion or abuse. The findings in this section address this omission.

Of the 15 participants interviewed for this study, four participants explicitly mention their partners or family members encouraging or forcing drugs and/or alcohol as a method of coercion and control, and other participants alluded to it in their wider narratives of mutual drug taking, addiction and abuse. For example, when Kassie was asked what would happen if she did not want to sex work and hand the money over to her ex-boyfriend, she said that he would use drugs to make her more compliant. She said:

> He’d force me to do a line, so I’d wake up and go. It would just be like, *oh you’ll be fine* […] It just became part of it, and then he charged me for it and there’d be more and more and more […] And I didn’t really want to go for gear (heroin), because they’re like, *oh you want to numb it out* and I was like, *no coke makes you feel like you’re on top of the world and you can like cope with twenty of them, no problem*! And you’re like, *bring it*!

Kassie “never wanted to use” drugs, but cocaine ended up being her “hook, line and sinker” because it allowed her to cope better with being coerced into selling sex.

Drugs financially indebted her to her ex-boyfriend, who charged her for the drugs he had forced her to become addicted to. This trapped Kassie in sex work through addiction, both physically and economically. Isla similarly began taking drugs through her mother providing them for her. She was “introduced to class A’s” when she was 15 by her mum:

> We’d end up going out. And that would be cocaine mostly. So we'd be on it until seven o'clock in the morning and that would go for three or four days, like this sort of bender if you will, and [her] working and not working. And I just wasn't in school.

Here, Isla’s mum is making Isla complicit in her drug taking and sex working, with her mum wanting her and Isla to be a team. This was an effective strategy, shown in how Isla says “we’d” be taking drugs until early morning.

Drugs were a significant part of the abuse of Sean at the hands of his ex-boyfriend. After a particularly sadistic and violent attack from his boyfriend in which he had pulled out one of Sean’s teeth, his boyfriend administered drugs which Sean believed would help him manage the pain,

> [He] gave me IV drugs and said, *this will help*, and in my medical, broken mind, I was like, *yeah, it will, I just need some respite from this.*

In this story, Sean does not name what drug was used, but he recounts that over time, the drugs were “heroin, crystal meth, everything”, and they were used beyond pain management. Drugs were used “to suppress the psychic agony and wounds” that Sean was experiencing every day, as well as to keep him compliant within the relationship. Though Sean’s actions could be seen as defeat and surrender to his ex-boyfriend’s will, Sean’s internal dialogue, as he presents it in the interview, shows as a strategy to better cope with his abuse; drugs became what Stark (2007) names as a ‘safety zone’ (Stark, 2007), an autonomous space within the relationship where Sean could find “respite”.

In Sean’s relationship drugs were also used to exemplify the cycle of abuse: an acute abuse incident, then the ‘honeymoon’ phase (Walker, 1979) to strengthen the bond between them:

> [He’d] inject me with drugs for weeks on end. And then at the end, when I would physically collapse, when I could not do anything more, and I was lying, shivering, naked on the floor, that’s when he would give me kisses and cuddles and be nice to me, and they felt extra special then.

The physical affection is necessary because the power his ex-boyfriend has over Sean is not only oppressive, but productive; by making Sean feel “extra special” the relationship moves from abusive to affectionate, reasserting Sean’s love and complicity in the relationship.

As mentioned earlier, further violence and harm, including attempts at murder, may increase when a victim/survivor leaves or tries to leave a perpetrator (Monckton-Smith, 2021). The Domestic Homicide Review[13] (2022) found that 29% of victim deaths had separated or were separating from the perpetrator. For Sean, the increasing forced substance abuse culminated in an attempted homicide, and happened when Sean tried to leave:

> In December I tried to leave again, and I got a taxi from London to my mum’s house in Manchester, after he had tried to overdose me again and wouldn’t let me go because people would have seen what was happening. So I would say there was an attempted murder attempted by him, I would say with confidence about that.

In addition to the drugs that Sean was using, and being forced to use, his ex-boyfriend’s “murder attempt” could potentially be hidden as an accidental overdose.

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[13] A Domestic Homicide Review (DHR) is a review into the circumstances around a death following domestic abuse. The purpose is to establish what can be learned from the death regarding the way in which local professionals and organisations work individually and together to safeguard victims

Sean’s forced substance misuse was to ensure his compliance, as well as directly and deliberately risking his health.

Sabotaging attempts at sobriety was another way that drugs and/or alcohol were weaponised. Aino, for example, told me they felt it was easier to drop their boundaries around alcohol in their home than it was to assert them and have to deal with the consequences of their ex-girlfriend’s temper. They said:

> I personally have issues with alcohol, so when she moved in I said *please don’t bring alcohol into my home because it will start to go wrong*, and at first she would bring alcohol home and I would say, *hey, I specifically asked you not to* and she would get upset, angry, aggressive. After a while, because it was such a fight with her every time, I just kind of allowed her to bring it in and I stopped fighting about it.

Ultimately, Aino relapsed from their sobriety, saying that “addiction is easier than having to have a huge screaming match that went on for days every time”. The consequences of relapsing into addiction at the time were favourable to the consequences of trying to enforce a boundary with their ex-girlfriend.

Not all participants who were using drugs were forced to within their relationship, but some referenced it as debilitating within the wider web of abuse they experienced. Anna, for example, said how her and her boyfriend would spend most evenings “smoking crack”. Though her boyfriend did not use drugs as a way of abusing Anna, drugs enabled created a relationship which was equally fun and exciting as it was difficult to leave,

> When you're taking that many drugs, it's just very hard to like make plans or like extricate yourself from something. You know, 'cause you feel so shitty each day, you just get through that day. And I guess on another level, things were quite fun.

Drugs and alcohol were used and abused in varied ways to facilitate abuse in families and relationships. Addiction often resulted in compliance and co-dependency, fostering a bond between the perpetrator and victim/survivors which was difficult to extract themselves from.

6.3 Economic and financial abuse

Economic abuse and financial abuse as terms may be used interchangeably, and this thesis uses the umbrella 'economic and financial abuse' (EFA) for participants, but there are subtle differences between the two. Women's Aid (2015) define financial abuse as a perpetrator using or misusing money which limits and controls their partner's current and future actions and their freedom of choice. Examples of this are stealing money, getting their partner into debt, or fraudulently using their credit cards. Economic abuse is broader than misusing money or financial assets; it can also include restricting access to essential resources such as food or education thus denying the means to improve a person's economic status or stability. All but one of the 15 participants told me about financial or economic abuse or exploitation. This was Elle, who began sex working after her relationship ended.

6.3.1 Sabotaging attempts at work

Work disruption, sabotage, or interference are actions that prevent a victim/survivor from reaching their workplace on time, if at all. Sabotaging attempts at work is the creation of a barrier to employability and income generation which can impede a victim/survivor's agency and independence (Swanberg and Macke, 2006; Swanberg et al 2005). As discussed in the previous chapter, sex working offered many participants access to a flexible and (comparably) high income, allowing them to maintain a better standard of living than they believed they would have had without sex working. Georgie had not even begun sex working when her boyfriend decided that she was not allowed to do it:

> While he had no moral objection to it, philosophically, he had plenty of objection to anyone else having access to my body that wasn't him. And so I did it without him, because it was for me. I could never have walked into another paid job without that safety net […] The possession he had over my body was more important than my wellbeing.

Georgie positioned her partner's objection to her working to be sexual, rather than economic, but the result was the same: her inability to earn a living. While he had no issue with her working, per se, he did not consider sex work to be an acceptable form of income generation for someone in his "possession".

Participants' stories also showed how work sabotage could be hidden in what may look like gestures of care. Reese, for example, told me how in one relationship she had been in, she felt her partner was deliberately "trying to get me to not do my job:

> I'd be like, *can you take me back tonight*, and he was like, *well, why don't you stay tonight, and then I'd take you back in the morning*. I'm like, *yeah, but I've to get ready for work*. And he was like, *why don't you cancel it and I'll take you out for lunch*. And obviously, at the beginning I was like, it's nice because I think you're doing things for me [but] doesn't work unless you are paying me to not do it because I still have to pay my fucking bills.

In the previous findings chapter, it was explained how Reese positioned sex work as a stop gap, a way of earning money without working; but here she showed that she is serious about her time management because sex work is her only form of income. Rather than this being a contradiction, Reese is showing the constraints on narrative that discourses of sex work have. If sex work is not work, , then the seriousness of being prevented from working may be less significant, but in claiming entitlement to her time, Reese explains that her partner is sabotaging her attempts at income generation. Rather than being “nice”, she believes he is deliberately diverting attention away from work, and pressuring her to take time off with clear material consequences. Reese had also experienced a different boyfriend disrespecting her and disregarding her time to the point where her work would suffer as a result:

> A lot of work dropped off my calendar just because I was trying to get hold of him half the time or he would say he would be ready for something or he could meet me on this day, and then he would cancel last minute.

While Reese does not say whether she thought this showed a deliberate attempt of her ex-boyfriend to stop her working, or whether it was disrespect toward her by not committing, nevertheless in two different relationships Reese experienced a partner effectively sabotaging her attempts to earn a living and disregarding her need to work.

Despite the diversity of maternal identities, and the growing recognition that mothers have responsibilities outside of parenthood, notions of the ‘good mother’ and ‘ideal mother’ are often predicated on not working outside of the home, or if mothers do, prioritising their children’s welfare over work (Dodsworth, 2014; Johnston and Swanson, 2006). Managing these multiple identities can cause challenges, and some participants spoke about their partners trying to sabotage their work through exploiting the challenges of these multiplicities. Thea’s ex-partner “needed” his partner to work to financially support them, while at the same time “resenting” her doing it. He would attempt to make Thea feel guilty for going to work by bringing their son into the arguments:

> It became every night. He’d be there going*, you’ve abandoned me, I’m having to cook my own food, I’m having to do this, and your son’s crying at the door when you leave* […] I think some of that is an exaggeration and if my son was crying at the door after I left, it was not necessarily because I’d left the house, it was because his dad had been shit and he wanted me to come back.

In spite of Thea's husband relying on her income because "he didn't want to work", he still drew on outdated models of motherhood and femininity to challenge Thea's need and desire to work. By claiming that their son is crying when she leaves, Thea's husband implied that she ought to be confined to the home and he emphasises his own inability as well as what he deemed as her responsibility to care for their son to make his point.

Stark (2007) points out that in relationships where a victim's income is critical to sustain the perpetrator's lifestyle, perpetrators tread a thin line between trying to maximise the income and regulating and controlling their means of earning it. As well as Thea, Aino also faced resistance from their partner in going to work. Aino said:

> If I earned more money than her, then that would start a huge argument, more things being broken, she would keep me up with like a lot of shouting all night, so I would get very tired.

Sleep deprivation, as Aino describes here, can cause chronic and substantial defects in cognition, and is commonly used as a method of torture (Walker, 2008; Denbeaux et al, 2019; Richards, 2021). Given that a defining feature of coercive control is victim's reduced capacity for action, and sleep deprivation incapacitates victims by making everyday life activity difficult and impairs and victim's ability to plan escape, it is an important area of further study (Stark, 200; Tetlow, 2016; Richards, 2021). Aino's ex-girlfriend depriving them of sleep is both a way of preventing Aino from being able to work as well as a form of physical abuse in itself. Aino's girlfriend would use sleep as way of controlling proximity to Aino, and deprive Aino of it when they did not comply. Aino said:

> I don’t sleep when there’s someone next to me because it freaks me out. And that would really upset her, so sometimes you know we would stay in bed together in the evening until she drifted off, and then I would sort of creep into my room to sleep. But if she woke up and found that I wasn’t there, she would get very upset, very angry that I had left her, so after a while I stopped doing that and I just stayed in the room with her and got more and more and more sleep deprived.

Sleep deprivation added an extra burden in Ain’s life to manage, instilling anxiety as well as causing long term implications for their physical and mental health; all this on top of the consequences on their work schedule and income, both of which suffered.

6.3.2 Financial dependency and resentment

As mentioned earlier (see section 7.1.1.2), in their research on the romantic relationships of strippers, Bradley-Engen and Hobbes (2010) found that the majority of dancers reported that their partners made them feel guilty about their occupation while simultaneously expecting them to be the sole or primary financial provider. Bahri (2019) argues that this contradiction can be understood as socially condoned punishment for women making money from labour that is generally expected to be provided for free in romantic relationships. This research focuses on strippers exclusively, but participants showed how this contradiction is found in other sex workers’ relationships also.

For some of the participants, their partners reaped the financial benefits of having sex working partners, but at the same time, the violence that participants experienced was uniquely tied to their sex working. For example, Helen’s boyfriend would force her to sex work to pay for his drugs:

> He used to beat me up and make me go down lane. And I used to say*, I don't want to go*, and he'd go*, just go down for a couple of hours*, and I'd have to walk down and walk back […]

Bethan was emotionally coerced into believing that she needed to have sex for money, otherwise her and her boyfriend would struggle financially:

> I gave it [the money] to him and, he would like buy us food and what we needed. I was paying. […] I was sixteen and I think he was twenty-four when I met him […] I thought that if I didn't do this, then he'd get mad at me because we wouldn't have the money and he wouldn't have the things that he wanted.

Though both participants spoke about their relationships with boyfriends – not pimps or bosses – there was clear financial and sexual exploitation happening: they had little or no control over their work conditions, and were forced to relinquish the money to their partner afterward and both allude to their being consequences of not doing what their partner's wanted. Bethan acknowledges this power imbalance when she says that her ex-boyfriend "was very much taking advantage of me".

Kassie's experience of being pressured into selling sex by her boyfriend created "a really weird kind of mix" where their dynamic was a "mishmash":

> He always said that he was my boss, so I can't stop saying it. But the more I look at it, and the more I think about it, the more I talk about, I'm like, well he was doing everything else that was intimate […] He used that to be like, *oh well you need to practise with me*, and *oh well I need the money for this*, and *oh well I need to stay with you* and then it would be manipulative and he'd be fatherly at some points and then he'd be more like a boyfriend at other points and then he'd be a boss.

Pimps and abusive boyfriends are not two distinct categories; they overlap and merge (see section 3.4.4). The insidiousness of financial abuse means that for participants who were being pressured to work, sometimes violently, and pressured to hand over money earned to their partners, their narratives construct these experiences as features of their abusive relationship dynamic rather than exploitative working conditions.

6.4 Sexual abuse

Twelve of the fifteen participants in this study spoke about sexual abuse perpetrated by family members, boyfriends or partners, with some participants experiencing abuse from multiple people across their life. What many of these stories from participants had in common, and what this section will focus on, was their experience of sexual abuse away from work, within domestic and familial relationships; and additionally, how participant's involvement in sex work and the sex industry enabled the conditions for the perpetrator to abuse them further. In taking an intersectional approach, this section in particular notes the gendered dynamics at play within these relationships.

6.4.1 Rape and sexual violation

Some participants narrated experiences of rape, forced sex, or sexual assault but were reluctant to apply these terms to their stories. Consistent with research into people who experience abuse, it was common for participants in this study to talk of sexual abuse and assault even if they did not use these words in their narratives (Donovan and Barnes, 2020; Tarzia and Hegarty, 2022).

Tetlow (2016: 195) suggests that perpetrators of domestic abuse focus on sexual violence as the most effective way to "break a victim's spirit', a position echoed in a number of participant narratives. Thea, for example, spoke about the non-consensual violence in her sex life, specifically how her husband would use sexual assault and rape, specifically anal sex, as a form of control after other abusive tactics had not sufficiently "broken" her. She said, "He'd force it upon me and he'd manipulate me with it. So if I wanted normal sex, I couldn't have normal sex until I'd allowed him to have anal sex." Thea does not use terms like 'sexual assault', instead explaining how her husband would withhold affection and intimacy from her, until she acquiesced to the "forceful and aggressive" sex that he wanted.

Some participants describe experiences which demonstrate how in a relationship which is already controlling and psychological abusive, sexual violence is an additional tactic which serves as a physical reminder of their partner's control (Tarzia and Hegarty, 2022). Helen, for example, spoke about her partner forcing sex on her as a reminder of his control over her:

> You know I wasn't right, I were really poorly in my chest, I couldn't breathe right, I were that bad he had to phone ambulance because it was a stabbing pain. And do you know what he did? When I were laid up, he pulled my trousers down right and had sex with me while I were waiting for ambulance to come, while I were in agony. He went, *lay down while the ambulance is coming*, and I laid down, and he pulled my trousers down and my knickers down and had sex with me, while I were in pain waiting for the ambulance to come.

Violence and risk of homicide increase when victim is leaving or making plans to leave (Campbell et al, 2017; Monkton-Smith, 2021). By getting in an ambulance and being removed from the home she shared with her partner in order to be around medical professionals, there was a potential risk that the violence and injuries Helen's partner had caused would come to light. Additionally, being in a hospital setting is a kind of leaving the home and relationship, albeit it potentially only temporarily. Sexually violating Helen while she was ill and in pain served as a physical reminder of her partner's power and control over her when she was at her most vulnerable, and simultaneously, at her most likely to be able to leave.

Sean also experienced an escalation in sexual violence after he planned on leaving. He recalled a time when he tried to leave after “a friend had found out what was going on and [was] actively intervening”, and the sexual violence increased:

> He [Sean’s ex-boyfriend] immediately takes all this clothes off and he would do things where he would squeeze me so hard that I couldn’t breathe, to stop me breathing and he grabbed me and he wouldn’t let me go and he was getting all rapey.

When I suggested that “rapey” was an interesting word to use, he replied saying that he “would trivialise” the incidents of abuse through language when talking about his relationship. He did this a number of times in the interview, such as when he referred back to the incident when his ex-partner raped him with a hammer shaft, he called it “thingy” instead of repeating that his ex-partner had sexually assaulted him. In using this type of language, Sean is trivialising what his ex-boyfriend did. This is not a critique; trivialising these events may be Sean’s way of avoiding reliving the trauma he experienced. As well as trivialising, Sean is also de-criminalising the events: rape is a criminal offence, but behaving “rapey”, or, as in Thea’s case, doing something that your partner is “not really keen” on, is not. As well as minimising the violence, the language Sean and Thea are using could be reflective of their denial of the abuse. Sean alluded to this denial when he said that he had felt “on the cusp” of “psychosis” when he could not, or would not, accept that his relationship was abusive even though all the physical signs and manifestations were there.

While there are multiple discursive frameworks through which to understand non-consensual sex, rape is most often constructed through a criminal discourse, with those who experience it becoming de facto victims of crime. The criminal justice system, then, is the primary discursive and institutional site for understanding and responding to rape (Serisier, 2019).

To prevent their stories being constructed in this way, participants instead told stories of sex they did not want to have, minimising the criminality and their own victimhood (explored further in Chapters 8 and 9). Aino explained how they felt that, in order to appease their ex-partner to prevent violence and abuse, it was easier to have "pretty unhealthy" sex with her than it was to assert their boundaries if they did not want to,

> Sometimes if I didn't want to have sex, she would get very upset […] I knew that if I had sex with her, then it would make the rest of the day smoother. I would strategically agree to have sex, or even initiate it, not because it was fun but because it was easier than trying to talk her down from fury.

Aino does not refer to these incidents as rape, instead calling it "sex that I didn't want to have". This sex was unwanted, Aino acquiesced to it, yet there was no physical force, threats, or even discussion between partners for it to be non-consensual sex, or rape (Basile, 1999). As with giving in to relapsing into addiction rather than face the fury of their girlfriend, Aino strategized and acquiesced to non-consensual sex rather than face what felt like the more difficult consequences of saying no.

6.4.2 Third party rape and sexual exploitation

Being sold for sex by a partner is an under-recognised and under-researched element of some domestic abuse relationships, and happens when the abuser coerces their partner into unwanted paid sex with third parties (Matolcsi, 2020). As argued throughout the thesis, intimate partners are not separate to coercive managers and bosses; offenders and victims are often related in some way and can have close, intimate relationships, a finding reflected in participants' stories (Verhoeven et al, 2015). For some participants, sexual abuse and economic abuse intersected when they were pressured or forced into selling sex with other people and these stories will be explored in this section under the umbrella term of third party rape and sexual exploitation. These stories were particularly difficult to extrapolate in the context of researching consensual, or less exploitative forms of sex work.

6.4.2.1 Sexual exploitation to keep the peace

While all participants had self-identified as sex workers for this study, some of their stories revealed that they were coerced into selling sex for money by their partner, which they did to maintain peace in the relationship. For Sean, calling the exchanges which Sean partook in as ‘sex work’ sidesteps the coercion and violence of Sean’s ex-partner in facilitating these meetings, as well as Sean’s distinct lack of consent. Sean explained how his ex-boyfriend would regularly bring over “weirdos”, “who are sexually aroused by the most insane, sadistic, disgusting things, you know, real sex offenders, really disgusting sex offenders.” This transactional sex was non-consensual abuse, and being sold for sex by his ex-boyfriend was one element of the broader web of controlling and abusive behaviours. After being told by his partner, and then repeatedly telling himself, that he was worthless, Sean came to believe that his worth was quantified through providing sexual services to his ex-boyfriend and the men that he would bring home. Though Sean was not directly bringing the money in through selling sex, by contributing his body as a “vessel” for other men to pay to use, Sean’s ex-boyfriend “would be sort of financially benefiting from this […] he actually was a pimp for the worst sorts of people”. Sean told me that though “the abuse was horrific, this was the only thing I could contribute.”

The way Sean spoke about this aspect of his relationship – the contribution which he felt he made - was similar to how Kassie spoke about her relationship with her ex-boyfriend. Though there were familiarities of a conventional relationship between Kassie and her ex-boyfriend, such as sharing a bed, him not paying Kassie for sex, spending time together and going out to eat together, he, as her boss, had the final say in how she worked and who she worked with. She said:

> He was getting me to do nastier and nastier things. He'd take me to his mate's house and I wouldn't get paid, and he'd just tie me to the bed and then his mates would come in one by one.

As was the case with Sean, if money did change hands, it was not Kassie who received it. Instead, having sex with men for her ex-boyfriend to keep the money was a way of proving her worth in a relationship. She told me how on one occasion after she had been working all night, she felt "really cool and happy", adding:

> I remember one morning, I'd made him a lot of money and he was so happy with me, and I loved it. He was really proud saying he loved my socks off and I was fucking incredible and I was the best girl he'd ever had.

Neither Sean, nor Kassie, narrate their experiences of being sold for sex as exploitative or violent. Instead, they construct stories of someone who actively seeks value and calm in making their partner happy, a way of 'keeping the peace' not uncommon in relationships, abusive or not (Basile, 1999; Stark, 2007). Helen's story is also constructed in this way. Her boyfriend would force her to sell sex, and though she did not want to, she said, "It were mad, because he used to make me do it, but then it were like, [maybe] he'd be all right with me when I come back".

6.4.2.2 The grooming narrative

Grooming is when a person builds a relationship with a child, young person or an adult so they can abuse them and manipulate them into doing things (Bennett and O'Donoghue, 2014; Met Police, 2023). Participants told stories which were congruent with these definitions of grooming, but the word 'grooming' was often absent. The concept of grooming is difficult to quantify, and the intentions of the 'groomer' difficult to prove, as they replicate many aspects of dating or an intimate relationship (Bennett and O'Donoghue, 2014).

Participants experienced grooming from partners. Morgan, for example, told me that after she began selling sex at thirteen years old she "ended up underneath a pimp", though "it started off they were my boyfriend". She described how her boyfriend would buy her "jewellery or some food" and she would think "Oh, this person loves me, I'm the best, this is really great". Over time:

> He obviously had his contacts so I'd go and do services with the people he knew. And then I'd give him the majority of the money [...] I'd get five quid, and at the time I was charging quite a lot because he'd make me do BDSM stuff, so because of my age, you can guess the sort of stuff they wanted, so he was getting a lot of money but I was getting five quid.

Morgan's use of the word 'obviously' implies that her boyfriend was enabling or supporting girls selling sex before Morgan came along, whether she knew that at the time or not. Her story also shows that she knew that her being underage was a selling point and something to exploit, while she believed she was in a relationship with him. Kassie's story sounds similar in the way she explains the blurred lines between a man being her boyfriend and a man selling her for sex. She said:

> It was a guy who got me into it, then I would say I was in a relationship with him and he'd bring gifts to the school gates and buy me flowers, perfume, all of that, and so then he'd give me a fiver. So, yeah, it's a bit messy, like it's all been a bit messy.

As ‘grooming’ is so difficult to define, it is difficult to ascertain whether it has taken place at all. None of the participants used the word grooming, but their stories show that coercion took place. “They weren’t great”, says Kassie, and when Morgan was told to work, “it wasn’t really like a question”. Both implied there were clear consequences.

Conclusion

This chapter presented the accounts of sex workers who experienced domestic and familial violence and abuse while they were sex working. While this chapter divided the experiences of participants into four separate typologies of abuse, it is important to clarify that abuse was not experienced as separate individual events or typified incidents, but as a web of ongoing and multiple victimisations (Holt, 2012).

The unique position which sex work occupies at the intersections of work/not work and sex/not sex means that for abusive family members and partners, they were able to coerce their partners in ways which were hidden and hard to detect if the participants were or could have been making a conscious choice to sell sex. Further, unwanted transactional sex with third parties has been researched in the context of sex work, but little is known about it in the context of domestic and familial violence and abuse. These findings may offer new insights.

Participants also spoke about drug and alcohol facilitated domestic abuse, another under-researched little known subsection of domestic abuse, particularly how the perpetrators deliberately caused or enabled addiction to violate boundaries, create co-dependence or ensure compliance. This was also especially relevant in coercing participants into selling sex. Yet, as shown, not all participants saw these behaviours as abusive, and minimised their own victimhood, and these narratives will be explored more in the next chapter.

7. Discourses of abuse and dis/identifying as victim

Introduction

This chapter focuses on how participants talked about and problematised their experiences of violence and abuse. In particular, this chapter focuses on how participants internalised, reproduced, and resisted dominant narratives, and the ways in which these narratives shaped their own stories, their perceptions of themselves, and their roles within the relationship.

Discourses shape problems and affect self-perception, as well opening up or closing down access to help-seeking and decisions to leave or stay. Though this chapter is divided into the different themes on naming abuse which were recognised in the narratives, in reality discourses overlap and merge and are not so clearly demarcated. The first part of this chapter interrogates these discourses through a critical realist lens. It will examine how structures and discourses affect how participants constructed and examined their world, and the material, lived, consequences of this.

The second half of this chapter interrogates discursive constructs of ‘victim’ and ‘survivor’ – both prominent terms in the literature, and policy. Those who experience domestic abuse have their agency and self-hood denied and in a society where sex workers are regularly referred to in ways they resist against (see section 2.1.3), it is so important to interrogate how participants chose to define themselves, how they define their experiences, and their resistance or reproduction of certain narratives. Language is at the heart of one’s construction of the world, and imbued with political consequences, something many participants were acutely aware of. Many participants rejected these terms, pushing back on perceived implications they believe were carried with these them. There were participants, however, who found these labels useful to advocate their innocence and their struggle.

7.1 Drawing on, or resisting, discourses of violence and abuse

It is common for some victim/survivors not to recognise their experiences as domestic violence or abuse at the time it was happening, or to only recognise their experiences as abuse after the end of the relationship (Donovan and Hester, 2010; Gill, 2004; Francis et al, 2017). Given the conflating, exclusionary, or myopic discourses on domestic abuse (see Chapter 3), many people whose experiences meet some definitions of domestic abuse will not label it as such. Yet, recognition - the ability to name domestic violence and simultaneously understand the implications of that naming - is crucial and even life-saving for many (McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance, 2016; Gavey, 2005). While I remain careful not to put words in the mouths of participants, or claim to understand their subconscious thoughts, it is interesting that while all participants self-selected to be in a study about domestic and familial violence and abuse, many still resisted these terms or put the blame for abuse on themselves. This first section will introduce the concept of ‘kaleidoscopic recognition’ and explore which discourses participants referred to when sidestepping concepts of violence or abuse.

7.1.1 Kaleidoscopic recognition: Refusing to name ‘violence’ and ‘abuse’

Though all participants had self-selected to be part of this study on domestic and familial violence and abuse, not all related their experienced to these terms, and in some narratives there were patterns of denial or a reluctance to name their perpetrators' behaviours as abusive. McGlynn and Westmarland (2019) coined the term 'kaleidoscopic justice', meaning that in their research, victim/survivors of sexual violence conceive of justice as a continually shifting pattern. In this sense, justice is not linear, it has multiple beginnings and is an on-going, ever-evolving process (McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019). Influenced by this ever-evolving perception of justice, I conceptualise of a 'kaledoscopic recognition' in participants. While all participants had identified their relationships or family dynamics as abusive in order to self-select for the study, many participants drew on multiple discourses and explanations for what has happened.

Aino, for example, said that they were "really hesitant" to "frame it [their relationship] as abuse". Instead of utilising discourses which emphasised the harm or violence of their ex-girlfriend's behaviour, Aino instead drew on medical discourse, saying that their girlfriend, "had, well still has presumably, quite severe mental health issues." This framing of their relationship was something Aino referenced a few times, saying, "That was kind of a recurring theme, that she would be in crisis a lot, and I would try and help her." When Aino medicalised their ex-girlfriend's behaviour, it constructed a dynamic between the two where their ex-girlfriend was excused to act however she needed to, which in turn meant that Aino may have felt it unfair of them to assert boundaries, or to ask or expect kinder or more respectful behaviour from their ex-girlfriend.

Isla, like Aino, referred to her mother's difficult mental health when talking about their relationship, saying that her mother "was never stable" and "flittered somewhere between bipolar disorder and borderline personality disorder". Isla's narrative also constructed a relationship where Isla felt responsible for her mother's safety, even as a child; Isla's "first memory is comforting her [mother] when she was crying.” Isla’s responsibility for her mother extended beyond comforting her, and, as an adult, Isla felt that she had to be at her mother’s beck and call to keep her safe:

> It always got worse regardless of what I did, but I felt that I had to do these things because I was convinced for a long time that the one time I didn't do that, like drop everything and go to her, something terrible would happen.

In taking full accountability for looking after her mother, Isla associates any possible negative consequences with her own actions, or possible lack of action, rather than her mum’s responsibility.

Other participants spoke about a kind of kaleidoscopic vision of their relationship, meaning that they could only sometimes being able to process the behaviours as abusive and other times could not. Bethan, for example, said of her relationship with her ex-boyfriend, “I realised that it’s not OK. So I still didn’t recognise that it was abuse […] I recognised then that it was wrong.” In Bethan’s narrative, she created a categorical distinction between abusive behaviour, and behaviour that is simply ‘wrong’. By differentiating between the two, Bethan was able to at once, acknowledge the harm of her ex-boyfriend’s behaviour toward her, but at the same time, removes any necessitation for a response or reaction. Abuse may be actionable, but being “wrong” may not be.

In Helen’s story of her past relationship was with her ex-partner, she oscillated between knowing that his violence toward her was “quite bad”, and that she “could see it [his violence], but couldn’t”. Helen acknowledged the clarity of hindsight in looking back to her relationship:

> Until I left him and then I looked back at what he used to do to me, and how he used to treat me, and I thought, *Wow. Why did I keep going back?* But at the time I were with him, I never thought it was much of a big deal as what it was.

Helen also provided context for her downplaying her ex-boyfriend’s violence when she said, “He's beaten all his girlfriend’s up, he's got a really bad criminal record.” As well as abusive previous girlfriends, Helen’s ex-boyfriend also abused his family:

> His mum, she’s poorly […] his mam’s husband were in a wheelchair, he were really poorly, and he used to get money off them, they were all scared of him […] that’s what he were like. I used to fall over for him.

While Helen could see how abusive her ex-boyfriend had been to other people, she minimised her experiences of it while she was with him. Though some participants could recognise the harm and damage that ex-partners were causing – to themselves and other people – they still did not use the defining label of ‘abusive’ to describe it. This is not insignificant; though the physical and emotional effects on participants was damaging, in minimising the abuse, possible responses were also.

7.1.2 Responsibility, self-blame, and tolerating abuse

Self-blame is a long standing process in victims of violence, including DVA, and researchers frequently note the ‘self-directed anger’ and tendency of women to blame themselves for violence and sexual assault (Miller and Porter, 1983; Alcoff and Gray, 1993: 284; Jenkins, 2017). Happening alongside this, while feminist advocates have worked to reconceptualise DVA as a societal, rather than individual, problem, neoliberal crime control discourse in the UK perpetuates self-blame because such discourse endorses, and reinforces, personal responsibility well beyond economic and fiscal policies. ‘Personal responsibility’ is consolidated in all areas of a person’s life including the family and intimate relationships (Stringer, 2014). This discourse, one which focuses on the individual and espouses personal responsibility, means that at times, the issue of DVA circumnavigates issues of gender, power, and social conditioning and instead is understood as an issue of interpersonal boundaries and poor judgement (Croghan and Miell, 1999). The reinforcement of self-blame, tied in with responsibility and individualising, was demonstrated by a number of participants through their narratives.

One way that this reinforcement was apparent in participants was the way some participants compared how they managed or experienced domestic abuse to how they perceived others did. Georgie, for example, individualised both her experience of domestic abuse and her response to it when she said, “This [abuse] happened to other women, it didn’t happen to kick ass women like me, that’s something that I’m never going to tolerate, never going to put up with, and yet I was.” Through Georgie’s construction of herself as a “kick ass” woman, she drew on ideas of female empowerment and strength, a construction which reinforced her self-blame; a strong woman would not be abused because she would not put up with it; a strong woman would make more empowered choices. Further, in using a passive voice – the abuse is something which happens *to* her, rather than done *by* her partner – Georgie is deliberately removing the active choice that her partner took in how he treated her, focusing only on her own role. Through her narrative, Georgie moved between using the word ‘abuse’ and shying away from it. She described the relationship with her current partner as being “very on and off, because of the abuse” showing that she was aware of the abuse happening, but when Georgie was asked what language she used to talk about her relationship, she framed the problem as being her inability to manage him, rather than the way he treated her. She said, “I would use the language, and this might be on reflection minimising it, *I’m having a very hard time with him*, or *I’m finding him really difficult* […] *I’m struggling with his behaviour*.” As such, while Georgie acknowledged that what was happening in the relationship was abuse, she still laid the managing the difficulty of it with herself and not her partner.

Bethan also positioned herself as being different to people who experienced domestic abuse, and she also adopted the passive voice when she spoke about it. She said, “I thought, I’m never going to be abused, like it just didn’t seem like a thing that would happen to me, which is really stupid”. Bethan calling herself stupid could be an internalisation of her ex-boyfriend’s insults toward her as she recalled that he would often call her “all kinds of names”. In Bethan’s positioning of herself as different to who might be susceptible to abuse, she placed responsibility on victims for not being abused. While Bethan does not directly blame herself for the abuse, she is centring her identity and reaction rather than the intentions and behaviours of her ex-boyfriend. She constructed herself as someone who ought to have recognised it, and as such, she blamed herself for not knowing better. The passive voice suggested that participants attempted to construct the violence or abuse in particular ways, namely the lack of responsibility of the perpetrator and their own responsibility to manage or prevent the abuse. For some participants, minimising the abuse by referring to their own sense of inability to manage their partners’ temper could be a coping strategy to allow them to remain in the situation; after all there is the emotional and practical investment of keeping the relationship (Cavanaugh, 2003).

Other participants also looked at their own actions and constructed the abusive relationship as being an issue of their inability to manage their partner’s actions and emotions. Aino, for example, had asked their ex-partner to not bring alcohol into the house as they were in recovery for their alcoholism, but eventually “just kind of allowed her to bring it in […] I lost my saying no powers”. In Aino’s narrative it was their responsibility to maintain stronger boundaries, and their inability to assert them which caused their ex-girlfriend to sabotage Aino's sobriety.

This emphasis on agency and desire to be self-determining may be appealing, yet this responsibility can become problematic when the difficult and sometimes dangerous relationship continues. For example, Georgie understood from her experience how a 'bit of a temper' is shorthand for violence, evidenced by how she mentioned that she tuned in to coded language when other people speak to her,

> One thing I'm really hyper sensitive to though is when other women around me in everyday life say comments like, *oh he's got a bit of a temper on him*. My ears always prick up then, because that's the way I've spoken about my partner, you know, *he's very quick to temper*, and I think, Christ, what does that actually mean? You've let that slip in this conversation in this room now but I wonder how loaded that is really.

In Georgie's case, as with Aino, by referring to their partners' behaviour as something that *they* are unable to cope with, rather than it being *their partners'* responsibility to act differently, they are downplaying the violence, or at least displacing the responsibility onto themselves for being unable to manage their partners' behaviour. Additionally, when Georgie tells me that her boyfriend "gets angry at nothing" and has "no ability to regulate his emotions for anything", her self-blame may be, in part, to generate feelings of perceived control to counteract the stress of his unpredictable behaviour. Similarly, when Aino tells me, "I think why did I allow that to happen, and I don't know", it may be because it is easier to seek answers from themselves, rather than their partner.

While Bethan and Georgie constructed themselves as women who ought not to have been susceptible to domestic abuse, others recounted the opposite. When Anna described how she and her ex-boyfriend met, she emphasised what felt, to her, like obvious and very visible vulnerability to abuse. She said:

> I do believe that, of the group that we were in, that he singled me out. Like he was a hunter and I was like the injured animal. […] I seemed quite mad and unstable and I think that's what he saw more than my friends. And he could tell that I had mental health stuff going on, which I didn't have the words for then. […] It was the being visibly less stable than my friends and more all over the place. […] I think he saw that. I think he saw that. Yeah. I really do think there's a reason that it was me and not the three girls that I hung out with. I think they had more self-respect. He could see that I didn't have much self-respect. That's it. […] They just wouldn't have taken his shit. They just wouldn't have put up with that, I don't think. And, but he could see that I would.

Though Anna is not overtly blaming herself, by comparing her ex-boyfriend to a hunter, and herself as prey, Anna implies a kind of ingrained, or intuitiveness about his targeting of a vulnerable woman to abuse. Similarly, Reese said that when she met her ex-boyfriend her insecurity put her in a vulnerable position:

> He was very hot and I have very skewed self-esteem as most women. So I was like, oh, far hotter than I could get, therefore, win, which already put me on the back foot regarding things that I would or wouldn't do for him.

Reese recounted that with her past relationships she "should have spotted some of the early red flags" and she asserted that "part of it is a little bit my fault because, like I said, I love an emotionally barren man." In her narrative, Reese is constructing herself as someone who is self-aware enough to understand who is dating and why, but that self-awareness became self-blame when assessing how she was treated in relationships.

Participants had different ways of blaming themselves, or centring their own vulnerabilities and actions regarding abusive behaviours. The commonality was how they looked to themselves, not the perpetrators, for how or why the abuse happened.

7.1.3 Discourses of female caregiving and practices of love

Dominant discourses of love, especially in relation to heterosexual love relationships, can make it harder for victims of domestic violence to recognise unhealthy or unpleasant behaviours or patterns as abusive (Fraser, 2005; Hayes and Jeffries, 2013). Gendered discourses which normalise male 'need' and female compliance within heterosexual relationships also lay the groundwork for normalising exploitation, violence or abuse (Hayes and Jeffries, 2013; Holloway, 1984). Some participants only consciously recognised the abuse once out of the relationship and downplayed its impact during, often relying on female-as-caregiver discourses as to why this was the case.

For some women who experience violence from their romantic partners, their interpretation of that violence is often consistent with culturally favoured romantic narratives (Wood, 2001; Hayes, 2013; Lelaurain et al, 2018). Kassie, for example, said that she is "naturally a caregiver", which is why she felt responsible for her ex-partner's moods and behaviours. She commented how he would go to her house and ask her to help him out, such as when he had "been arrested or caught speeding" or when he had "run out of money". Kassie spoke of being aware that her she was being taken advantage of by her partner, adding that her generosity and inability to say no to someone in need was something "he was very good at sussing out". Similarly adopting dominant gendered narratives of caring and relationships, in order to minimise possible outbursts from her partner, Georgie relied on feminised domestic labour of cooking and food preparation to "keep him happy". She said:

> I knew that to minimise the likelihood of it going wrong, I would have to have his favourite snacks in, and plenty of them, and always to know when the next meal was going to be, and planning a menu literally, you know, '*When you come we'll have that that night and then for breakfast the following day it'll be that, and after that for lunch we'll have that, and then we'll have that for dinner, and then the next day we'll have that*'. I think that

> on reflection, if I can just keep him happy with food, he's going to be sated, he's going to be settled, his nervous system is going to be under the influence of the parasympathetic side of things, you know! He's not going to be agitated.

Kassie and Georgie drew on discourses of the nurturing feminine ideal in their relationships, demonstrated by how they expressed a responsibility for maintaining and sustaining the equilibrium between them and her partner; Kassie through being a caregiver and Georgie through cooking and providing food. Reese echoed this need to maintain the calmness of a relationship with her response to abusive behaviours from her ex-boyfriends. She said: "there are some real obvious issues […] if I ignore it, maybe if I love him more, maybe he'll be better."

In these narratives of the relationship, participants took on the responsibility of managing their partners' moods and anticipating their needs, then taking the blame themselves and facing the consequences when they inevitably fell short. Further, these participants demonstrate the additional emotional and domestic labour they took on as maintaining the relationship rather than hold their partners' accountable for their behaviour.

7.1.3.1 Gender roles in non-heterosexual relationships

Complicating views of gender roles, these practices of love are not unique to heterosexual relationships, and research has shown that they are found in same sex relationships also. Donovan and Hester (2014), found that rather than simplistic gender roles, dominant scripts about heterosexual relationships influence the dynamic of same sex DVA; scripts such as 'if you love somebody you should stay with them through good times and bad'; 'that a commitment to a relationship should not easily be broken'; or 'that a desire to prove love can overcome the abuse being experienced and lead to change in the abusive partner for the better'. The xx participants in same-sex relationships reported similar experiences. Sean, for example, was in a relationship with another man. While they were together Sean took on the responsibility for sustaining and maintaining the relationship, even as his relationship "got worse and worse and worse and worse and worse progressively, and each month he would get worse and worse." Sean said:

> My brain is saying, I still love this person as much as before it got really, really awful, maybe more […] everything is hinged upon my love and thinking that at some point he'll get off the drugs and out of these things.

Discourses of romantic love overcoming all obstacles and being prioritised above all else can mean that it takes a long time to evaluate whether commitment to the relationship and preparedness to work on issues are likely to turn things around (Fraser, 2005; Power et al, 2006). Sean referenced an overlap of discourses, both medical and romantic, influencing his relationship saying, that he had "medicalised his [ex-boyfriend's] behaviour, believing that he was a victim of horrendous abuse, or that he needs to be loved more", and withstood the abuse as a sign of love and commitment. Aino also drew on discourses of romantic love overcoming everything; Aino is non-binary and their ex-girlfriend is a trans woman, and Aino tried to appease their ex-girlfriend's behaviour. During lockdown Aino's girlfriend's violence escalated and they said,

> When the pandemic kicked off, she would do these things, she would say, *oh I'm just very stressed about all the goings on, and that's why I'm having these outbursts,* even though the outbursts kind of pre-dated. I think once the pandemic hit, I was just like I'm going to appease because I'm so stressed out about the world, outside and inside, that if we can make the world a bit better then I will.

Aino's narrative charted two separate version of events; they stated that "we" – Aino and their girlfriend - can make living through lockdown easier, but then said that if it was possible then "I" will. This telling showed that Aino saw both of them as being in a position to help, but that only they took on the responsibility for it. This language is a reflection of the individual responsibility that Aino felt during the relationship. Aino also described their life as being divided into two kinds of chaos during the pandemic,

> Once the pandemic hit, I was like, *I'm going to appease because I'm so stressed out about the world, outside and inside*. Chaos on the outside, chaos on the inside, and the chaos on the inside, I can pick the kind of the chaos that I'm going to have […] the least chaotic choice out of a load of chaotic choices!

By looking inward at why the abusive relationship is sustained, through participant's own vulnerability, or belief that loving their partner more may help, it may be a form of strategic safety planning. By centring themselves in the narrative participants may be constructing a particular form of agency and choice, and showing that they are not consenting to the abuse, but exercising agency within the abuse.

7.2 Interrogating 'victim' and 'survivor' concepts

Language is at the heart of one's construction of the world, and the place where identities are built, maintained and challenged (Holt, 2011). An individual's personal definition of a problem shapes both how they understand their experiences and how they wish others to understand it. Additionally, someone's experiences impact the words they draw on to name it. Research indicates that both the terms 'victim' and 'survivor' can hold specific meanings for the people who are described using them as well as how they view their own personal identities (Hepworth, 2022). This can be both helpful or harmful. Section 3.3.3 traced the arguments pertaining to language referring to those who experience DVA. From a critical realist perspective, both discourses and material reality shape participants' identities, and given that victim, survivor and victim/survivor are identities commonly ascribed to those who experience domestic and familial violence and abuse, these terms are worthy of interrogation.

Sex workers have a long history of fighting to be named as sex workers rather than 'prostitutes' or 'prostituted women', yet are still considered in policy, and in radical feminist rhetoric, as being de facto victims. Additionally, a key element in DVA is having agency and identity compromised, which is why interrogating language around experiencing DVA is so pressing and cannot be taken for granted.

7.2.1 Rejecting the terms

There is significant debate regarding appropriate terminology or labelling for those who experience DVA (Gondolf and Fisher, 1988; Kelly et al, 1996; Baker, 2008; Williamson and Serna, 2017; Wiper and Lewis, 2020). It has been argued that 'victim' suggests a master identity as well as being an emotionally loaded term of passivity and weakness, and yet, victimhood as a movement can be a force for good, mobilising a political and transformative collective (Stringer, 2014; Jones, 2015). The move to 'survivor' emphasises resistance and agency, yet, not all of those who experience intimate partner or family violence survive, even if they have exercised resistance, resilience and choice. The term victim-survivor has been recently coined to acknowledge the ongoing effects and harm of abuse, as well as honouring the resilience of people who have experienced violence (Kelly et al, 1996). Most participants (10 of 15) rejected these terms, and distanced themselves from the implications they believed were carried by them. It is difficult to categorise these reasons into clear cut sections, but ultimately what all these stories have in common is a discomfort in socially prescribed words for their experiences and identities.

7.2.1.1 Rejecting a fixed identity

Participants in this study troubled the terms ‘victim’ and ‘survivor’, and considered them to have harmful consequences. Kassie, for instance, rejected the defining subject position of both victim and of survivor, and said:

> Survivor, I just think of [surviving a] fire and I don’t identify with it, I don’t understand the word. I think it’s because it defines you, it gives a name to you and it becomes a quantifier and that’s it, and you’re nothing else other than that. Whereas if you say, *I’ve experienced it*, it’s part of your life but it’s not the whole of your life. Like if I say *I’m a survivor*, it’s like that’s what I am, whereas if you say, *I’ve experienced it*, then actually I’m also, like, a student.

For Kassie, her rejection of the terms was a rejection of she felt was a fixed identity, and an identity which was at the cost of other aspects of her life and character. Similarly, Bethan resisted this fixity too when she said that she “wouldn’t want to call” herself a victim. She positioned herself “as far removed from that as possible” from the term, saying, “I’m over it, I want to move on, and I think calling myself a victim or a survivor is only going to link part of my identity to him.” Sean also rejected the identity of survivor because he did not want to tie his relationship with his ex-boyfriend to one of abuse, as it would cement how his identity and relationship will be known in future. He said, “I see myself as a person who has lived experience. My friends say I’m a survivor, [but] it’s absolute and it’s one that if you’re a survivor, you’re always a survivor. To be a survivor is absolute, isn’t it?”

These three participants rejected the labelling because there is a sense that these labels were static and absolute. As such, labelling may influence their healing journey and could prevent them from moving on or moving forward with their lives away from the relationship. Further, being identified as a victim or as a survivor necessarily reduces one’s life that that experience, negating all other possible identities, experiences and accomplishments.

Other participants rejected victim identity in order to distance themselves from the label and its political connotations. Stringer (2014) argues that concepts of personal responsibility have brought with them widespread criticism of structurally imposed victimhood, effectively depoliticising it. Responsibilisation pertaining to domestic violence and abuse can be seen in the move from victimhood as political mobilisation, to victimhood as an implication of bad judgement and self-pity (Coy and Kelly, 2019; Porter, 2020). This is resonant in Anna’s narrative who said of her experiences, “It was such a different time. There was no sex worker rights movement. There was no internet, I'd never met a[nother] sex worker.” Relatedly, Anna did not identify with the term ‘victim’, saying that, “the way I feel, the kudos that people got out these days from like being a big victim didn't really exist”. This was in the 1990s, when Anna was sex working and in a violent relationship, and was held in comparison to current times when our conversation was taking place. Disliking this perceived current trend, Anna said that in the 1990s when she left her relationship, it was “such a different time”. She went on, “There was a kudos of being able to deal with stuff and cope with stuff. And handle your drugs, cope with anything, be quite tough and strong.” Here, Anna links naming oneself as a victim of abuse, with necessarily having a victim-mentality; such a conflation sidesteps any structural oppression and reduces victimhood to an individual state of mind.

In an antithesis to perceived victimhood, Anna said her experience was, "Like, very obviously bad. And then I survived. It felt like that I could be proud like that this awful stuff happened to me. And here I am, I survived it." Though she does not position herself as a survivor, per se, Anna's narrative constructs her as having agency throughout the abuse, and she says that she was "proud on some level of the awfulness of her relationship" as it made visible how strong and capable she was, and how much she was not a victim.

Boonzaier (2014) notes that a contradiction lies at the heart of some narratives of abuse: while women are positioned as passive – as survivors or victims - they are provided agency in their capacity to seek out violent partners, and respond or resist to the violence they experience. The dominant discourse leaves little nuance for those who experience violence to consider themselves other than victim/survivor. Participants in this study, however, demonstrate that identifying oneself as a victim or survivor may not be possible if recognising what happened as domestic violence or abuse is not possible. For example, it was described earlier in this chapter how Georgie displaced the responsibility of her partner's abuse onto her inability to manage it. Georgie expanded on how this relates to her rejection of identifying as a victim. She said: "I take the point that you know *I've struggled with his behaviour* or *I'm having a hard time with him,* rather than labelling myself as a survivor or whatever. Victim, certainly not. [emphasis added]"

There were other participants who expressed the limits to building victimhood into their identity. Sean, for example, did not see himself as a victim or survivor, but he also did not want to consign his ex-partner to being a "bad person" or an "abuser" nor himself as a victim or survivor. As he put it: "I perceive myself as someone who has lived experience of a particularly toxic relationship. […] That's how I identify as, not as a victim of abuse, and that there was just a period of it.” Aino also struggled with what they called “identity words”, and said:

> I always found it hard to identify as a survivor because it had made me feel like more heroic than I felt that I was and a thing that happened to me. Victim feels worse I’d say, you know things sort of enacted on you.

Instead of focusing on their right not to be victimised, these participants reflect anti-victim hegemony, not uncommon in neoliberal discourse (Stringer, 2014). This resulted in their refusal of passivity and ‘victim-mentality- as well as an emphasis on personal responsibility.

7.2.1.2 Rejecting ‘victimhood’ as disempowering

The shift from ‘victim’ to ‘survivor’ in the proliferation of discourses necessitates victimhood as a notion to be critiqued, and replaced with “agency” and “empowerment” as the legitimate choice of language (Stringer, 2014). Yet, the constraints of discourse became apparent in the narratives of participants who problematised language when it was used *for* them, and not *by* them. Kassie, for example, expressed frustration with being named something she did not identify as, saying,

> You know what I hate is when services or charities, whatever it is, don’t ask what you want to be identified as, they just assume that you want to be called a victim or a survivor or whatever it is […] I just say *I experienced it,* because domestic abuse, it automatically makes me think of like an intimate partner and people don’t apply that term to family […]

The limited availability of discourse was felt by Kassie who rejected the available professional language. She further added that she viewed dominant narratives of domestic abuse to be “usually a boyfriend or a fatherly figure”. Kassie’s “unusual relationship" with her mum was, she felt, closed off by services who only focused on intimate partner violence in their conception of domestic abuse. Kassie's narrative pushed back against policy driven language in other ways, also.

Kassie further counters labels from organisations. She said:

> But it's the same with trafficking. Technically trafficking applies to anyone who's been moved around by someone so technically I am, but I'd never call myself that, and that's weird. When it's been put down, I'm like *hold on, why are you putting that?* And they're like, *oh don't worry*, and I'm like, *no I do worry because that's not what I identify with*. There's a lot of labels out there […] I never identify with them, like victim is just weird.

There is a wealth of literature on the discursive constructs of victim or survivor (see Chapter 3), but Kassie pushes back against all labels. The use of language and terminology presents an important and interesting dynamic; it is disempowering to be named as something which, legally speaking, is congruent with her experiences, but which she rejects. Being named as something and having it "put down" by people in a position of authority, such as charity workers, comes with consequences, not only discursive. A refusal of 'trafficking' and 'victim' labels may also speak to how Kassie does not want to focus on the criminality of her abuser's behaviour, or engage with the police (explored more in Chapter 9); instead she typifies the abuse as something that she experienced, rather than a crime of which she was the victim.

Some participants experienced terms like victim as erasing much more complex social identities. For example, Judy highlighted how being a migrant sex worker made things more complicated, and she resisted names being used to describe her, saying:

> People have this notion that whenever they see Asian women, I think they associate with a massage parlour and very submissive […] I don't know whether we are allowed to call ourselves as we please. I do get to hear about names called by the society towards us, but do we have the luxury to name

> what we should be called? […] I think survivors and all that, I think it's very outdated, isn't it?

Judy’s identity intersects at multiple marginalities with consequences for how she is perceived, something she is highly aware of. Drawing on an intersectional approach, when Judy dismissed being called a survivor, she is resisting discourses which construct the Asian migrant sex worker as meek and unable to speak for herself.

Other participants also rejected being named something which they did feel most accurately described their situation, as well as it clearly violating their consent. For example, Isla said:

> I don’t have any problem with people describing themselves as it [victim or survivor], but when I’m sat in a therapy appointment and they’re like, *you are a survivor*, it just makes me turn inside out. I hate it.

Isla viewed the word “survivor” as “a false reclamation”, because the abuse she lived with from her mother “could have been prevented so many times, there’s a million opportunities where things could have been prevented”. To Isla, using victim and/or survivor embodied the implication that she was a victim of, or survived, the abuse from her mother. Yet, as Isla claimed, her mother was not the only person responsible for what she experienced. Isla was “failed by social services”; failed by her school who “knew everything” and failed by other people from whom she asked for help, who “knew, but the ones that knew were also going through a world of their own shit.”

Isla found it difficult to make her experiences intelligible, saying “I struggle with that sort of thing […] I don't know if it's because I actively want to reject those labels or if they just make me feel uncomfortable”. Isla’s experiences of abuse are not only with her mother, but other institutions and people which, she felt, ought to have been protecting and looking after her; they did not which is why she says “I haven’t survived it”. “Isla is in effect identifying process of responsibilisation because, by refusing to be named as either a victim or a survivor, she is acknowledging the structural harms as well as the individual.

The term victim and/or survivor have been reconceptualised to acknowledge the ongoing effects and harms of abuse, as well as honouring the resilience of people who have experienced violence. For these participants, however, the language was problematic and they resisted the implications and dominant narratives which they felt were carried by the terms. Though ‘battered women’ has been displaced in favour or victim and/or survivor, along with an ongoing shift in language to reflect agency, for some participants their agency was compromised by the use of these terms. There was a struggle for them to situate themselves or make sense of their experiences in the context of dominant, but constraining, narratives.

7.2.2 Identifying as being a victim/survivor

While some participants rejected the terms victim or survivor, others felt comfortable using this language to describe themselves and their experiences. Five participants identified with being a victim or survivor. Some viewed victim and/or survivor as a dichotomy and identified with one, rather than the other. Helen, for example, identified with the terminology:

> I’ve thought I were a victim, I were a victim of abuse, violence, psychological and physical, and sexual as well you know, he’d sleep with me when he wanted, he’d just pull me trousers down while I were in bed, or my pyjamas or whatever, so yeah, I suppose victim, survivor. I mean when I look at other people that have been through it, I think that about them, they’re survivors or victims.

She acknowledges that she was not to blame, that it was not her fault, and that she suffered at the hands of her ex-boyfriend when he did what he wanted with her. Lisa, for example, believed that naming herself as a victim is “part of acknowledging” that abuse happened to her, but she did not identify as a survivor:

> Personally, I would say I’m a victim of domestic violence. I’m not going to say I’m a survivor, not that I think it’s a bad term to use, I know it’s very empowering to people but I just don’t feel like I survived it. I’m not going to say I’ve come out of the end of it because I don’t think I ever will.

To Lisa, being a survivor implies an end, and as such this label is incongruent with the ongoing difficulties Lisa lives with as a result of the abuse.

The finality of survivor resonated with other participants, however. Elle had left her abusive relationship and said:

> I like survivor actually, as a word. Referring to domestic abuse, or if I’m talking about stuff with clients, I feel like victim has connotations I don’t quite like, or makes me sound more weak and defenceless than I would like. And I feel like it’s a little bit reductive, whereas survivor is like a thing happened that you didn’t deserve and it was bad, but it’s over.

Elle drew on the sex worker as victim discourse in her rejection of the word ‘victim’, and she positioned victimhood quite distinctly from being a survivor. When talking about work, regardless of the experience, victimhood implies vulnerability or ties into stereotypes of people who sell sex. Instead, Elle, similar to other participants, associated being a victim with being weak, but the finality of being a survivor resonated.

To some participants, there was no dichotomy. The victim or survivor identity was, to some participants, a journey along a spectrum of healing, or what Dunn (2005) refers to as extremes on the polar ends of a continuum of possibilities. In this way, both terms are applicable at different stages of life. and both were applicable at different times. Thea positioned herself along this healing continuum:

> The way I see it I was a victim at the time and I'm a survivor of it now, because it didn't get as far as him killing me, even though there were many nights where I'd go to sleep going, am I going to wake up in the morning?

Thea's literal survival of her past relationship has allowed her to move along the continuum, past victimhood, into a place where she is no longer suffering. While Lisa is still living with the consequences of her abuse and so cannot identity with being a survivor, for Thea, her material existence is enough to assert herself as having survived.

Arnall also placed himself along a continuum, but not in terms of his healing, but the way he viewed the timeline of his life. He said: "I feel like I've had two lives, my first half, definitely a survivor from that, but my second half, no, I don't feel like I've survived anything. I don't feel like it's been a trauma." The second half of Arnall's life – the time he sold sex as an adult and was in an abusive relationship with his ex-boyfriend – is not part of Arnall's narratives of abuse. He said:

> From my childhood life, I very much feel like a survivor. From my adult life, no, I don't […] The times where it wasn't enjoyable, I've just put it straight dead, or I've finished the job and not gone back to that individual. So there's been one or two occasions where I feel like I've got away with it because I'm not dead! But I don't feel like a survivor as an adult. I don't feel like I've survived anything because I feel like I've enjoyed it.

Arnall interlocks his time sex working and his time being sold for sex when asked about the language he might use to describe himself. These narratives were influential in how many participants constructed their stories and their identities, but there were participants also who pushed back against them.

Yet, not all participants struggled with this language. For some, naming and identifying themselves as a 'victim' and/or 'survivor' were necessarily to acknowledging an important representation of part of their life, and a stage of healing and reclamation in their journey.

Conclusion

Some participants had internalised the abuse discourse which shaped their stories around responsibilisation and self-blaming in their relationships. Though domestic abuse is criminalised, meaning that participants are ‘victims’, and so are often referred to in this way in policy and advocacy, relationships with this particular term was contentious for some participants. Participants often spoke about their response to the abuse, rather than the actions of their abuser, thus directing blame and responsibility toward themselves. Discourses of romantic love and the self-sacrifice it entails along with expectations of caregiving were powerful scripts for some participants who felt they ought to, or were expected to, stay committed to relationships even when abusive behaviour was present.

With ‘victim’ being phased out in favour of ‘survivor’ or ‘victim-survivor’ in advocacy and front line services, the focus with this term has been a concerted move toward emphasising resistance and agency. Nevertheless, regardless of whether they blamed themselves or their partner, participants still problematised this quantifiable position which they felt was too absolute to identify with.

There were participants, however, who found these labels useful to advocate their innocence and their struggle, and not all participants struggled with this language. For some, naming and identifying themselves as a ‘victim’ and/or ‘survivor’ were necessarily to acknowledging an important representation of part of their life, and a stage of healing and reclamation in their journey.

Referring to someone with language that they do not identify with or consent to these terms is significant in the context of this research because these constructs shape how support agencies position them, and how police respond to them. These interventions will be examined in the next chapter.

8: Participants' experiences of intervention and help seeking

Introduction

The previous chapter explored the journey participants took understanding and naming their experiences. Building on those findings, this chapter will focus on the third aim of the thesis: to understand where and how sex workers seek support, and to identify the barriers they face in their help-seeking decisions. Participants spoke about barriers, which they felt prevented them from reaching out for help, as well as interventions which occurred with and without their consent.

It is necessary to contextualise attempts at intervention and help-seeking within the current neoliberal framework. Neoliberal policies of economic deregulation along with the extension of market relations into all aspects of citizenship (see section 1.1 and 3.3.3) have affected social welfare through the cutting of public spending and austerity. There is evidence that not all citizens are affected equally by austerity; women, especially those with multiple intersections of inequality such as class, ethnicity, nationality, disability and migration status, and vulnerable children, are bearing the brunt of austerity measures (Durbin et al, 2017; Pearson, 2019; Murphy, 2021). Services which co-ordinate responses to DVA, or child protection services, have seen their funding cut meaning there is an increased demand for a workforce with less time and less resources.

This chapter is divided into three systems of intervention: child protection and domestic abuse services; the police; and sex work outreach projects. The partially criminalised framework of sex work, as well as non-normative intimacy – be in personal or in a work capacity – renders sex workers' romantic relationships with a marginalised status (Matos and Haze, 2019; Benoit et al, 2018). Considering the proliferation of research into sex work marginalisation and the resulting stigma, there is little research on the context of stigma in sex worker intimate relationships or family life, and intimate partner and family abuse. Consequently, the barriers to their help seeking in situations of domestic or familial abuse have been little explored. The aim of this chapter is to begin to begin to fill the gap in this knowledge.

8.1 Child protection and domestic abuse services

The first type of intervention examined in this chapter is that of child protection and social services. A number of participants were under the age of 18 when they began selling sex or experiencing familial abuse, and so were engaged with social workers or child sexual exploitation workers. Oftentimes participants expressed confusion or frustration at these professionals' seeming lack of intervention. This section then moves to explore participants' experiences of domestic abuse organisations, though most participants in the study did not disclose to these services, and many expressed no desire to. Participants narratives showed that their engagement with these services was often marred by negative experiences.

8.1.1 Child protection and social services

Scott and Skidmore (2006: 3) write that services face three major challenges in maintaining engagement from children and young people who are selling sex, or who are being sexually exploited. Firstly, the children or young people often do not acknowledge their own exploitation. As Lefevre et al (2017) have argued, children whose feelings, safety, and views have historically been disregarded are often less able to recognise they are being harmed or exploited. Arnall, for example had been sold for sex his whole life, beginning "before I can remember, before I could even walk" and he told me about a time he was taken to a nightclub when he was "thirteen, fourteen" years old:

> This guy decided to take me to this room, do whatever he was doing with me, not a problem, it was something I was used to, not a problem. I didn't feel like anything was being done wrong to me because it was just normal life to me.

Secondly, some children and young people[14] have not wished to engage because they present as being 'needy' for attention, or what they perceive to be 'love' and believe they will not meet this need through services (Scott and Skimore, 2006: 3). They want to belong somewhere, and they are often reliant on abusive adults to meet these needs. Morgan, for example said that she struggled at school, which made selling sex more appealing:

> I was quite lonely […] I think I had a group of friends but it was quite isolating, because everyone else was having a go at me for stuff. So I just wanted someone who actually care about me and like to say, *oh you're beautiful, oh you're this*.

Thirdly, children and young people often have little previous experience of adult support and so believe they are better off looking after themselves rather than relying on parents or professionals. As Pearce (2009) has highlighted, many of the children and young people selling sex do not ask to be protected and are not actively seeking intervention. Additionally, as Murphy (2023) argues, years of government cuts in funding to children's social services has resulted in social workers dealing with a rising case-load of vulnerable children and families, whilst concomitantly unable to spend enough time with children to obtain full knowledge of their living situation. For participants in this study, many felt that despite initial hesitancy to engage with support services, a major challenge was that participants felt they had been failed when they asked for help and did not receive it.

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[14] In England and Wales a child is defined as any person under the age of 18. There is no universally agreed definition of a young person, however, the UN defines a young person or youth as between the ages of 15-24, and in this thesis, a young person, as opposed to an adult, is someone between the age of 15 and 18.

Four participants began selling sex under the age of 18, and three of these participants mentioned being involved with Children's Social Care at some point. These participants believed that though there were opportunities for intervention, their engagement with social care did not reduce their risk of violence, nor did anyone meaningfully intervene with the abuse they were living with from their families. For example, when Morgan was 13, her parents found out she was "at risk of sexual exploitation" and that she was "selling nudes online". Morgan describes her home life as "normal, until I had a support worker for CSE [child sexual exploitation], up to that point when that started happening, everything was alright." Morgan draws a connection between the intervention of professional services, and the neglect and abuse at home worsening. Morgan disclosed the abuse to her CSE worker when she was "getting really worried" about her sisters being locked in their room:

> I told my CSE worker, and she reported it to Social Services. And then I think that was when my dad, he got kicked out of work, because he worked with children […] I think that's when things started getting really bad because obviously then everyone was mad at me because I told on them.

When Morgan disclosed the neglect at home to her CSE support worker, it was because she had "had enough" of looking after her two sisters, and of her parents locking them all in their rooms. Morgan located her disclosure as a point when the abuse worsened, believing that people thought she was at fault. She went on to describe her anger at social service's lack of pro-active intervention:

> The people I'm actually mad at is social services and the people that let us stay at home and the professionals […] So I'm more mad at services, *why didn't you do anything?* We were all under a 'Child In Need' plan or child at risk, you know the child at risk Social Service thing[15]. So we were all under that, but we were left at home.

Though Morgan and her sisters were under a child in need plan, she expressed anger and confusion about its purpose and the roles of professionals in her life. She claimed that "through all of this, I wasn't stupid, and I didn't need saving", yet, she still felt let down that she was left with her family. There is a disjuncture between what Morgan might have expected to happen – though she did not clarify what this was - and what actually happened.

There were also unclear and unhelpful relationships with social workers. Arnall was involved with children's social care after a neighbour reported suspected abuse of him by his family. Arnall found his engagement with social services to be a "really, really negative experience". He said, "We were put on the Child Protection Register by that point, but things [sexual abuse] still continued for years." In addition to his disillusion with children's social services, Arnall also described a loss of trust with them, something which sabotaged Arnall's safety at home and his desire to disclose in future:

> I opened up a little bit to the individual who presented some information back to my mum and dad, which I was very much then taught not to talk to others, not to talk to people. So we closed down very much at that point and the social worker stayed with us for I think about a year, and then there was no more social worker interaction after that.

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[15] A 'child in need' is defined under the Children Act 1989 as a child who is unlikely to achieve or maintain a reasonable level of health or development, or whose health and development is likely to be significantly or further impaired, without the provision of services; or a child who is disabled. A child in need plan will contain the support which is being provided to a child and/or family by children's services.

The British Association of Social Workers includes transparency as a model of good social work; in practice this means, at times, the social worker sharing information meaningfully between parents and children (Dons et al, 2020). For Arnall the transparency is both limited and unclear because he does not seem to know what the social worker was doing, why the social worker left after about a year, or what their role was in Arnall's safety.

Not all participants decided to engage with social services when the opportunity presented. Isla "disclosed a lot" to the hostel she was living in after she left her mother's house. She says that the staff in the hostel "didn't tell me about the whole safeguarding clause of *'We will break confidentiality if'*", which caused Isla to panic:

> They basically said they were going call social services because my little sister was still in the care of my mom. I freaked out and somehow convinced these adults to not do that.

While Isla positioned this interaction with the hostel as frightening, she did not fully explain why. Isla later recounts that "whenever my sister was there [with their mum], I was there because I couldn't leave my sister alone with our mum" showing that Isla worried about her sister's wellbeing, but she also feared any intervention into her sister's homelife. Isla does not state what her fear was if social services were to get involved, but she assumes something bad would happened and her quote implies it would be the removal of her sister from her mum's care; a situation she intervenes in herself, but does not want anyone else to get involved in.

One reason why Isla did not want social services to intervene with her sister could be due to her own difficult relationships with teachers; adults who are positioned to safeguard. Isla said: "The school knew, the school knew everything. I used to come in with bruises around my neck”, adding “I was fine academically, but the teachers used to pick on me”. Of this time at school, Isla said:

> It was difficult because it was like, I think it really contributed to my own disillusionment because I was like, ‘Well, all these people knew.’ [I felt] God, just totally empty. I've got a few blank spots in my childhood, you know what I mean? And like around that sort of time is one, and it's just like going through the motions, like what do you even, what do you say?

Participants reported feeling angry and let down by social services. Their stories show that they may have resisted some interventions, but they still were reliant on the adults in their life to keep them safe. Though participants never explicitly said what it was they wanted to happen, or what they expected teachers or social workers or CSE workers to do, they did not feel helped, and expressed anger and confusion that they were left in the abuse, or ignored, or their attempts at asking for help were sabotaged.

8.1.2 Domestic abuse services

Chapter 3 offered a number of reasons for why those experiencing domestic abuse may not attempt to leave, or report across organisations and agencies (see section 3.3.1.3). These including a fear of abuser, shame, stigma, self-blame or lack of confidence in outcome (Francis et al, 2017; Dolan and Conroy, 2021; Donovan and Hester, 2011; Overstreet and Quinn, 2013) as well as the belief that current service responses are resources around the needs of white, heterosexual, able-bodied women and as such may not be appropriate for the needs of other, or more marginalised, victims of domestic abuse (Hague and Mullender, 2006). Impacted by years of austerity politics and cost-cutting, organisations working with victims of DVA have to focus on approaches which save money (Ishkanian, 2014; Donovon and Durey, 2018). For example, Women’s Aid report that a third of referrals to their refuges have had to be turned away due to lack of space (Women’s Aid, 2023).

It did not occur to some participants to seek help from an agency or service and the majority of participants did not disclose to a domestic abuse organisation. When Anna was asked if she ever thought about getting help or support from an organisation, she told me, “It didn't cross my mind, no. I would never. It didn't even occur to me.” For others, the help they needed was more tangible than what they believed a service could offer. When asked if she had ever considered engaging with a domestic abuse service, Judy told me “I’m just not that type.” She went on:

> I think lot of women in this industry, I think we do it because we don't want those services […] I think it's because we know it's money that we do need, and I think essentially support really doesn't provide that.

Judy is a migrant woman of colour and as such, is under-represented in domestic abuse services; the resources are often not designed with women like Judy in mind (Hague and Mullender, 2006). Instead of reporting her abuse to an agency or service, Judy instead offers sex work as the response to her problem; she sex worked to earn money and so, could prevent the need to engage with anyone else for help.

Only one of the 15 participants accessed domestic abuse services while they were in their abusive relationship. This was Georgie, who did not seek support for herself, but for her partner. Georgie’s therapist suggested that her relationship may be abusive, and her therapist also added that Georgie might want to “refer him to a perpetrator programme”. Perpetrator programmes are designed and organised by Respect, a charity for perpetrators, and male victims, or DVA. Georgie said:

> We had lots and lots of arguments about that, *I’m not a nonce, I’m not one of those men, I don’t beat women up*.

After an “ultimatum”, Georgie’s boyfriend “yielded”,

> They gave him an appointment but when he got to that appointment, there was a camera on a tripod in the room and they said, *We’re filming this* and he said, *No you’re not* and he walked out […] I made a formal written complaint about it myself, I said *You’re supposed to be keeping me safe and he’s come home in one bad mood because this has happened*. I sent him into that situation and that put me in danger.

Georgie felt that the perpetrator programme had a negative impact on her partner and their relationship, and she felt at greater risk afterward as a result of his enrolment. In calling his actions “tantrums” or a “bad mood” she is turning his long-standing pattern of abusive and frightening behaviour into individual acts, as well as minimising the intention and consequences of his behaviour. Georgie alternated the blame for her boyfriend’s “bad mood” after this incident between the organisation who ran the programme, and herself. She does not, at any point, hold her boyfriend accountable for not controlling his temper or for putting her in danger when the programme was not what either of them expected it to be.

Whether perpetrator programmes for abusive or violent partners are effective is contested, as research has considerable deficits in sound evaluation. Babcock et al (2004) and Graham-Kevan (2007) found that perpetrator programmes have a minimal impact on reducing recidivism, however Westmarland et al (2010) interviewed partners of men enrolled on a programme and found that over a twelve month period, men’s violence had decreased and the men were more aware of the effects of their behaviour on others.

Almost all the other participants did not engage with domestic abuse services at any point, during or after the abusive relationship. The only exception was Thea who “went to the Power to Change[16] course with Women’s Aid”. Though Thea recognised her ex-husband’s poor treatment of her and so had left the relationship and instigated a divorce, she said she did not recognise that what had happened was abuse, at the hands of both her mother and her ex-husband "until much, much later” on in life as a result of the course she took. She said:

> I filled two notebooks of everything I went through with just my husband. I’ve since done a course in understanding the effects of childhood trauma and abuse, and then I’ve just done a counselling course, so I’ve now learnt a lot about all of it.

For some participants, the politics of the organisation they sought help from conflated the abuse from their partner with abuse of sex work. Kassie moved into a women’s refuge run by a women’s DVA charity after “a punter had attacked me quite badly and put me in hospital”. The refuge is run by an organisation for women ‘subjected to sexual and domestic violence and abuse, including prostitution’ and Kassie describes her time involved with this organisation as “horrendous, to say the least”. The organisation which runs the refuge is openly pro-Nordic Model (see Chapter 2) and thus classify all prostitution and sex work a form of discrimination and violence against women. Kassie critiqued the organisation for how this stance affected how they engaged her. She said:

> They basically took all the funding, and they do this whole, *Oh we can get people to exit in three months* shit! Well, it’s like a tick boxing sort of thing. They turn around and were like, ‘Oh yeah we can do it in three months’. And I had one meeting with this woman, she was like, ‘Yeah, so what do you need to do?’ Because I didn’t want to be doing it, she was like, ‘*we need to find you something else you can get attention from*.’

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[16] The Power to Change is a free 12 weeks course for women who are survivors of domestic violence and abuse. The main aims of the group are to change patterns of behaviour, to raise awareness of women’s basic rights, and to build self-esteem, self-determination, confidence and empowerment.

Suggesting that Kassie is selling sex for attention and thus it is the source of attention which needs to change, sidesteps any broader or structural reasons why Kassie might feel trapped in the sex industry, even though she openly says that she “didn’t want to be doing it”. Rather than addressing why Kassie might still be selling sex the staff member’s support seems to be contingent on ideological stances of who might be selling sex and why. By comparing the support that is needed with being a box-ticking exercise, Kassie illustrates a dehumanising approach to service user support, as well managing stigma and assumptions that people who sell sex already often experience.

8.2 Experiences and opinions of the police

Police in England and Wales receive over 100 calls an hour related to DVA (HMIC, 2015; ONS 2022), and are often the first point of contact for women in emergency situations, as well the being the first point of contact outside of someone’s own immediate network for those experiencing DVA. Nevertheless, many participants spoke negatively of their interactions of the police, recalling incidents which were at best unsatisfactory, and at worst, dangerous and violent.

8.2.1 Hostility toward police

While legal and social policy initiatives in the UK have tried to encourage more victims to call the police, this is happening at a time when many victims have no-one else to call *except* the police due to a lack of other available support (Domestic Abuse Commissioner, 2022). Further, there is evidence that some victims do not want their partner arrested for a number of reasons[17], such as their own economic or material precarity, or a fear of being entered into the criminal justice system themselves (Goodmark, 2018; Gruber, 2020; Fluery et al, 1998).

Many participants in this study expressed difficulty in deciding to reach out or involve the police. For some participants, they felt clear hostility toward the police and this hostility was a barrier for their engaging with them. For Isla, when the harassment from her mum was becoming too much for Isla to bear, she said; “[I] did go to the police about her in the end” but did not want to, adding:

> I'm from Liverpool. We don't ring the police. It was the last resort. I tried everything else under the sun and luckily they put me straight through […] They sent me a harassment diary and things like that, but that only lasted for two years.

Isla did not expand on who she was put through to, but, although she was initially reluctant to engage, when she did call the police, it ultimately resulted in a No Contact Order[18] being issued by the courts. This was useful in preventing her mother from contacting her, but, Isla says, “Nobody told me that it only lasted for two years”. Isla then described how she had to call the police again the Order it ran out, an experience she described this time as “a fucking nightmare” and “horrific”. Though Isla was thankful that calling the police resulted in a No Contact Order, the reason why her interaction with the police is categorised here as hostile is for two reasons: the first because Isla did not initially want to call the police, but felt she had no choice after trying “everything else” to mitigate tensions between her and her mother. The second reason is for the impermanence of the police's actions and seeming lack of transparency at the length of the Order; she did not realise it was only for two years as she said no one told her. Isla drew on her socio-cultural background[19] to explain her animosity toward police, and explicitly mentions the removal of her agency in her calling them, saying she did so "completely against my will". Her hostility is carried over after the police have been contacted and a court order was issued because there was, as far as Isla is concerned, no way to prevent her mother from continuing her abuse which did not involve a compromise of her beliefs.

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[17] The Royal College of Policing (2018) advices that “Police officers have a duty to take positive action when dealing with domestic abuse incidents. Often this means making an arrest.”

[18] An Order issued by the family court with the intention of stopping or reducing a parent from having any contact with their child.

Police intervention sometimes happened without the participant's consent. Helen had also expressed reluctance at getting the police involved after her ex-boyfriend "strangled" and "beat" Helen "unconscious". This particular attack on her was caught on her neighbour's CCTV camera, and it was her neighbours who intervened and called the police. At the time, Helen was involved with a local sex workers' outreach service and had their help and support, but she had never called the police on her ex-boyfriend's behaviour, and said:

> I didn't want him to get arrested. I know it's stupid, but I didn't want him to get arrested at the time. So I said, "*I'll just go, if I'm not here, they might not arrest you. You can just say, "I don't know what you're on about."*"

Once her ex-partner was arrested Helen's agency was compromised again, this time by her ex-boyfriend. "He rung me up. He made me go to court, and then he made me write a letter saying that he hadn't done anything". Helen's use of the word "made" strongly implies that she was still a victim of coercive control, even when her ex-boyfriend was in jail awaiting trial. Her ex-partner was incapacitated yet still carried on controlling her, something she said he had done throughout their relationship. Supporting this, Helen said, "If I weren't on time or missed the bus, he'd go mad with me […] He were just really controlling." Helen's hostility toward the police, then, seems to be more of a capitulation to her partner's control than an ideological barrier to engaging with the criminal justice system. Even though Helen was pressured into writing on behalf of her ex-partner, she said that "the judge wasn't interested, he didn't even read the letter", and Helen's ex-boyfriend served six months in prison.

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[19] Liverpudlians have held a long-established opposition towards the establishment, including the police, and was entrenched during the Conservative government's "managed decline" of the city under Thatcher. The failings of the government and the police during, and following, the Hillsborough disaster deepened this animosity.

Significant here is how the nature of the police role impacted Helen's experience of intervention. What Helen might have wanted did not seem to be taken into account throughout the process of the criminal justice intervention; she did not want her ex-boyfriend arrested, yet he was, and she did not want him to go to prison, yet he did. However, Helen also did not explicitly say what she wanted to happen between her and her ex-boyfriend during our interview, and what it was she wanted changed over time. While Helen said that she did not want him arrested, she is thankful of the eventual outcome and explained:

> I think if he hadn't have been locked up, I'd probably still be there now, or I'd be dead. I'd probably be dead actually because I was so suicidal while I were with him as well […] it opened my eyes.

The eventual outcome of no contact or incapacitation ultimately gave participants space away from their abusers, but at the same time, this involvement with the criminal justice system left them feeling compromised during the process, ideologically and emotionally.

8.2.2 Safety compromised by the police

National Policing Sex Work and Prostitution Guidance (2019) suggest that the police starting point for engaging with sex workers should ensure that they do not treat sex workers as de facto criminals. Additionally, for those selling sex as children, Jago (2010: 53) suggests that police officers have adopted a "softer approach" in their interactions with children and young people. In policy guidance, those who sell sex as adults, children, or as young people should not be treated as offenders, but as people who may be or become victims of crime (CPS, 2019; CPS, 2023).

Yet, participants, described encounters with the police which were structurally violent and accusatory, even when they were children. This was also the case when they engaged with the police as victims of physical assault, sexual exploitation or DVA. For some, their safety was compromised from calling the police; engaging with police had potentially put them in more danger, not protected them from it.

Morgan and Kassie both spoke about times they went to the police and were, they said, effectively turned away. When Morgan's mum found out that Morgan was engaging in transactional sex, her mum took Morgan to the police:

> I'll always remember, I was just talking about my experiences and I was open, I said, *Oh this has happened, this has happened*, basically I was explaining, I was just like *I don't care*, *no one's hurting me.* They said, *Oh if you don't work with us, we're gonna turn against you and we'll get you in trouble*.

Morgan rebelled against being a victim and dismissed the need for any police intervention, a common response by children and young people who are selling or have been sold for sex (Scott and Skidmore, 2006; Pearce, 2009). Instead of fostering trust and trying to work with Morgan, the police seemed to treat her as a criminal and threatened her with "trouble" if she did not comply. What makes this behaviour from the police so audacious, is that the threats issued by the police, and the guilt tripping, are similar tactics used by an abuser against their victim to make them comply.

Kassie also faced what felt, to her, like a compromise of her safety when she called the police. This was in spite of the fact that, similar to Morgan, she had approached the police as a victim. After Kassie left the violent relationship with the man who had sold her for sex, she used the opportunity to call the police and have her ex-partner arrested:

> I went over [to the hostel], called the police, blurted out everything about what he'd been doing, about his agency, about the coke, gave them all the details where he hid it, all the different places, and I said that he was going to come back, and he tried to get in to get the work phone, but if I let him in I didn't know what he'd do, and they went, *Well you've got to wait for him to like get the work phone, you have to give that back to him, we can't do anything until you give him the work phone back.*

Rather than trying to keep her safe, Kassie felt that the police were perpetrating more abuse and she felt that the treatment she experienced from the police was being worse than from "the punters [her clients]",

> That hurts more than anything, like I can cope with like a punter being nasty because they are nasty, you can put them in that box. When it's the police, that are meant to be there to keep you safe and they just went, *Can't do anything till you give him his phone back.*

When sex workers operate within a partially criminalised framework, and with the increasing criminalisation of various aspects of domestic and interpersonal violence, police gain opportunities to intervene and criminalise more and more aspects of sex workers' lives (Platt et al, 2018; Grenfell et al, 2022; Holt and Gott, 2022). Even though Kassie was calling the police as a victim of abuse, and Morgan's mother took her to the police as a victim of sexual exploitation, they were not treated as victims. This may be because Kassie had "stolen" her pimp's work phone, and Morgan was denying abuse was happening, something not uncommon in victims of sexual exploitation; consequently, even though Morgan was thirteen and so legally a child, and Kassie had sought help as a victim, the police were empowered to help, but the partially criminalised status of sex work and sexual exploitation meant that instead the police were also empowered to further threaten them and potentially compromise their safety.

Other participants did not even consider calling the police, even if they were also victims of crimes. For example, When Aino was experiencing violence and abuse from their partner, the barriers to calling the police were multiple and intersecting:

> A lot of advice about abusive relationships was to tell someone, call the police, that kind of stuff. It was kind of like*, Am I going to call the police on a flat with two of us, where we're both sex working, and trans people?* […] two sex workers living together and working out of one flat, which is a brothel apparently.

A brothel is defined in UK law as two sex workers working from the same premise (CPS, 2019), and police officers may have grounds to issue a closure notice[20] and arrest both Aino and their partner, even if Aino is calling the police as a victim. UK based trans sex workers remain largely invisible in researching about sex work and the police (see Laing et al, 2017), and Aino demonstrated that as trans sex workers, Aino and their girlfriend have multiple reasons to fear calling the police, and thus do not make contact even when Aino reads that that is an advisable course of action.

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[20] The Policing and Crime Act 2009 inserted Part 2A into the Sexual Offences Act 2003. These provisions permit the courts to close, on a temporary basis, any premises being used for activities related to one or more specified prostitution or pornography offences during the period of the order.

The ACPO guidance for DVA suggest that though police can exercise powers of arrest where they exist, and where it is necessary, they ought to identify the primary aggressor and to avoid arresting both parties. This is not what happened with Sean, however. After Sean's neighbours heard an argument between Sean and his boyfriend and they called the police. When the police arrived, Sean said:

> I was covered in bruises, with blood everywhere. blood running down my legs and all this kind of stuff, him screaming at me […] The place was destroyed, it was a nice place, and […] there was a giant Bulgarian guy with an accent […] and there's me who's slight, pale, not that well looking, covered in all this kind of […]

Sean is implying here that it should have been clear to the police who the aggressor was in this situation. Dual arrests should not be made in instances of counter allegation (Centrex, 2004; Hester, 2012), and in same sex relationships, if police cannot determine victim and perpetrator they may arrest both parties, or make a seemingly 'random' decisions when it was difficult to ascertain victim and perpetrator (Butterworth, 2018: 177). The decision to arrest Sean, even though he was injured and bleeding, compounded the trauma of what later happened at the police station:

> I got there and then they searched me in front of people in the station and I just had to stare at a fixed point because I was about to pass out […] I was so traumatised. It's the worst thing that ever happened to me, the complete loss of agency and power.

The very essence of DVA is to strip victims of agency and control, a dynamic replicated here between participants and the police. Though criminal justice is the frontline response to domestic abuse, these interventions were mostly failures for participants who overwhelmingly reported negative, intrusive and violent experiences at the hands of the police and the criminal justice systems, on top of the police often being involved without participants' consent.

8.3 Engaging with sex work outreach projects

The third form of interventions that participants spoke about was from sex work outreach projects. A sex work outreach project (SWOP) encompasses a variety of different aims, objectives, and politics, from housing and benefits advise, advocation for "the recue industry" (see Chapter 2) and sexual health and contraceptive information. Sanders et al (2009) write that with the increasingly prohibitionist policy stance, services for sex workers are moving toward more regulated approaches designed to steer sex workers into services and out of sex work. There is a dearth of research interrogating the relationship between sex workers and SWOPs, but the findings in this chapter show that of the participants who did engage with SWOPs, they all spoke highly of their experiences, emphasising that their agency was respected and that they received they help they needed.

8.3.1 Occupational stigma and SWOP services

What compromises 'outreach' differs from project to project, but outreach can broadly be described as mobile provision to communities who feel they are socially and/ or physically unable to access what could broadly be described as mainstream health and wellbeing services (Whowell, 2010). Pitcher (2006) notes that SWOP services have arisen as a response to the under-use of conventional services by sex workers, often perceived as a "hard to reach" group, and O'Neill and Pitcher (2010) point out the important work that these projects provide in helping sex workers with their physical, sexual and mental health in the long term (see also Pitcher, 2006).

Research has shown the need for specialised help and support for victims of DVA in marginalised communities (Gill and Harrison, 2016; Donovan and Hester, 2011), and, as racism, hetero-sexism and/or xenophobia may be barriers for both recognition and disclosure of DVA, well-founded fears of discrimination or stigma from service workers prevent sex workers from disclosing or seeking help also (Pitcher, 2006; Rayson and Alba, 2018; Platt et al, 2018). Participants in this data set showed that whore-stigma is another barrier not explored in literature on DVA, and their engagement with SWOPs was hugely helpful.

For example, Helen was a street-based sex worker and during this time met someone from a local SWOP who would give out “hot drinks, sandwiches, condoms, advice” in the red light area where she worked. Workers from the SWOP would invite Helen to the project, but she always refused telling them, “I'm not going there” as she was “too involved in drugs” until an outreach worker told Helen she was “not taking no for an answer”. When Helen eventually went,

> They were just brilliant, the women, I just loved it there. It were open three times a week, and I were there three times a week […]. They were my support network, and I used to say all the time, without them, I wouldn’t have been here now. But they never gave up, they’re really persistent, and they’re absolutely brilliant.

Helen never engaged with domestic abuse services when she was with her ex-partner, but she did disclose violence to the SWOP. The fact that the project came to her and were helpful in so many ways allowed Helen to build up a relationship with the staff and other sex workers there. She recalled how at the project, “You'd have something to eat, you could use phone, you could get a bath, a shower, get clothes or get toiletries, food parcels. They'd ring up housing, they'd ring up for your benefit.” After being engaged with the SWOP for a while, Helen “got a point where, because they’d made me feel comfortable” that she was able “to open up and talk about everything”. The SWOP’s holistic and long term support began from SWOP reaching out rather than Helen actively help-seeking. A combination of multiple support resources, direct need provision, constant outreach even when Helen was reluctant to engage, and the organisational non-judgmental attitude enabled Helen to eventually disclose the abuse she was experiencing. Helen eventually left her ex-partner while he was in prison, but she said how having people at the project saying, “‘*Do not go back to him, stay away from him. Please Michelle, you're worth more than this*’” was invaluable. Helen said, “I think you have to have support, if you haven't got support, you're never ever going to get anywhere where you need to go.”

Lazarus et al (2012) have argued that the occupational stigma of sex workers is a significant barrier for accessing primary health care, and these findings additionally show that some sex workers face barriers which prevent them from disclosing domestic abuse to services and organisations. Helen did not recognise abuse, and then disclose to a specialist DVA organisation; instead she was engaged with sex worker outreach projects, and once a relationship between herself and the organisation had been built up, she disclosed the abuse.

Lisa also disclosed abuse after building a relationship with a sex worker outreach organisation. In Chapter 7 it was documented how Lisa was being outed as a sex worker by her step-father, and how he continued to stalk and harass her through her work websites (see section 7.1.1.3). Due to fears about privacy, as well as the social stigma of being a sex worker, Lisa was apprehensive about going to a domestic violence service or the police:

> I felt like I had nothing. I have all these things being said against me, plus I'm a sex worker, and I don't think anyone's going to believe me, and I kind of felt like if I was going to the police, it would be like, *Well you were asking for it, you were advertising yourself on-line*.

Lisa had told her mother what happened, and Lisa said that "she didn't believe me, she was just like, it's nothing." Lisa was also engaged with a SWOP after they had "reached out" to her previously to offer "testing[21] and counselling services". When she did not know what to do about her step-dad, and felt unable to go to the police about him, she disclosed what was happening to her to the SWOP workers,

> They were really helpful about it. They were absolutely wonderful, and I told them what happened and they just said, *report it, tell everyone it's not real but do not like engage with it.* And that was basically the best advice I've been given is like just do not engage with it.

In the UK it is not a criminal offence for members of the public to share professionally created images or videos of a person, even if the images are shared without consent. Still, Lisa's fear around disclosure are founded on a rape myth that she was "asking for it" and so is undeserving of help or support.

Abuse may look the same between sex workers and not sex workers – Revenge Porn Helpline (2022) have reported a year on year increase in non-consensual explicit image sharing and online harassment of both sex workers and non-sex workers - but, Lisa's narrative demonstrated that, as a sex worker, there had been additional internal battles to recognise that she was a victim of abuse, and the image sharing was not her fault. It was a specialist SWOP who validated her victimhood and asserted her right to seek justice by reporting.

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[21] Testing for sexually transmitted infections, also known as a sexual health screening

Some participants became members of sex work outreach groups through these organisations making contact with them. For example, Lisa said "It was nice. I could talk about clients freely, I could get checked out and I could just have a cup of tea and a biscuit and it was nice." Likewise, Helen said "They'd made me feel comfortable talking about it, I could talk to anyone about it after […] I used to call them me little project family". This data shows the importance of community based services for sex workers.

Some SWOPs, and domestic abuse organisations, adopt radical feminist positions on sex work, seeking abolition of sex work rather than decriminalization (see Bernstein, 2012; Strossen, 1993; Carline and Scoular, 2017). While this approach may have shaped Kassie's negative experience demonstrated earlier in the chapter (see section 9.1.2), these politics are not necessarily a problematic barrier in seeking support. While she had had a negative experience, Kassie called a different sex work outreach project in her area at a later time in her life. This particular service is also run according to a radical feminist ethos, and aims to work toward ending prostitution, something they conflate with all sexual exploitation. Kassie "didn't know anything about that sort of stuff until later on" and said of her experience:

> I stand by them even though I don't agree with their political views. Even though some of their political views don't align with mine, they were the first that I was able to just call and say *I need help*, I was homeless, or about to be homeless, I was working three jobs, including sex working, and I was just in a mess. I was scared, I was in danger.

Kassie advocated for decriminalisation of sex work, saying "I agree with it completely" and yet, regardless of ideological differences, she spoke highly of her time engaged with this radical feminist organisation,

> They were brilliant, they taught me more about the different things, and then I got more interested in the law. I was still working independently, and then it

> was like kind of my choice what I wanted to do, and I kind of got the autonomy back.

Regardless of a perceived difference in politics. Sex work can be, and often is as participants attest, exploitative and violent, however Kassie notes the importance of rounded support. Her agency and choice regarding work was respected, but help was available when needed, regardless of the politics or ethos of the organisation.

8.3.2 Support for male sex working victims of abuse

While little is known regarding the barriers and challenges of providing support to men in abusive relationships, research is growing (Huntley et al. 2019; Hines et al 2020). Huntley et al (2019) identified a number of barriers to male victims of domestic abuse, and found that fear of disclosure, difficulties challenging ideas around masculinity, commitment to relationships and invisibility or lack of knowledge about perceptions of service were the main difficulties. The two male participants in this study faced additional barriers compounded by their selling sex. While the experiences of men who sell sex is explored in literature (see Whowell and Gaffney, 2009; Morris, 2018) transactional sex is a policy issue confined to almost entirely to Violence Against Women and Girls and so there are almost no provisions for men who sell sex, and their needs for services and outreach is extremely under-researched. The two men in this study did not disclose to domestic abuse services, but instead sought help from an organisation which works with men who are sex working, victims of sexual abuse and exploitation, or both.

Arnall and Sean identified as sex workers, queer male sex workers, and male victims of violence their a same-sex relationship. These compounding and intersecting experiences marginalised and thus erased their presence as potential victims, creating a barrier for help-seeking. Arnall said:

> I had no support network whatsoever […] I spoke to [this charity] and the more I spoke to [the charity], the more I realised I did need to get some help this time […] This is the first time I've ever actually asked for support, but I'm glad I have, it took me a while to actually engage with it because there's just not enough support out there for men anyway.

Arnall spoke highly of the organisation he was involved with, though he acknowledged that "[they] aren't necessarily tailored towards this, but they do their best for it, you know what I mean?" The complexities of Arnall's situation, and the limited availability of support meant that Arnall received what he could, rather than specialised care.

Sean also noted the difficulties and barriers to accessing support for people with intersecting vulnerabilities. He stressed the importance of organisations which can address multiple and complex experiences and identities, saying:

> Working with sex workers, working with minorities, you know like trans people and stuff, all these people where the vagaries and the greys of work and abuse. [These issues] are quite difficult for people, especially dependent on their backgrounds.

Domestic abuse and sex work are constructed and politicised as issues affecting predominantly women, and both men in this study were affected by an intersectional invisibility; because of this, they found the organisation which offered the most support was one which was mindful of their marginalised status as queer men who have experienced abuse and sexual exploitation.

As mentioned in an earlier chapter, Sean "identified as a sex worker" in order to feel that he had some "agency within this situation" (see section 6.1.1); this was at the same time that Sean said he "was coerced" and that it was his ex-boyfriend, not him, who was "financially benefitting from this". Sean's difficulty in naming his experiences as abusive is common in victims of sexual exploitation (Scott and Skidmore, 2006; Dodsworth, 2014), but Sean's difficulty seems to constitute a kind of barrier of interpretation, because he cannot fully conceptualise what happened. As a result, he needed a support service who could work with "the vagaries and the greys".

Due to the intersecting vulnerabilities of being queer, being sexually exploited, and experiencing domestic and intimate partner abuse, Arnall and Sean encountered compounding barriers for accessing help and support. Men, LGBTQ people, and sex workers, all experience barriers to disclosure and help-seeking, and here Arnall and Sean show the importance of non-judgemental specialist services working with people at the intersections of all three.

Conclusion

This chapter focused on the third research aim of this thesis: to understand how the sex workers in this study sought support for the abuse they were living with. In asking these questions, participants also spoke about barriers, both real and perceived, which they felt prevented them from reaching out for help, as well as interventions which occurred with and without their consent.

One of the key findings presented in this chapter has been how occupational stigma, or whore-phobia, was such a significant barrier for help-seeking for many participants, especially when their sex working was compounded with other marginalities.

Participants who were in same sex or queer relationships, along with those who were gender non-conforming, were managing intersectional vulnerabilities which both made them fearful of inviting police presence into their lives as well as feeling that there was little help available who could specifically meet their needs. These findings highlight the consequences of sex work stigma on seeking and receiving help and support for domestic and familial abuse, an issue which has not yet been explored in literature, and further emphasise the necessity of sex worker specific services and outreach organisations.

Outsiders to the sex worker community commonly hold beliefs which stigmatise the sex industry and those who work in it, and these prejudices may result in an internalised whorephobia; the internalisation of structural and interpersonal discrimination and negative beliefs. Findings in these chapters show how whore-stigma, both internal and external, affected participants recognition and their help seeking, and further, shaped their interactions with police and service providers.

For some participants, the thought of engaging with the criminal justice system and the police may involve deep ideological and emotional negotiations, and a compromise to their beliefs and priorities. While the outcome of their engagement was in some ways useful, the process of engagement was distressing for some participants. This was often as a result of some participants not knowing who else to call except for the police, with criminal justice solutions being over-emphasised as a first point of call for people experiencing DVA. At times, participants were treated, not as victims, but as accomplices to their abusers, a response which often added to the trauma, fear, and suspicion that participants were already experiencing.

Another key finding in this chapter has shown the limits of intersectional on theorising about sex workers' barriers to help and support. There is a small, but growing, body of work on the relationship between sex workers and sex worker outreach projects (Pitcher, 2006), and participants in this study spoke about the holistic and non-judgemental support from specialist sex worker support projects, allowing them to disclose and seek help for abuse, when they were ready to, because they felt sure that they would be heard and their agency respected.

9. Discussion

Introduction

I began this thesis with a number of beliefs about the intersections of sex work, violence and society. I believed that sex work is a highly stigmatised form of labour, often undertaken in precarious or unstable circumstances; that sex work is constructed, and criminalised, in policy and law as both de facto violence against women and as a public nuisance; that DVA is written into policy as interpersonal, and criminalised accordingly; that regardless of the effectiveness of criminal discourse in preventing DVA, or preventing sex work, both are discursively understood and responded to in this way; and that fundamentally, research had not addressed the issue of how sex workers experience domestic violence, and this needed to change. The aim of this thesis was to explore sex workers' experiences of domestic abuse; how they experienced it, and how they understood it and spoke about it, and how they managed it.

This research was conducted against the backdrop of neoliberalism described throughout the literature review chapters, and so I analysed the findings of this project within a critical realist framework to best understand how the structural conditions impact the lived materiality of participant's lives. These frameworks came to constitute fundamental considerations when unpicking the interrelated, but highly individual, narratives of the participants. In using an intersectional feminist framework, this thesis showed how dominant stories and structures have created overlapping webs of oppression, and by using a feminist approach in questioning and analysis, I have generated data and shown how participants both reinforced and resisted dominant stories about sex work, sex workers and domestic abuse. In so doing, this thesis generated key insights in how sex workers perceived themselves, how they experienced abuse, and their options and barriers for help-seeking.

The final chapter is structured as follows: I begin by explaining the key theoretical and empirical contributions of this thesis. I then engage with the methodological implications of this project; it's strengths and limitations, and the journey and making of this thesis as a whole. I then suggest policy recommendations and areas for potential further research which may follow from this study. I close this chapter with some concluding thoughts on this research project, and my relationship with it, as a whole.

9.1 Contributions to knowledge

Through in-depth interviews with 15 participants, I have documented the impact of DVA on sex workers. I have shown how sex-working complicated and exacerbated experiences of DVA. While sex work was sometimes implicated in how DVA occurred, sex work was also seen as a place of safety, or at least agency, for some of the participants, and a place where they could escape the abuse they were living with. This thesis complicated simplistic narratives of both sex work as violence and of sex work as work, and because of this, these findings highlight how sex workers are particularly vulnerable to DVA. This is, in part, because sex workers are constructed and seen as undeserving or non-ideal victims, perhaps not even susceptible to violence outside of the sex industry. In exploring sex workers' experiences of domestic and familial abuse, I have investigated notions of work and labour, stigma, criminality, identity and violence, and these findings offer new and rich insights into the lives of sex workers. The main empirical contributions from this thesis are explored below.

The findings in this thesis demonstrate the complex nature of sex work, and with it, the diverse ways and reasons for entering into the sex industry. Such findings emphasise the importance of interrogating the concept of ‘sex work’ and the identity of the ‘sex worker’, and not take for granted the ways that people may relate to or identify with these terms. ‘Sex worker’ is a political identity, not just a form of income generation, and as such the terms ‘sex worker’ and ‘sex work’ carry with it implications of labour rights and social activism. I had initially taken for granted that all those who had self-selected for this research identified as sex workers. Yet, throughout this thesis, ‘sex work’ and ‘sex worker’ were not a universal or stable referents, and the fluid nature of work, including how participants moved in and out of the industry, or across different factions at various points of their life, meant that these terms speak in different ways to different people. To some participants, then, the terms sex work and sex worker glossed over the coercive, reluctant, or non-consensual elements of their relationship to transactional sex, even if they had agency in their involvement. While the advocacy of sex work activism emphasises the need to use these terms, this thesis shows the necessity of unpacking how people relate to their work, the terms they use to describe it, and the circumstances in which they came to it. Further, using terms such as ‘sex worker’ without interrogation may disregard that some may not wish to engage in the political elements of the sex worker identity.

The differential nature of sex work was contingent on social factors, not just across geographical and cultural contexts, but politically and economically as well. While all participants had at some point identified as a sex worker – either to accentuate their agency, emphasise their labour, resist connotations of abuse, or in drawing on wider discourses of transactional sex – the many and varied ways that participants explained how they exchanged sexual services, what they exchanged, and why, showed that the labels of ‘sex worker’ and ‘sex work’ as labels are not reducible to the acts they describe, and carry with them strong implications of agency, political solidarity, or lack thereof. For participants, transactional sex has occupied an ambivalent position, oscillating between sex work as work, and sex work as anti-work; a form of income generation for those who cannot, or who feel unable to engage in ‘square’ work or ‘civvy’ work. These findings show the problematisation of both the ‘sex work as labour’ argument *and* the ‘sex work as abuse’ argument.

This thesis has also shown that the ways in which some participants came to engage in sex work potentially made them more vulnerable to DVA. For those participants who sex worked in desperate circumstances - as an alternative to poverty, or to escape an abusive or violent home or relationship, or who believed their health was at risk in undertaking ‘civvy’ work - their vulnerability and proximity to risk was often leveraged by abusers to exploit their sex working. Yet, even those who were coerced, or forced, or who felt they had no other option but to engage in transactional sex, often maintained their agency throughout. In this way, sex work must be legitimised as resistance against poverty as much as living with an abuser is resistance against violence, as the stories of those who engaged in sex work under hard landings typified.

Throughout this thesis, DVA has been theorised as a method of power and control (Stark, 2007; DAA, 2021; Bishop, 2022). This framework therefore considers DVA as a pattern of actions and behaviours, rather than individual and discrete incidents, and these behaviours can be physical, psychological and emotional, economic and financial, or sexual in nature (DAA, 2021). One of the central findings of this thesis has been to interrogate the complex relationship between sex work and DVA without reducing both to typologies of violence against women and girls (VAWG). Whorephobia, or sex work stigma, has been theorised in literature extensively (Armstrong, 2019; Benoit et al, 2018; Grenfell et al, 2017; Platt, 2019; Pheterson, 1993; Weitzer, 2017; Sanders, 2018), yet new findings in this thesis show the ways that whorephobia manifests in family dynamics and intimate partner relationships. Systemic oppression, such as racism, sexism and ableism, has been documented as leverage to harm an individual, and some scholars have used the term 'identity abuse' (IA) to describe these tactics taking place withing domestic, intimate partner and familial relationships (Woulfe and Goodman, 2018; Donovan and Barnes, 2020). Influenced by conceptualisation of IA, I have re-examined the term, and applied it in new ways to refer to the ways that abusers leverage whorephobia and the partially criminalised nature of sex work against victim/survivors. This new conceptualisation of identity abuse has uncovered the particular and unique manifestations of DVA for sex workers.

I argue that whorephobia within intimate and familial relationships should be reconceptualised as IA when abusers are empowered by the societal and political context in which discriminatory, demeaning and stigmatising stereotypes and assumptions about sex workers continues to thrive. Indeed, at times participants explicitly noted the ways in which they felt that undermining and harmful assumptions and stereotypes about sex workers emboldened their perpetrators into controlling, insulting, or exploiting them. In many instances, the socially maligned position of the sex worker empowered the perpetrators to control, shame or abuse participants.

Participants demonstrated the particular types of abuse that seemed to be unique to sex-working victim/survivors. Sex work, considered both work and not-work, meant that for some participants it could be utilised as a way of generating income for other people through sexual exploitation. Due to the stigmatised position of sex work as sex rather than work, and of sex workers being hyper-sexualised to the point of being little more than ‘body-objects’ (O’Neill, 2001), often partners or family members did not empathise with the worker, or empathise with the labour involved or the need to generate an income, instead focusing on the demands and perception of the client. Further, the unique position which sex work occupies at the intersections of work/not work and sex/not sex had meant that abusive family members and partners were able to coerce their partners in ways which were hidden and hard to detect if the participants were or could have been making a conscious choice to sell sex. While unwanted transactional sex with third parties has been researched in the context of sex work (Matolsci, 2020), little is known about it in the context of domestic and familial violence and abuse. These findings may offer new insights. The weaponising of oppression often intimidated sex-working victim/survivors into being controlled, but further, this leveraged whorephobia was documented in the findings as creating barriers for participants to seek help and support.

The impact of whorephobia extended well beyond the material experiences of abuse, and impacted participants experiences of seeking support and help. Sex workers operate within a partially criminalised framework, and, with the increasing criminalisation of various aspects of domestic and interpersonal violence, police gain opportunities to intervene in more and more aspects of sex workers' lives (Platt et al, 2018; Grenfell et al, 2022; Holt and Gott, 2022). Participants spoke of feeling unable to seek help, believing that being a sex worker meant they deserved the abuse, or that they had brought it upon themselves. Others felt that the criminality of their work would result in their getting intro legal trouble rather than being taken seriously as a victim of DVA. Research has shown the need for specialised help and support for victims of DVA in marginalised communities (Gill and Harrison, 2016; Donovan and Hester, 2011) and, much as racism, hetero-sexism and/or xenophobia may be barriers for both recognition and disclosure of DVA, well-founded fears of discrimination or stigma from service workers prevent sex workers from disclosing or seeking help also (Pitcher, 2006; Rayson and Alba, 2018; Platt et al, 2018).

A key finding is that for those participants who were engaged in child protection services, often their experiences were so traumatising that they were discouraged from seeking help later in life. Many participants were unable or unwilling to call on the police for support, and of those who did, many had violent or frightening experiences, and their safety was often compromised by police involvement. Research into the relationship between sex workers and sex worker outreach projects (SWOPs) is limited (Pitcher, 2006), but findings in this thesis show that for the participants who did engage with their services, this type of support was invaluable. With whorephobia being a major barrier for help and support, the importance of SWOPs and organisations which recognise sex work as work, and sex workers as workers, is imperative.

One of the aims of this thesis has been to develop an understanding of how sex workers draw upon or resist discourses to narrate their experiences of domestic and familial violence and abuse. Many participants, for example, described acts, incidents and behaviours which constituted or fit in with the accepted definition of DVA but they did not use these terms to describe their experiences, and some actively resisted these words. There are legal as well as discursive consequences for using or resisting language, and some participants were at times emphatic about their own role in the abuse, or distancing themselves from victimhood. This distancing was a resistance to both criminal and feminist discourse, the latter of which paved the way for victim/survivor as a site of political struggle and as a reclamation of empowerment. For sex workers, and indeed for all feminists, language has been a key are of struggle, and so how language was used by participants was worthy of particular exploration. Through organising and theorising, feminists have intervened to try to alter the language used to describe DVA, arguing that language matters in the construction of social problems (Bacchi, 1999). Bacchi (1999) argues that a social problem is not just the particular phrase which is used to describe the issue, but the ways in which a descriptor is deployed to produce a problem representation. A 'battered woman' produces a different problem to a victim/survivor; and a 'prostituted woman' creates a different problem to respond to than a 'sex worker'.

One reason for these narrative resistances (McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance, 2017) may be found in the impact of neoliberalism on broader discursive trends. Such a hegemonic discourses emphasises self-reliance and responsibility, and as such, some participants expressed a disdain with seeming 'victim-mentality'. While participants were not asked about, and did not openly refer to neoliberalism as a concept, their narratives often drew on discourses pertaining to individualism and self-reliance. These findings show how these wider frameworks shape participants' constructions of themselves, and how they construct their experiences. Such constructs had profound effects on participants help-seeking, also.

This thesis has also improved understanding of the complex ways sex workers recognize DVA, both retrospectively and during experiences of violence. Influenced by McGlynn and Westmarland's (2019) perception of justice as ever-evolving and changing – a 'kaleidoscopic justice' - the participants in this thesis demonstrated what I conceptualised as 'kaleidoscopic recognition' of the DVA they had experienced. This meant that participant's relationship with the concept of DVA, and of the terms 'victim' and 'survivor' changed, evolved, and was contingent on multiple factors, such as how far along in their healing they were, how much responsibility they took, or how they felt about the support offered when they tried to leave. While all participants had identified their relationships or family dynamics as abusive in order to self-select for the study, many participants drew on multiple discourses and explanations for what has happened, meaning that they shifted between drawing on discourses of abuse, and resisting them. This is relevant as naming experiences in particular ways has implications; for self-identity, for healing, and for seeking support and help.

9.2 Reflections on methodology

Committed to scholar-activism and feminist values, I ensured that the methodology employed drew extensively on my insider status and involved centring the voices and experiences of sex workers. While these had substantial benefits, there were limitations and drawbacks to consider. This section will reflect on the research process as a whole, and consider implications for future research.

I feel that my role in the community ensured a familiarity of language which opened up paths of dialogue. Von Munchow (2020) argues that silences are part of what makes text coherent, and meaning is made through both speaking and excluding and silences were notable in a number of ways through the interviews. For the participants who spoke of their fear of being ‘outed’, for example (see section 6.1.1.2), they did not explain what they meant by ‘outed’ or defined it as a term, nor did they explain the consequences of it. As I was open about being a sex worker with participants, and had I recruited for participants on a number of sex worker only spaces, it seemed as though participants assumed I was familiar with both the language and the risks which are unique to those who sex work. The danger of outing was known and implied, and though the consequences may look different for each participants, that there were consequences to being ‘outed’ did not need to be stated in the interviews.

Another clear benefit of being an insider to the sex worker community has been the incorporation of sex worker ‘grey literature’ alongside traditional academic journals and books. Sex worker zines, websites and online spaces along with anecdotal knowledge, stories and information informed the structure of the methodology, and the line of questioning which allowed such a rich yield of data.

I also believe that the richness of data and the breadth of stories and experiences was facilitated by my ability to recruit from within the sex worker community itself, and the trust and reliability that I had built up over a number of years through sex worker activism. Indeed, there was an affirming amount of positive feedback from participants who noted that they enjoyed the interview process, even when emotionally troubling, and had found it helpful, in no small part because I had experiences not dissimilar to their own. Supporting this, one participant commented that she explicitly liked that the person interviewing her had also been a sex worker:

> It's nice to talk to somebody about it where it's just like, I don't know. Like if I talk to somebody in my life about it who hasn't engaged in sex work, I don't have a lot of people in my life who have or researched it academically or whatever. So it's just nice to be able to have these conversations with someone on the same level.

I felt very humbled at how much participants disclosed and shared with me. The shame I had experienced after realising a relationship I had been in was abusive had meant that it was years before I ever told anyone, and so I truly empathise with those who keep that part of their lives secret.

This secrecy speaks to the broader issues around sex work stigma and whorephobia. The extent of one participant's secrecy and compartmentalization was expressed at the end of the interview when I asked her if there was anything in particular she wanted to add that I had not asked:

> No, other than to say how helpful it's been just to have a conversation about my life in all of its completion. It's so compartmentalised. There's an awful lot of judgements towards service providers who are in relationships and the partners don't know. And you didn't even flicker. Whilst you took interest in it, I didn't feel in the slightest bit judged […] there's not very many circumstances, and this is one of them, where I can talk about all aspects of my life in one go, to one person.

I remained alert to not speaking for participants, nor minimising their experiences and so I made a conscious effort to mirror their language and use the terminology they used. This was a political choice as much as a methodological one; sex workers and people who have experienced DVA are often spoken about, or are referred to in ways they do not consent to. It was imperative then, to accurately represent the voices of participants, and this extended to using their language when speaking with them. One participant did not refer to his selling sex as an under 18 as 'child sexual exploitation', so I chose not to, and he noticed and commented that he thought it was due to my personal experience rather than academic interest:

> I'm sure you've got a personal passion for it, but you can also see it from an academic point of view as well. You use language like 'pimping out' rather than 'sex abuse' and stuff, I'm sure you could probably see it from both sides. […] it's not only personal but you are looking at it from an academic point of view. People who simply look at it from an academic point of view wouldn't [use his language] actually.

The range of participant stories must not be over-exaggerated, however. The majority of stories were from participants who identified as female, most of whom were not migrants, and the participant cohort is relatively small. I make no claims of generalisability, instead focusing on the richness and the depth of data. As Agustin (2007) notes, one case does not represent universal truths. Yet, the findings in this thesis illuminate the commonalities and pervasive effects of stigma, criminality, and abuse.

I also recognise the limitations and reflexivity that are needed related to my insider status. Though researchers have pointed out that being an insider to the community can help with accessing knowledge as well as with contextualising findings (Colosi, 2008; Gloss, 2020), there are risks which come with this position. Dobson (2009: 185) warn that insiders may feel tempted to "fill the gaps" in responses from participants, or assume the meaning and context of what they participants based on their own personal experiences and views. While I constantly reflected on my relationship with the subject matter, and participants, there were times during the research process when my insider status as both an ex-sex worker and victim/survivor of DVA hindered the research. For example, as I read over the transcripts I became aware of times I spoke over participants, or rushed to agree with them. It was only when I was reading the transcripts that I noticed the times I clearly should have kept quiet and allowed participants to carry on speaking rather than agreeing with them. In talking about my own experiences, I believed I was showing empathy, but I was cutting them off often causing them losing their train of thought. While one consequence of this was that the interview felt in a way more of a conversation, ultimately data was lost and stories were not told. My interruptions and agreements resulted in there being gaps in the data which meant there were gaps in analysis. In future research, I will be mindful to share stories without interrupting, and to empathise without redirecting the focus onto myself.

The other major impact of this thesis was that of COVID-19. Having started my PhD in January 2020, the whole process was impacted by social restrictions including lockdown. The pandemic was disruptive and closed off the possibility for face to face interviewing for a time, but this allowed me to speak to people who otherwise may not have engaged due to physical distance, or fears of anonymity. Due to the risks of being ‘outed’ sex workers may have a higher need for anonymity than the average research participant (Bouwers, 2022), and the ability to totally anonymise on Zoom meant that a number of participants could be part of the research without disclosing any information about themselves. This included their name, which part of the country they were talking to me from, or even what they looked like. Conducting interviews on Zoom allowed me to speak to people from across the country without lengthy or expensive travel arrangements as well as the potential safety issues and risk assessments which go along with in-person interviewing. Thus, the effects of the pandemic and the lockdown worked partly in favour for those who wished to speak to me, but were cautious.

9.3 Recommendations for policy and further research

While research which feeds into social policy is often quantitative, this research has insight into the nuances of sex workers’ experiences of DVA, the interventions that are supposed to help them, and where these have failed. This last section is where I address the third aim of the thesis: to produce recommendations for advocates, activists, researchers and academics, organisations, and policy makers and practitioners to better support sex working victims of domestic and familial abuse.

The underfunding of child protection and social services is a direct consequence of neoliberal policy and results in social workers unable to effectively manage rising caseloads. The rollback of welfare provision often left participants feeling helpless and frustrated and as such, were less likely to engage in statutory services later in life. The increase in demand along with decreased resources leads to irreparable damage and trauma. One clear first step is to address the funding for social services early in life.

These findings show how the partially criminalised framework in which sex workers operate is directly harmful for sex workers who are experiencing DVA, most notably because partial criminalisation compounds their fear and scepticism of police. Many sex workers who participated in this thesis were not working illegally, but regardless, for those participants who did engage with the police, many were left traumatised by their experience. Decriminalising sex work, along with a divestment away from criminal justice interventions into specialist sex worker organisations may go some way to enable sex-working victims of DVA to seek support and help.

Increased criminalisation of DVA has not seen a decrease in incidents of prevalence of DVA (Killean, 2020), and additionally, increased criminalisation of DVA has a range of dangerous consequences of marginalised populations who fear police intervention (Goodmark, 2018; Bumiller, 2008; Kim, 2013; Mehrotra et al, 2016; Beetham et al, 2021). The rollback of welfare and service provision, along with an increase in criminal justice policies are interlinked, and a strong carceral system is not a deviation from, but a constituent component of neoliberalism (Wacquant, 2009). These findings show how sex workers, as criminalised and marginalised, may not benefit from ever-expanding DVA conceptions in policy, nor the concomitant increased police power. A removal of police involvement in help-seeking and support pertaining to DVA may go some way to empower victim/survivors who fear police interaction.

The literature review demonstrated that a critique of statutory DVA organisations is that they are often structured around the needs of white, English speaking, cis-gendered, heterosexual and able-bodied women (Hague and Mullender, 2006), and this issue was reflected in the findings. Both male respondents spoke about how DVA organisations often do not serve the needs of those with complex situations regarding gender, sexuality, and type of exploitation. With vulnerability, disability, sexuality and gender identity all increasing ones risk of experiencing DVA, increased resources for these communities is imperative. Additionally, while sex worker outreach projects (SWOPs) were effectively in providing support for participants, and they often address the many different needs sex workers may have, increased resources and funding is necessary. The value of community-based, localised, and holistic interventions is imperative and often cannot be addressed by national policies. While decriminalisation is imperative for safety, there is a recognised and documented need for SWOPs who recognise the diverse and specialised needs of sex workers.

This thesis was inspired by, yet remained critical of, radical feminist constructions and responses to violence against women and girls. The critique of radical feminist framings was underpinned by Black feminism and intersectional theorising, anti-carcerality, and sex worker rights activism. The contributions to knowledge and the advancements in theory and methodology span a range of disciplines from social policy, queer theory, criminology, and feminism. The research aims were shaped by the legislative frameworks surrounding full service sex work, and the social stigma affecting workers across the sex industry, but in some ways were limited by this contest. A recommendation for further research would be to compare the findings of this research which is based in England and Wales, with countries in which sex work, and the adult industry more broadly, exist in different legal, social and cultural contexts.

Participants drew connections between abuse at home, and moving into sex work, as both children and as adults. Further research which focuses on the impact of family abuse and sex work, as well as family dynamics and entry into the sex industry, could offer important insights into kinship and responsibility, and further interrogate types of violence which sex workers navigate. Additionally, friend-abuse, also known as ‘mate crime’ is the umbrella term for hostile acts of abuse and exploitation where people are befriended with the intention of them being exploited and abused financially, physically, emotionally or otherwise (Thomas, 2011; Landman, 2014). Research on ‘mate crime’ is very limited, and generally categorised as a sub-section of disability hate crime, but findings in this thesis suggest that sex workers’ vulnerability to abuse and exploitation by others may render them vulnerable to ‘mate crime’ also. Further research could potentially draw important parallels.

9.4 Concluding thoughts

This research was borne from my own experiences. I do not know, and maybe I never will know, what drew me to sex work. Money was part of it, but it was only one factor in a wider web of experiences, traumas, needs, and desires. I do believe that what drew me to sex work initially, and what kept me in the industry for over ten years, was a similar force that kept me with men long past the point where I knew I was not safe. There was a darkness I could sense but could not articulate, and a sense of risk and degradation that I found soothing for reasons I could not and did not understand. I have not fully unpicked it all, but now that I am safe and no longer sex working, I am trying to.

I no longer sex work and I know that I have drawn a line under that part of my life. I do think that I will be a sex work activist forever though, advocating for the rights and dignities of sex workers, fighting for them to be safe and free from stigma and abuse. Sex work has been too important, too relevant and shaped me too much as a person to leave behind entirely. I want to believe that I am no longer at risk of experiencing violence or abuse in a relationship, but I know that I have less control over that. Yet, since I have stopped sex working I feel less vulnerable, less marginalised, and more empowered in my personal relationships. In all, I feel less vulnerable to risk, but I should not have to had left the sex industry to feel that. No sex worker, no person, should feel vulnerable to risk, stigma, violence, and degradation. We all deserve to be safe.

This thesis is a piece of research, and with it, significant feminist praxis. My aim with this research has been to fill a much needed gap in knowledge about sex workers' experiences of domestic and familial abuse, and to amplify experiences which are often unexplored in research. In this thesis, I have explored the ways that sex workers experience domestic and familial violence and abuse. I have argued that stigma of sex workers is constructed, and weaponised as a tactic of control in relationships and family dynamics. Decriminalising sex work will go some way to disempower those who want to hurt, exploit or abuse sex workers, and decriminalisation may empower those who do sell sex to seek help and support if they need to. This is only the first step, however. Rather than increasing criminal justice responses to DVA, and rather than expanding the terms by which DVA is problematised in policy and law, the state ought to work by empowering those who are vulnerable to abuse. More than that, the state should ensure that no one is vulnerable to abuse, and one way of doing this is to work toward destigmatising sex work and destigmatising those who may be vulnerable to engaging in transactional sex. Stigmatisation is not simply theoretical; it is felt corporally and materially with devastating consequences. As one participant said:

> Even verbal abuse, saying things like, *"Oh, this woman have sex for money."* Well, I think it's very subtle forms, but I think it's a violence anyway. It's not like you going to be physically maimed or anything like that, but it's still a form of violence that shouldn't be happening.

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University of Roehampton London

Participant information sheet

Exploring the narratives of domestic and familial abuse of sex workers as experienced by sex workers.

You are invited to take part in an interview for a study which is aiming to understand sex workers' experiences of domestic and familial abuse. Each interview will last about an hour and you will be reimbursed for your time on successful completion of the interview. Before you decide whether to participate, you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and talk to others about the study if you wish.

If there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information, please ask by emailing me on: **holtv@roehampton.ac.uk** Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Why is the study being done?

This study aims to explore how sex workers who have experienced abusive and/or violent behaviour from their intimate partner (or ex-partner) or from a family member, or as if often the case, multiple people at various times. I am also interested in understanding how sex workers consider the best ways they can be supported through their experiences, if they wish to access support.

Do I have to take part?

Your participation is entirely voluntary. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. If, at any time during or after the interview, you wish to withdraw from the research project, you may do so, without having to give a reason. In such a case, please contact me.

What will I have to do if I take part?

If you agree to take part, I will arrange a date and a time to have a preliminary discussion about the interview. Here, you will have a chance to discuss the consent form, dates to interview, times, location and best method of recording – if you give permission to do so.

Each interview will last for approximately 60 minutes and will take the form of a series of open-ended questions. During the interview I will ask questions related to your experience. With your consent, our conversation will be digitally-recorded using a password-protected recording device. The purpose of the recording is to allow me to capture all the information discussed during the interview, which is important for creating an accurate transcription for later analysis. You will be given the option to decline being recorded and, in such case, only hand-written paper-based notes will be taken. If you are recorded and the interview is transcribed, you will be given an opportunity to review the transcription to check for accuracy and make to amendments. If the interviews take place face to face, you can choose where to meet and all travel expenses will be reimbursed. If they are unable to take place face to face, we can arrange a time on the phone or over Zoom/Skype/Teams. Interviews will last approximately 60 minutes with the option of speaking across more than one interview if you prefer this.

What are the disadvantages of taking part?

During the interview, you may be asked questions about certain topics which are sensitive or may upset you. You can refuse to answer any questions which you feel uncomfortable with, and/ or you can stop the interview anytime. After the interview I'll turn the recording device off and we will have time to debrief and talk anything through that comes up for you.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

All the information that you provide will be strictly confidential. Neither you nor any of the people you discuss in the interview will be identified in any reports or publications arising from this study: identifiable and unusual features will be removed and a pseudonym will be agreed upon with the participant and all identifying information will be excluded. The recorded interview will be transcribed by me. Only I will have access to the audio-recording. Once transcribed, the pseudonymised transcript will be available to the supervisory teams and excepts may be used as quotations.

Once the transcript has been completed and checked by the interviewer for accuracy, the audio-recording will be erased from the recording device by me. The research data will be kept on a password protected and encrypted server for 10 years from completion of the project before being deleted. Consent forms will be kept for 6 years from completion of the project. We will ensure there is no inadvertently identifying information on the saved files.

Whilst many activities related to selling sex, or domestic abuse, are against the law, there is no duty for me to pass this information on to any third parties or the police. However, confidentiality may be broken if something is revealed during the research process that suggests to the me that you or anyone else is at serious and immediate risk of harm. You will be fully informed of this, and the researcher will discuss with you what this will entail.

What will happen to the results of the research project?

The results of this study will be published in my PhD thesis and it is expected that this will form the basis of further academic publications. A summary of the results and of further publications can be sent to you if you request them. The findings may also be disseminated through talks, presentations and media engagement activities to raise awareness of this issue and what the research project found out about it. These can also be forwarded on to you, and your information will be kept fully confidential.

Who is organising and funding the research?

This research is entirely self-funded by me.

Consent Statement:

I agree to take part in this research which explores sex workers' experiences of domestic and familial abuse. I am aware that I am free to withdraw at any point without giving a reason by contacting Victoria Holt. I understand that if I do withdraw, my data may not be erased but will only be used in an anonymised form as part of an aggregated dataset. I understand that the personal data collected from me during the course of the project will be used for the purposes outlined above in the public interest.

By signing this form I am confirming that I have read the information sheet and had the opportunity to ask any questions. I have been informed about and understand the University's Data Privacy Notice for Research Participants.

The information I will provide will be treated in confidence by the researcher and my identity will be protected in the publication of any findings. The purpose of the research may change over time, and my data may be re-used for research projects by the University in the future. If this is the case, I will normally be provided with additional information about the new project.

This research project will result in automated decision making involving my personal data which has a significant or legal effect on me. I have a right to object to this automated decision making, and if you would like to do this you should contact Victoria Holt.

Name
………

Signature
………

Date
………

Please note: if I have a concern about any aspect of your participation or any other queries please raise this with Victoria Holt. However, if I would like to contact an independent party please contact her supervisor(s):

Dr Amanda Holt -

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Independent Contact

The independent contact is usually the Head of Department or School. Head of School of Humanities and Social Sciences is Professor Laura Peters

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Hello,

My name is Victoria and I'm a PhD student at the University of Roehampton. I'm also a member of SWARM (Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement) and Decrim Now: two sex worker led organisations active in working for sex worker rights. I sex worked myself between 2009-2020, and have been an activist since about 2015.

My thesis is titled *"Exploring sex workers' experience of domestic violence"* and I have full ethical approval from my university.

If you are, or have been, a sex worker and have experienced domestic violence or family abuse I would love to speak with you. This can be from a **partner, ex-partner, or family member** (that was/is over the age of 16).

Domestic violence or abuse are broad terms, and can include any of the following:

- Name-calling, insults, threats or intimidation to you, your friends, pets or family; destroying or threatening to destroy your personal belongings, home or car.
- Sulking, guilt-trips, threats or punishment because of your work, actions, looks, friendships or activities
- Taking your money, pressuring you to work, making you feel guilty if you don't work, or making you work in ways you didn't like?
- Stalking, isolating, following or controlling you, including making unreasonable demands for your attention, stop you going to work, belittle you or blame you for the arguments or their bad mood
- Physical aggression such as pushing, burning, punching, grabbing, choking or holding down
- Made unwanted sexual demands, coerced, forced or pressured you to have sex or hurt you during sex?

All interviews are confidential and will last about 45-60 minutes each time. I am looking to interview people once or twice, depending on time commitments, and I will pay £50 each time. This can be cash, bank transfer, or a donation to a charity in your name.

As well as being paid you'll be contributing to the growing body of work which shows how criminalisation and stigma effects many areas of a sex worker's life. My research will broaden understandings of abuse which sex workers face away from work, and to see how work affects relationships and families.

If you have any questions or wish to be interviewed, please contact me on holtv@roehampton.ac.uk, or on twitter @victoriabee27

You can read more of my work here on https://forgedintimacies.com/, and see my academic credentials here https://pure.roehampton.ac.uk/portal/en/persons/victoria-holt

MACRO INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Opening questions about sex work experiences

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself?
2. Can you tell me a bit about your history of working, how you got into the sex industry?
3. In terms of violence you've experienced in your personal life, who is the main person you have experienced this from?

> *If the answer relates to a partner, refer to IPV schedule; if the answer relates to a family member (child, parent, etc) refer to family violence schedule.*
>
> ****

Once IPV or FV schedule has been completed, return to 'Getting Help' questions

Getting Help

These questions are about how, if at all, you looked outside of the relationship or family for support.

4. Did you tell anyone what was happening, or did anyone know? (e.g. was this someone you knew personally, or an organisation of some kind?)
5. (follow up question if they did engage with services). Who did you disclose to? What was the reason for disclosing to this particular service?
6. How, if at all, did you leave?

Concluding questions

7. When you hear words describing people in abusive relationships such as 'victim' or 'survivor' what do they mean to you? Do you ever think of those words to describe yourself, and if not, what would you consider to be a better word?

8. What words would you use to describe your job? Do you think sex worker is appropriate, and if not, what would you use instead?

9. Is there anything else you want to add or anything important that you think I have missed?

IPV INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

These questions are not numbered as the semi-structured nature means they are not expected to be asked sequentially each time, nor is it necessary to ask every single question

- How did the two of you meet? And can you tell me a bit about the relationship at the beginning?

Their opinion of your work

- What did they think of you sex working? Did their opinion of sex work change over time?

- Was there pressure to sex work, or to not sex work?

- Can you tell me a bit about how you would talk about work with your partner? (Did you feel you could be open about what went on, or what your day was like, or did you feel that you had to not talk about certain things?)

- Did you ever feel responsible for your partner's feelings about work did you feel? Did you have to manage his feelings about your work, and if so, did it change how you felt about work?

- When did you start to think that what was happening in your relationship was not ok?

- When did you first hear the term 'domestic violence/abuse'? Did you think of your relationship in those terms?

The nature of the abuse

- Can you talk me through a typical day?
- Did certain things trigger abusive or controlling behaviour?
- (What kind of things did they do), how did you respond?

Abuse and work

- Did you partner ever monitor your work? (e.g. want to see work emails, or profiles, or come to work with you, or check anything over?)
- How much was your job part of the abuse at home (shaming around work, pressuring you to work more, taking your money, threats to 'out' them, etc)?

Your relationship to your work

- Was work an escape from what was happening at home, or a continuation of what was happening at home? Was it part of the abuse or was it an escape from it?

Once completed return to Macro Schedule

FAMILY INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

10. Can you tell me a bit about home life, growing up, and your relationship with [family member]?

The relationship and family member's opinion of work

- Have you ever broached the topic of sex work? (if so, how?)
- If they do know, are there negative comments or behaviours related to your work?
- Do you think there was pressure to work, or to not work?
- Did you feel that a good family dynamic was dependent on you earning money from sex working?
- When did you start to think that what was happening was not ok?
- When did you first hear the term 'domestic violence/abuse'? Did you think of it in those terms?

The nature of the abuse

I'm interested in getting a better understanding of the abuse. I realise this may be difficult emotionally and take your time with this, but I have some questions I would like to ask to understand the violence, abuse, or however you want to frame it.

- Can you talk me through a typical day?
- Did certain things trigger abusive or controlling behaviour?
- (What kind of things did they do), how did you respond?

Abuse and work

- Did the family member ever monitor your work? (e.g. want to see work emails, or profiles, or come to work with you, or check anything over?)

Your relationship to your work

- Was work an escape from what was happening at home, or a continuation of what was happening at home? Was it part of the abuse or was it an escape from it?
- (If they have left the industry) – What was the decision to leave?

Return to Macro Schedule once all answers complete

Sociodemographic data

(to be collected by the researcher at the beginning of the interview)

Age at your last birthday? ______________

Gender you identify as? ______________

Sexual orientation ______________

Where are you living now? ______________

Where were you living at the time? ______________

Length of time working in the sex industry? ______________

Ethnicity ______________