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Pragmatic, progressive, problematic: Addressing vulnerability through a local street sex work partnership initiative

Abstract

Whilst it remains a criminal activity to solicit sex publicly in the UK, it has become increasingly popular to configure sex workers as 'vulnerable', often as a means of foregrounding the significant levels of violence faced by female street sex workers. Sex work scholars have highlighted that this discourse can play an enabling role in a moralistic national policy agenda which criminalises and marginalises those who sell sex. Yet multiple and overlapping narratives of vulnerability circulate in this policy arena, raising questions about how these might operate at ground level. Drawing on empirical data gathered in the development of an innovative local street sex work partnership in Leeds, this article explores debates, discourses and realities of sex worker vulnerability. Setting applied insights within more theoretically-inclined analysis, we suggest how vulnerability might usefully be understood in relation to sex work, but also highlight how social justice for sex workers requires more than progressive discourses and local initiatives. Empirical findings highlight that whilst addressing vulnerability through a local street sex work partnership initiative can provide a valuable platform for shared action on violence in particular, more fundamental legal and social reform is required in order to address the differentiated and diverse lived experiences of sex worker vulnerability.

Introduction

In the UK and elsewhere, vulnerability has become a popular conceptual frame through which to view the labour, lives and bodies of sex workers. Discourses are widely recognised as playing an important role in processes which marginalise and endanger those who sell sex (Lowman, 2000) and whilst the rise of vulnerability narratives might at first appear a progressive development, beyond the surface it is more contentious. Concerns about vulnerability appear frequently alongside notions of 'exploitation', 'victimhood' and 'coercion' in the governance of the sex industry; controversial ideas in long-running debates

about sex worker agency. Vulnerability narratives are most often used in highly normative ways, sometimes invoked to advance particular ideologies and interventions. Subtle hierarchies of recognition (cf Gubbay, 1999; Butler, 2004) are also evident within this discursive scheme. Female sex workers tend to be those positioned as 'vulnerable', and women selling sex on the street are commonly the focus where this sociological shorthand for deservingness is deployed. Within policy frameworks such as the UK's, which have long criminalised the sale of sex in public, vulnerability narratives merge concern for sex workers' safety with anxieties about the 'problem' of prostitution. Dominant narrations of sex work might be considered part of a wider 'vulnerability-transgression nexus' (Brown 2014 and 2015), where classifications of vulnerability are used to indicate that an individual is at risk, but also to imply that they pose a risk to others and should be surveilled or controlled.

In highly polarised debates about the nature of sex work there are a range of competing and overlapping discourses (Sanders et al, 2009). Generally speaking, those who view sex work as violence against women and institutionalised male domination position vulnerability as fundamental to and central in women's experiences of selling sex, as a result of gender inequality. Barry (1995; 316), for example, argues that 'prostitution makes all women vulnerable, exposed to danger, open to attack'. Whilst some argue this vulnerability narrative can offer a basis for countering individualising 'neo-liberal' discourses through attention to systemic gender inequalities in violence (see Hewer, 2015), controversially, such accounts leave little room for recognition of sex worker agency. Scholars focussing more on the institutions and environments which structure the risks attached to sex work tend to use vulnerability to highlight difference and variations of individual experience shaped by environmental, social and political factors (see Sanders and Campbell, 2007; Carline, 2009) with stigma and prejudice being key. Multiple vulnerability narratives operate alongside one another in this field, offering a rare point at which different ways of describing and understanding sex work intersect and overlap.

Vulnerability is, as Wiles notes (2011), a 'vexed subject'. The amorphousness of the concept is far from benign (Brown, 2011) and whilst attention to vulnerability can be useful to certain individuals some of the time, its increasing popularity can also support moves towards enhanced social control in the name of protection (cf Phoenix, 2012), augmenting tendencies for 'vulnerable' people to be 'done to' by policy-makers (Brown, 2015). This is

especially relevant in relation to street sex work (see Carline, 2009 and 2011; Munro and Scoular, 2012 and 2013). Although the majority of sex workers sell sex indoors (see Sanders, 2009; Scoular, 2016), on-street sex work is the most often hazardous and most publicly visible sector of the sex industry, and is therefore a key focus in vulnerability debates. Yet wide-ranging research has shown important diversity and differentiation of sex work vulnerability across street/indoor (Sanders and Campbell, 2007), male (Whowell, 2010) and trans (Laing *et al*, 2015) markets – these tend to be obscured in overly simplistic vulnerability narratives. Like all governance philosophies, designing and delivering provision based on ‘vulnerability’ has normative implications which play out on a day to day basis through the delivery of interventions (see Bevir, 2013; 4), but these textured implications remain little understood. With perspectives of sex workers often side-lined in discussion of how their work and lives should be governed (Geymanot and Macioti, 2016 and also Sanders *et al*, 2015), how prominent policy discourses are received and woven in with practice on the ground remains important.

This article takes sex workers as a case study group through which to explore vulnerability as a theoretical lens and governance mechanism. Through a focus on a local sex work partnership initiative in the city of Leeds, UK, the paper explores how sex worker vulnerability might be understood and addressed, both in relation to violence and also more generally. We use the idea of ‘vulnerability narratives’ to refer to the stories people tell and which social scientists investigate (see Bevir, 2013; 8) about what vulnerability is and how it should be addressed, giving attention to how these narratives alter and inform interactions and policy frameworks which in turn shape lived experiences of vulnerability. Firstly, an overview of the rise of vulnerability in sex work policy in the UK is outlined. After brief contextual information about the local picture and initiative, we report from qualitative and other available data gathered as part of the development, implementation and evaluation of the partnership scheme in Leeds. We focus first on vulnerability narratives in action, and then move on to findings about how these mapped onto social justice for street sex workers. The article highlights how in a context of austerity politics and responsibilisation, risks of pathologisation are never far from the surface, and although vulnerability narratives could be considered to hold promise for framing the empirical realities of sex work, they must be handled with care. Using applied insights to generate more theoretically-inclined

analysis, the article sets out how vulnerability might best be understood in relation to sex work, but also underlines that addressing the lived vulnerabilities of sex workers requires more than progressive discourses and local initiatives on tackling violence.

Vulnerability narratives in UK sex work policy and local practice

The language of vulnerability has become a prominent feature of UK prostitution policy in recent decades (Carline, 2009; Phoenix, 2012; Munro and Scoular, 2013; Hewer, 2015). Such narratives have been evident for some time. The Wolfenden report (1957) on 'prostitution and homosexual offences' is widely attributed to form the foundation of contemporary sex work policy (see Phoenix and Oerton, 2005; Sanders et al, 2009), focussing predominantly on moral concerns and the regulation and criminalisation of public solicitation of sex, but also making reference to the need to provide safeguards to those who were 'Specially vulnerable because they are young, weak in body or mind, inexperienced, or in a state of special physical, official or economic dependence' (Wolfenden, 1957: 9-10). This nexus where vulnerability and transgression appear alongside one another has remained central in prostitution policy, with emphases on victimhood and offending morphing over time within the wider frame.

Vulnerability narratives are commonly deployed normatively, implying a need for action to address social injustice and drawing on a growing body of research which has informed how the policy agenda has taken shape. Sexual health issues, drug use, physical and mental health problems are frequently identified components of the complex adversities experienced by street sex workers in particular (Grenfell and Platt, 2015). Most often though, sex worker vulnerability is configured in relation to violence (see Kinnell, 2008). Large amounts of research throughout the world document how the majority of street sex workers experience physical, sexual and economic violence in their job (see Sanders, 2016). Salfati et al's (2008) systematic review of violence against sex workers (which mainly included street-based studies) is often used as a point of reference here, finding that sex workers were twelve times more likely to be killed than non-sex working women. Whilst this literature brings into focus structural as well as situational and more individual factors, the ubiquity of accounts of sex workers' various vulnerabilities migrates into practice in a way that can risk a 'repackaging of stereotypes' (see Quesada, 2011; 250) supporting the very pathologisation they are deployed to mitigate.

Under New Labour in particular, vulnerability narratives focussed on 'victimhood' further permeated policy and practice (Munro and Scoular, 2013), as radical feminist accounts of sex work enjoyed considerable prominence at political level. The 2004 *Paying the Price* consultation on prostitution policy, for example, brought violence and vulnerability firmly to centre stage (Hewer, 2015). The document explicitly states at one point that 'vulnerability is the key' (Home Office, 2004; 33 and 63), with the notion configured mainly in relation to gendered exploitation/violence but also making passing acknowledgement to 'economic' and 'emotional' dimensions. Focussed mainly on street sex work, these vulnerability narratives were often a platform for bolstering interventions directed at 'preventing' the 'problem' behaviours of sex workers, which included not only support for 'exiting' but also sanctions where sex workers did take 'appropriate' action to exit prostitution (Scoular and O'Neill, 2007). The use of anti-social behaviour orders became common place nationally, with many criminal justice agencies awarded contracts to deliver highly conditional 'support' for street sex workers (Sagar, 2010).

Critics of the rise of vulnerability discourses in sex work policy argued that this played an 'enabling role' in advancing self-governance (Munro and Scoular, 2013; 31) and in furthering conservative concerns with behavioural compliance (Carline, 2011; Munro and Scoular, 2012; Phoenix, 2012); intensifying social control and leading to an exacerbation of lived vulnerability as sex workers were further marginalised and stigmatised within intervention frameworks which masqueraded as 'supportive'. Such accounts highlight how street sex workers in particular have been brought further into the criminal justice system under auspices of 'protection' within a rights and responsibilities citizenship framework, as their often recidivist soliciting behaviour was targeted as out of place, uncivil and in need of controlling (Scoular and O'Neill, 2007; Sagar, 2010; Carline and Scoular, 2014; Scoular and Carline, 2015). Policy debates, guidance, and legal change under New Labour up until 2008 remained overwhelmingly street focused (Soothill and Sanders, 2004), with overly simplistic vulnerability narratives playing a role in the obfuscation of diverse adversities faced by male, trans and indoor sex workers and of how new technologies were informing the commercial sex landscape (see Sanders, 2009).

More recently, vulnerability has taken on a slightly more nuanced understanding in policy. The Conservative-Liberal democrat Coalition government released the *Effective Practice in*

Responding to Prostitution (Home Office, 2011) guidance, underlining local responses as central, creating space for towns and cities to innovate within the broader national framework. Holistic and harm reduction initiatives were emphasised as priority, with contractual behavioural tools such as ASBOs deployed as a last resort. Supporting local policing partnerships and solutions was the guiding principle behind the latest *National Police Sex Work Guidance* (National Police Chief Council, 2015), the backdrop to which has been widespread cuts to policing and political commitments to shrinking state apparatus and intervention in society. Yet this ground-breaking policing guidance clearly differentiates where policing priorities should lie and vulnerability is operationalised amidst a more sophisticated understanding of the differences between voluntary sex work and forms of exploitation, as well as the prominence of sex markets located online. Within this wider national policy context, certain local approaches have foregrounded vulnerability in order to address the injustices and violence faced by sex workers. For example, pioneered in Liverpool, the 'Merseyside model' treats all crimes against sex workers as hate crimes, with violence tackled firmly in line with the hate crime agenda (Campbell, 2014). As in the wider hate crime agenda the concept of vulnerability has been part of the language used, which some have argued is a controversial basis for policing interventions, especially in terms of how groups such as disabled people might secure access to justice (see Roulstone et al, 2011; Roulstone and Sadique, 2013). Whilst the governance of vulnerability has been a focus for policy critiques, less attention has been given to the implications of the rise of vulnerability narratives at ground level, and it is to this which the article now turns.

Addressing vulnerability through a local sex work partnership initiative

The street sex industry in Leeds operates in a long established and relatively condensed area close to the city centre, which can be described as mainly urban industrial and partial wasteland, with some residential streets and close to a site of major urban regeneration. The size of the sex industry is notoriously difficult to pin down internationally, nationally and locally, but a scoping report in Leeds (Brown and Moore, 2014) indicated a large and diverse indoor market and a much smaller outdoor market. Whilst different policing initiatives show varying figures for the number of women involved in street sex work, Basis Yorkshire, the Leeds-based sex work support project (see <http://basisyorkshire.org.uk/>), report around 10-15 women working on the street each evening, a number that has been relatively static over

many years. Prior to 2013, enforcement had been the central approach to managing prostitution in Leeds for over a decade. Frustrations with this response were marked and the baseline scoping research revealed a concerning picture in relation to violence against sex workers and persistence of resident complaints (see Brown and Moore, 2014). In 2014, a new city-wide strategic partnership on prostitution took shape. This included (but was not limited to): (i) the introduction of a dedicated police sex work liaison officer; (ii) the pilot of a managed approach to street sex work (October 2014–October 2015) in the industrial area where street sex work had taken place for over a decade, and (iii) enhanced safety work led by Basis Yorkshire, including city-wide training and promotion of the ‘National Ugly Mugs’ safety scheme (see www.uknswp.org/um/) – which enables sex workers to report crimes committed against them either anonymously or with full details shared with the police – and intensive support to sex workers reporting violence.

The managed approach had specific operational rules, agreed through consultation with residents, businesses and sex workers. Sex workers could work in designated streets away from residential housing between the hours of 7pm until 7am without being cautioned or arrested for loitering or soliciting. The area was policed for the safety of sex workers and all other laws were enforced. On-going attention was given to litter in the vicinity. The approach was novel in some respects in that an (albeit highly conditional) strategy of minimal-enforcement of soliciting legislation was supported by state agencies. In other ways it was less so, in that it might be seen as a formalisation of commonly occurring informal local practices of sporadic non-enforcement which operate in many towns and cities across the UK. After regular monitoring and an independent evaluation (Sanders, 2015), the managed approach was confirmed by the partners as an on-going arrangement in September 2015. Tragically, in December 2015, 21-year-old Daria Pionko was murdered in the designated area. This led to intense scrutiny of the strategy – especially in the press – and a temporary spike in resident concerns, with further developments underway at the time of writing.

This article brings together findings generated over the development, implementation and evaluation of the pilot of the managed area (2012–2015). Both authors were involved in this process: Kate Brown as Research Lead on the strategic partnership and author of the initial scoping which the strategy was based on (see Brown and Moore, 2014); Teela Sanders

conducted an independent evaluation of the pilot (see Sanders, 2015). The evaluation used documentary analysis and qualitative interviews with practitioners, police and policy strategists (n=15), residents and businesses (n=6) and sex workers (n=6), and was supplemented by insights through ethnographic observations from street outreach work. Ethical approval was received from the University of Leeds before fieldwork began, paying particular attention to the sensitive nature of the subject, the processes for anonymity for both the sex workers and the key informants and the possible consequences for the women if there were discussions around abuse and criminality. Interviews took the format of formal structured questions for the practitioners. With sex workers, three of the interviews were conducted using 'walking' methodologies, walking with women from the previous larger street sex work area to the newly designated (smaller and non-residential) area, discussing their experiences before and after the managed approach was implemented. Experiences and feelings of vulnerability on the streets were specifically discussed, as well as how these differed depending on space and policy. Interviews were analysed based on thematic coding in order to fulfil the requirements of the evaluation, which focussed on feeding back on key outcomes related to the pilot of the scheme. Qualitative data included here is taken mainly from interview questions asking specifically about vulnerability, supplemented by other available data gathered through on-going work with the local strategic partnership and sex work support project, with attention given to how vulnerability narratives operate, and how these map on to wider material developments in social justice for street sex workers in Leeds.

Narratives of vulnerability: a platform for pragmatism?

A range of understandings of vulnerability were operating on the ground, providing a conceptual umbrella for pragmatic shared action on safety in particular. Essentialist understandings of the 'inherent' nature of vulnerability were common, as one business owner said, '*They know it's part of the job they do unfortunately. It's a sad truth*'. In police approaches, vulnerability narratives often served as a frame for a focus on protection:

I hear the details of their stories and they are horrific and we must do everything we can do to keep them safe. We are here to make vulnerable people safe and it doesn't matter what background they come from we need to make them safe... It's an industry

that I would say is inherently dangerous— I don't think you can do it safely." (Senior Police Officer A)

Other practitioners employed the language of vulnerability to frame more situational accounts of adversity, countering emphases on individual defects or potential pathologies. In these accounts, sex worker agency and resilience could be accommodated within vulnerability narratives:

[Sex workers] can be [vulnerable] because of the spaces that they are in but I don't think they are vulnerable otherwise. I think the environments that they can be placed in can massively contribute to their vulnerability but I wouldn't have said that they are [vulnerable]. I think they are very, very strong, powerful people actually because of the work they engage in. (Outreach Worker)

Indeed, discourses of vulnerability offered a means of naming injustices, structural factors and inequalities associated with violence:

Lots of perpetrators of sexual assault and other assault would target sex workers specifically because of their vulnerability, because of the fact that they are unlikely to report. (Senior Outreach Worker)

As in other research and commentary of the sex industry from sex workers and their organising allies (Geymonat and Macioti, 2016), in the small sample of evaluation interviews with sex workers there were hints that vulnerability narratives resonated with street sex workers' own interpretation of their lives and work:

Well obviously we are going to be vulnerable on the streets, who ain't going to be vulnerable on the street, but that's a risk you have got to take if you are going to work the streets. (26 years, involved in sex industry since 9 years old)

Physical danger especially remained an everyday concern for the women, summed up starkly here through the language of vulnerability used by one of the participants:

Women are vulnerable everyday of the year love, because this is like a life or death thing. You either walk on the beat alive or you walk down here and go back in a bodybag. (32 years, street/home working for 8 years)

Discourses of vulnerability appeared to be something shared, providing a broad umbrella under which different understandings of and action to manage sex work took place. Yet resistance to vulnerability narratives was also evident, due to the connotations of weakness and pathology the notion carried:

“... they are just as vulnerable as you and I would be walking down there on a night. I struggle with that term as it is disempowering in some senses. Some women are fully aware of the risks around their personal safety and have made their choices but I think some other women are more vulnerable.” (Senior Support Worker)

Generally speaking, discourses of vulnerability could accommodate diverse interests and interpretations of sex work, from essentialising violence to highlighting systemic marginalisations and injustices. Vulnerability narratives were deployed in Leeds to underpin cultural shifts away from sex workers being seen a deviant group. These provided a degree of shared language on violence in particular, which foregrounded safety and protection but which had less emphasis on wider rights and entitlements. How far this shared language of vulnerability amongst stakeholders translated into progressive action on the ground is a further consideration now explored in more detail.

Away from enforcement

Prior to the new approach, levels of enforcement action taken against sex workers in Leeds were high. Twenty Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) ranging from two to five years were issued to street sex workers during the period 2006-2013 and in 2013 alone, nearly 60 Home Office Cautions were issued for prostitution (Brown and Moore, 2014), tied to a range of disposals including fines through to imprisonment. Sex buyers were also disciplined through Anti-Social Behaviour Contracts (ABCs). Under the new initiative, at time of the evaluation just three cautions had been issued to women working outside the designated area, although it should be noted that further cautions had been issued against women working outside the designated area since media and public attention following Daria Pionko's murder, in response to resident complaints. Important cultural changes were evident in relation to the focus of the police and the attitude switch from enforcement to protection. One senior police strategist indicated this was 'progress':

The fact that they [sex workers] are not having to hide away in dodgy places, some of the roads are quite busy and they are not skulking away down a back alley trying to avoid detection...

Such moves had clear benefits to sex workers in terms of treatment by police, removing threat of arrest, and concerns over if the police were nearby and putting off clients:

...[Police] would pull up and not believe anything you said and had no compassion and you would be nicked... before, I was worried about getting arrested and if we saw a police car we would go somewhere else... It seems like the police have changed – the 7-7 works as they are still around and the punters know the police are around, they are half here for us and half to still get rid of the punters. (28 years, street working for 8 years)

At the same time though, the fragility of coordinated efforts to address sex worker vulnerability was clear, as indicated by this Strategic Level Senior Police Officer:

It's fortunate that we are the type of institution where you tell people what to do and they do it. If I say arrest one day they would and if I said don't arrest the next then they would. That's how it works here. Some of [the officers] understand the approach but if it stopped tomorrow they would just go back to arresting.

The non-enforcement approach and associated focus on vulnerability represented a move away from responding to sex work as transgression and public nuisance, meaning sex workers, police and support workers could get on with their work less hindered by enforcement-orientated problems. Although evidently a fragile development, this was particularly important in relation to the management of crimes committed against sex workers.

Towards justice

In 2012 the West Yorkshire Policing and Crime Commissioner (WYPCC) area had one of the lowest reporting rates of violence and harassment against sex workers nationally (Feis-Bryce, 2016), with just 7 per cent of 15 reports being made with consent to share full details with the police. A full report is significant as means follow up action can be taken by the police. Under the new initiative the area moved to having one of the highest reporting rates

in the UK, with many more reports also being taken from sex workers in Leeds. In 2014 there were 68 reports made in the WYPCC area with 42 per cent sex workers giving permission for full reports, and in 2015 this rate rose further to 52 per cent (of 61 reports)ⁱ. This dramatic change indicates a significantly more trusting relationship between the police and sex workers, which was supported by the qualitative research:

Issues are being recognised more, women are being listened to, they're reporting more... Lots of police reports used to be rude to women, slagging them off, saying horrible things to them, and women are sort of starting to believe that they can do something about that now. There's a bigger culture of understanding, myth-busting, which means that women are ultimately safer. (Senior Outreach Worker)

Here the outreach worker's view hints that within a protective strategy there could be a fostering of rights and entitlements to justice, in particular. There were wider indications that the shift away from enforcement was dovetailing with more effective criminal justice responses to crimes against sex workers. At time of writing, since the introduction of the managed area two violent perpetrators who raped sex workers had been brought to justice; sentenced to 8 and 10 years respectively. A third case was to be tried in Leeds Crown Court later in 2016.

Despite this progress and attitudinal change, recognising and addressing crimes perpetrated against sex workers did not necessarily deliver results in terms of addressing lived realities of vulnerability. Situational dangers and harms in particular remained significant because of sex being sold in isolated spaces: backstreets, industrial estates and car parks, usually in the dark during night-time hours. As one drugs worker and outreach partner stated: "*Sex workers are always going to be vulnerable, as soon as you get picked up you are being taken away and the risk is still present*". Sex workers noted that physical vulnerability remained very much central to their work:

I think [the non-arrest approach] is a lot easier because they will never stop prostitution – but there could be more police officers – because you know there are serious attacks that go on down here and it is when police presence aren't about. (28 years, street working for 8 years)

Fear of violence, and indeed the attacks on sex workers continued, underlined most starkly by the Daria Pionko murder in December 2015. Daria was a Polish migrant worker and her death forms part of a wider picture of fatal attacks on migrant sex workers in the UK. Correspondence with grassroots projects established that from the last 14 sex worker murders in the UK (October 2013 to December 2015), 11 of those lost were migrant womenⁱⁱ. This indicates a racialised targeting of sex workers due to heightened vulnerability, particularly in relation to migrant workers' reluctance to report crimes for fear of citizenship status repercussions. Such racialised vulnerability might be understood as intensified by a broader context of selling sex in risky physical spaces:

I am a police officer – if I am going into someone's house I have a stab vest, handcuffs, a baton, CS spray, I will ask the radio to ask about previous information, and I have no way intentions of getting as intimate as the women do. The women are getting into cars and they don't know who he is. They have none of the protection afforded to them. I do think they are vulnerable. (Senior Police Officer B)

Attitudinal change and a foregrounding of vulnerability were steps towards social justice for sex workers, but it is also notable that addressing wider structural vulnerabilities seemed beyond the scope, remit and outcome of the partnership scheme. The value of using a shared non-discriminatory language to highlight the hazards and injustices faced by street sex workers might well be seen as limited if this language is not matched by corresponding action on social justice. Indeed, sex workers drew attention to broader regulatory structures which were considered to be the only way that violence would be more fully addressed:

... it is never going to be safe down there, even with cameras down there, every time you get into a punters car you are putting yourself at risk, I don't see how anything down there can make it safer. The only way it will make it safer is if they made houses for girls to work in but the government won't do that. (26 year old, street working intermittently for 12 years)

Concerns of residents and businesses continued to be a central driver of the development of the scheme, particularly following Daria's murder, after which the policy was placed under review and enforcement of conditions of the managed area was

tightened. This highlighted the fragility of enhanced safety work and how local initiatives implemented within a wider framework of criminalisation involved a delicate balancing of sex worker safety and the concerns of certain residents. For some this may raise questions about how far shared discourses and local partnership work on vulnerability translated into widespread and a deep-rooted commitment to action against what could be fatal risks faced by sex workers. When considered in light of the socio-economic and political factors which shape the lived vulnerabilities of sex workers, the managed area was a blunt tool in some ways. It offered important pragmatic and progressive developments but could only achieve so much given the wider structural context and national legal framework. As one senior police strategist said: *'I would like to think there was some progress but there is a long way to go'*.

Concluding comments: Vulnerability and social justice for sex workers

The concept of vulnerability has risen to prominence in the governance of sex work, with vulnerability narratives offering a rare point at which radical feminist, liberal feminist, sex worker, activists, local practitioner and national policy discourses intersect and overlap. However, widespread and variable usage of the notion in this arena also results in a lack of analytic clarity which can be problematic when it is operationalised. At national policy level across the UK, vulnerability narratives operate to downplay structural accounts of social problems and rehearse constructions of certain groups as representing a social problem. These ideas are often a vehicle for advancing the idea that sex work is inherently dangerous and an activity that can never be pursued through voluntarily engagement. Such uni-dimensional understandings of vulnerability within commercial sex arenas flatten out the diversity of the industry and experiences, justifying social control mechanisms which exacerbate the lived vulnerabilities of those who sell sex. This plays into a longstanding simultaneous offender/victim construction which ultimately locates responsibility for risks and harms with the individual sex worker rather than in structural factors such as poverty, exclusion, and gendered violence.

A local view of attempts to address sex worker vulnerability reveals a more varied picture. Evidence from Leeds highlights possibilities for how vulnerability narratives can operate to support mobilisation of resources, cultural shifts away from sex workers being seen as

‘public nuisance’ and moves towards progressive criminal justice responses to violence and harassment. Although foregrounding protection from violence more than wider rights and entitlements, vulnerability-based approaches provided a platform for safety work and ideas about freedom from victimisation that in Leeds mapped onto progressive criminal justice responses in particular. Discourses of vulnerability could be pathologising, but could also frame challenges to the stigmatisation of sex workers and bring into focus situational and structural contexts that exacerbate harm and violence. Indeed, the normative power and amorphousness of vulnerability narratives provided a pragmatic conceptual umbrella under which variously motivated collective action on sex worker safety could be pursued, and there is some evidence that sex workers themselves are receptive to framing their experiences in these terms (see also Ava Caradonna and x:talk project 2016).

The limited-enforcement, protection-based sex work partnership in Leeds is a clear example of how efforts can be made to ‘design out’ vulnerability in sex work (see Sanders and Campbell, 2007). Yet in the context of wider ‘discourses of disposability’ (Lowman, 2000), national policy frameworks which criminalise the sale of sex, and a broader austerity and responsabilisation agenda, progressive local initiatives can only achieve so much. Addressing sex worker vulnerability at local level seemed in many ways to be a strategy which centred on acknowledging and prosecuting violence. Such a focus provided important gains not to be understated in their significance, but might also be seen as limited in terms of tackling wider inequalities and social policy scaffolding implicated in the lived realities of sex work, such as matters of welfare, housing, health and gender inequalities.

Inclusive, anti-discriminatory language and action on violence are vital strands of challenging the stigma and marginalisation which sex workers face, but the political, economic and legal context which shapes their daily lives is urgently in need of reform if sex workers lived experiences of vulnerability are to be addressed effectively. In efforts to address the vulnerability of sex workers it is important that this slippery concept is handled with care. Building on accounts of vulnerability advanced by Quesada et al (2011; 341), sex worker vulnerability might usefully be understood as position in a social order where physical and emotional suffering is inflicted and patterned by economic injustice, cultural stigma, and gendered, sexualised and racialized discriminations. At the same time, accounts

of sex worker vulnerability must leave space for recognition of the multitude of identities, stories, embodiments, emotions, practices and performances which sex work involves. Sex workers should be seen as vulnerable but also as creative agents with differential resources, pursuing varying strategies of being under conditions which expose them to violence, harassment, health difficulties, discriminations and a proliferation of other adversities. Progressive discourses of vulnerability might be one tool in the armoury of moves towards social justice for sex workers, but as the sex worker voices in the evaluation showed, it is action to tackle legal, social and economic marginalisation, stigma and violence that are needed most urgently.

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ⁱ Correspondence with National Ugly Mugs March 2016

ⁱⁱ N=11 victims were migrants (5 Romanian, 3 Polish, 1 Columbian, 1 Israeli, 1 US/Mexican). Information from Shelly Stoops via National Ugly Mugs.