

Commentary

UK Students and Sex Work: Current Knowledge and Research Issues

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ABSTRACT

Available evidence, largely anecdotal suggests that students are turning to quick ways of making money such as work in the sex industry in order to balance their finances, a trend seen in other countries with similar student support and tuition fee policies. Further research is urgently needed to understand the scale of student involvement in sex work and to clarify our understanding of the factors that influence the decision to engage in it. Unfortunately a number of methodological, practical and political problems stand in the way of such research. These are discussed together with preliminary findings from an exploratory study. Copyright © 2007 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: students; higher education; prostitution; sex work; research

‘In my day, people went to University in order to avoid this kind of life, but now they lead this kind of life in order to go to University’.

Female Massage Parlour Owner in Leeds, BBC World Service interview with RR, 2001.

Students are commonly perceived as living a life of revelry with few cares and responsibilities. However, there is reason to believe that this romanticized perception is starkly different, particularly for those students whose economic and social circumstances have brought them into direct contact with the sex industry. This paper explores the background to this phenomenon, presents currently available knowledge and examines the practical and institutional hurdles that confront researchers wishing to understand how and why this situation has arisen.

The plight of contemporary students is inextricably linked to their economic circumstances. Mandatory grants were abolished in the 1990s, leaving many having to take out long-term loans to meet their financial needs, leading in turn to increased debts. The introduction of tuition fees has further exacerbated hardship with evidence pointing to

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soaring levels of personal debt, and increases in the time expected to pay these off. A National Westminster Bank (2004) survey puts the average debt in 2004 at £12 180, a rise of 50 per cent over the previous year, with one-third of students now believing it will take 10 years to pay this off. These economic necessities now mean that a high proportion of all students are working in addition to studying, in order to contain spiralling debts. Several studies point to the demanding economic situation as a root cause of a host of problems— notably psychological distress, which has now become ‘endemic in the student population’, and impaired exam performance (e.g. Andrews & Wilding, 2004; Hodgeson & Simoni, 1995; Lindsay & Paton-Saltzburg, 1993; National Union of Students, 1994, Roberts & Zelenyanski, 2002; Roberts et al., 2000; Windle, 1993). Regrettably, to these problems may be added participation in sex work.

SEX WORK

Anecdotal evidence was first presented by Barrett (1997) that students are turning to quick ways of making money such as illegal commerce or the sex industry, in order to balance their finances. Such work may leave students with more money and time for studies than the poorly paid jobs usually available to them (Lantz, 2004; Moffat & Peters, 2004). With respect to sex work, Roberts and colleagues (Roberts et al., 2000; Roberts and Zelenyanski, 2002) in a study at two universities found that between 3 and 4 per cent of their respondents knew of other students involved in prostitution to support themselves financially. Positive responses on each of these issues were significantly associated with being in debt. To our knowledge, these are the only UK data pertinent to the prevalence of student involvement in the sex industry. These results, together with evidence from several disparate sources (Chapman, 2001; Glendinning, 2004; Lantz; Sedgman, 2004; Whitaker, 2001) are consistent with the view that increasing numbers of female students are entering the sex industry, in order to make ends meet—many seem to feel that the prospect of significantly fewer working hours and a considerably higher wage, which the sex industry can offer women, is a more attractive option than other jobs (Sedgman), and that sex work is less deterring than poverty, severe debts and perhaps facing exclusion from university because of difficulties in paying tuition fees (Whitaker). Some of the students interviewed have simply entered wet T-shirt contests to win money whereas others have auctioned their virginity on the Internet or started work in brothels. The Praed Street Project in London, England’s primary clinic for sex workers, have noticed a similar trend and claim that a growing number of their clients are students. Furthermore, these students agree that the main motivation behind their choice of work is the abolition of the student grant (Chapman).

Moffat and Peters (2004) have recently examined the pricing of personal services and earnings of workers in the UK prostitution industry. They collected data from the website @Punternet¹, which purports to provide a means for exchanging information between clients and sexual service providers. They found that prostitutes earn more than double the wage of non-manual workers and more than three times that of manual workers. Earnings in the sex industry are also positively correlated with earnings from alternative employment. Hence, a sex worker will earn more in London than in another part of the UK. Furthermore, a significant effect was found for age, indicating that younger personal

¹This website can be found at <http://www.punternet.com/>.

service providers in the late teens and early 20s earned higher wages than older sex workers. Being a young student will thus elevate one's earning capacity. Similar findings have been reported by Raymond, Hughes, & Gomez (2001). These data provide convincing evidence for the major role that money plays in the decision to take up sex work. Our own preliminary analysis of data from the Punternet website found many field reports submitted by clients explicitly referred to the student status of the women working as sexual service providers, with some indication that the number of such reports has been increasing over time. These women are generally working from their home, in massage parlours or saunas or as escorts.

The trend for student involvement in sex work has also been seen in other countries with similar student support and tuition fee policies. Anecdotal evidence from Sedgman (2004) suggested that approximately half of all brothel workers in Melbourne, Australia, could be students. These women professed an intention to quit their work in the sex industry as soon as they had finished their degree. Sex work was seen as a job that they would only do during their studies, in order to afford their education and living expenses. A study by Lantz (2004) also in Melbourne, which investigated the social, educational, economic and environmental influences on female students' decisions to enter sex work also supports contentions that financial strain is the major factor.

Barrett (1997) reminds us that involvement in sex work brings with it a host of risks—criminality, drug abuse and ill-health. Raymond, Hughes, & Gomez (2001) have found that sex workers are paid considerably more money if they agree to sex without a condom. Forty-five per cent of the women in their sample even stated that they risked abuse if they insisted on using protection during sex. Even though many establishments have rules of obligatory condom use by all customers, this was found to be negotiable between the client and service provider, thus presenting risks to the sex worker of contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (Wolffers, 2004). A cross cultural study conducted with prostitutes from five countries showed that 80 per cent of the women had suffered physical violence from clients and pimps along with subsequent negative physical as well as psychological health effects (Raymond et al., 2002). Clearly, on the basis of this kind of data, it is difficult to claim that sex work is positively experienced by a majority of service providers, despite the claims that it can be an empowering and positive experience for many women (Agustin, 2004; Wahab & Sloan, 2004).

RESEARCHING STUDENT SEX WORKERS

It is clear that further research is urgently needed to understand the scale of student involvement in sex work and to clarify our understanding of the factors that influence the decision to engage in it. We particularly need to understand the short- and long-term consequences both for the individuals themselves, and for society of organising higher education in such a way that the sex industry becomes a major beneficiary. We might also ask what steps higher education institutes themselves are willing to take to recognize and address the problem. A recent review of mental health issues facing UK students (Olohan, 2004) contained no recognition that students may be undertaking sex work and even downplayed the role of financial hardship itself in generating psychological distress.

For the past 2 years, the authors have been engaged in attempts to study students in the UK engaged in sex work—here, defined as payment for sexual services (prostitution) or work in branches of the adult entertainment industry (stripping, escorting or lap dancing,

etc.). Our work has several aims—first of all to identify the pathways into sex work for students—in particular, whether specific background factors such as prior economic hardship, lower educational attainment or a history of physical or sexual abuse place some people at greater risk of choosing this type of work. In addition, we feel it is important to explore the motivations of student sex workers—what advantages and disadvantages the work offers them—as well as to assess perceptions of the costs and consequences of engaging in sex work for personal, social and family relationships, academic attainment and mental health. To address these issues, we initially sought to undertake a series of semi-structured interviews with participants.

Unfortunately, a number of methodological and political problems have arisen with this work. Following phone calls and meetings with the National Union of Students' (NUS) Head of Welfare, initial responses were favourable with suggestions from the NUS that they would fund the work, which they envisaged would be undertaken with a team of researchers throughout the UK. Shortly after this initial enthusiasm and without further explanation, the NUS ceased all further communication. Attempts by telephone and email, both to the Head of Welfare and the President failed to elicit any response, although other individuals within the organisation expressed incredulity and were unable to explain what was going on. One of the Universities involved in the initial study which had identified a link between students participating in sex work and being in debt (Roberts et al., 2000), refused ethical clearance on the grounds that asking questions about people's sex lives and their earlier adverse sexual experiences was considered 'too sensitive'. This action appears to endorse the view that it is better to have the problem out of sight than address whether there are vulnerable individuals requiring help. The ethics committee at our own institution cleared the project, but only on the condition that the work was not conducted with students from there. We know of several students who have been or may be currently engaged in sex work but are unable to pursue the matter in any way because of the 'ethical constraints' imposed.

As a result of these difficulties, we subsequently sought to obtain participants through information and contact sheets placed on notice boards in student unions, sexual health clinics and specialized clinics for sex workers around London. This too was not without difficulty. Although our protocol was deemed satisfactory by the head of one of London's leading sexual health clinics, we were then invited to submit yet another proposal—this one some 57 pages long, for yet another ethics committee. The time scale involved in this has meant that even should the proposal eventually pass this third hurdle, the project could not be completed on time for a research thesis. This appears to be yet one more instance where increasing ethical constraints on research are being vigorously pursued, not in order to protect the welfare of human beings who participate in research but to prevent socially important but 'uncomfortable' research from being conducted. We would not be the first to ask whether ethics committees are 'strangling research' (Barracough, 2004; Elder, 2004). We proceeded to submit a paper examining the research issues in this field to a well-known journal. This was returned without review with the comment that the journal would not publish any material without a reply from the NUS, though they would not seek to contact the NUS for this—effectively handing a veto to an organisation, which had already withdrawn from public communication on this topic.

A second study was designed to gather further data by means of an exploratory cross-sectional survey. In this, we gathered data on a range of measures (of economic, physical and psychological well-being), in addition to asking students whether they knew of other students engaged in a range of activities (including different types of sex work), in

order to help support themselves financially. Such a question is, of course, not ideal because it does not directly capture individual involvement. However, its advantage is that it has provided a conduit through the maze of research ethics committee requirements. A further advantage is that respondents can describe themselves without risk of feeling their own situation could be exposed. As one would expect as if they had been talking about themselves, the measure did, in fact, correlate with individual financial, physical and psychological measures, and its utility is further supported by the fact that we were able to produce models with strong predictive ability, particularly with respect to lap dancing and stripping, where we were able to explain up to 80 per cent of the variance. Our data also suggested that the pathways to stripping and lap dancing might differ considerably from those leading to prostitution and escort work. There is an urgent need to replicate and extend these findings in other areas of the UK using larger samples and where possible, better measures that will arrive at a more precise estimate of the magnitude of this social problem.

What is evident so far is that this issue is not simply methodologically difficult to conduct. There appear to be considerable institutional hurdles to obtaining any data on what is an issue of national importance. The question of whether students engaged in sex work should be given any kind of a voice through the research process does not seem to have occurred to anyone with whom we have sought help. It would appear that the leadership of the NUS have decided that a policy of non-cooperation and non-investigation of students working in the sex industry best serves their interests. Whether it is in students' interests that the topic remains under wraps is another matter and does not seem to concern them. The fact that in the recent past, several previous NUS presidents have found careers in the political party that brought us tuition fees is unlikely to be unrelated to this. In fact, it seems hard to come up with an alternative hypothesis to explain the swing from enthusiasm to silence on a welfare matter of such obvious importance and which has clear policy implications for the NUS and the Government.

Meanwhile, universities themselves show little enthusiasm to cooperate in addressing the question of why their clientele are increasingly turning to employment which entails the provision of sexual services to a paying public. The potential psychological and physical cost to students appears to be of little interest or else is viewed as a potential source of negative public relations. Of course, providing sexual services, in order to obtain a 'good education' is neither a marketing dream for higher education institutions, nor for the NUS, both of which function as businesses predicated on the existence of a sizeable student body. Funding applications have also been turned down with no explanation. Unless some political will can be found that is capable of operating above individual institutions, any way forward will be difficult. As the opening quote to this piece makes clear, the tragedy is that for many, the education system may be failing to provide an opportunity for self-improvement and a real opportunity to *transcend* economic deprivation.

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