

# **AN ACADEMIC RESPONSE TO “BIG BROTHEL”<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> “BIG BROTHEL: A SURVEY OF THE OFF-STREET SEX INDUSTRY IN LONDON”, BY JULIE BINDEL AND HELEN ATKINS, POPPY PROJECT, EAVES HOUSING FOR WOMEN, PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER 2008

## **1.INTRODUCTION AND KEY THEMES FOR COMMENT**

We are writing in response to the “Big Brothel” Report published by The Poppy Project. We express some serious concerns about some of the information in the report, the assumptions made and the methods used to gather information for the report. As a group of established academics and researchers, we have grave concerns about the lack of ethical protocols and procedures followed in this study and also the weak methodological rigour through which information was gathered.

In addition, we are worried about the salacious nature of the report and the media ‘hype’ that has been generated regarding safer sexual practices in brothels and the price of sexual services in the UK. Due to considerable media attention and exposure given to the report, there is the danger of simplistic misrepresentations impacting upon very important social and public policy issues. At this particular juncture in the history of regulation/management of the sex industry we need rigorous research that offers clarity and knowledge about the complexities involved in order to develop social policy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These misrepresentations fall largely into the areas of: safer sex, children being exploited in the indoor sex industry, types of sexual services, safety in the indoor markets and the representation of men who pay for sexual services.

## 2. METHODOLOGY: METHODS OF GAINING INFORMATION AND ASSUMPTIONS MADE

### 2.1 Research Standards

In the social sciences obtaining ethical approval for research is MANDATORY. As this research was supported by MP, Harriet Harman, we are shocked that the government's own standards of ethical approval have not been demanded in this research. This research therefore contravenes established protocols from across disciplines:

The Declaration of Helsinki (1964)<sup>1</sup> developed by the World Medical Association, is the cornerstone of research with human participants which upholds basic principles of respect and the right to make informed decisions.

The British Society for Criminology, Code of Ethics for Researchers in the Field of Criminology<sup>2</sup> state that researchers should 'base research on the freely given informed consent of those studied in all but exceptional circumstances'.

The British Psychology Society, in their Guidelines Minimal Standards for Ethical Approval<sup>3</sup> state very clear principles based on the protection of participants; informed consent; no coercion; the right to withdraw; anonymity and confidentiality; and a duty of care.

Social Research Association (developed in 1978) insists that basic principles of informed consent are maintained even in difficult social environments.<sup>4</sup>

As this research crosses over with health issues, the NHS Research Ethics Service should have been consulted.<sup>5</sup>

**Why was this research allowed to proceed without any ethical scrutiny from an independent review board? As a charity, the Poppy Project is obliged to consult their local NHS ethical review committee, before health related research takes place.**

If a report bringing together a range of information claims to be social research one hopes it will confirm to standards of good practice and ethical procedure such as those outlined in the British Sociological Association's ethical guidance.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the report the authors constantly use terms which locate this piece of work as "research", that this is 'research' in the formal and technical sense: terms such as; 'research project', 'manner in which the research was carried out', 'the study'; 'data'; 'database'; 'technical expertise'; 'primary research was conducted over the telephone' (page 5); etc are used to give the impression that this is serious research which has been approved by official bodies. Yet the researchers themselves seem to caution against the validity and reliability due to the "anecdotal" information which is at the base of the report.

The authors themselves give a number of "disclaimers":

"This study is not intended to be an exhaustive mapping of the sex industry in London, nor does it claim to be a piece of irrefutable scientific evidence" (page 4).

The disclaimers made by the authors themselves state that this report is really only an anecdotal account of some responses to hoax calls made to telephone numbers obtained from sex venue adverts.

## **2.2 Bias: Open Investigative Approach?**

The methodology appears to be essentially flawed from the outset. For example, it cites that its main aim is: *"To challenge the misconceptions of the off-street sex industry in London"*. This already presupposes that there are misconceptions and that the perspective of the authors is the correct one (rather than being an open investigation that sets out to explore the nature of the industry, which may or may not verify the research hypothesis). A rigorous and unbiased research study might start off with an investigation of an hypothesis along the lines of 'current depictions of the indoor sex industry are not representative', but its aim would be to explore *whether* it is the case that current depictions are unrepresentative of the industry.

Overall there is a distinct lack of objectivity in the report, which is clearly written from a biased viewpoint and communicates a particular analysis and view of prostitution. In the foreword the Chief Executive of Eaves (CEO) identifies prostitution as something which "helps to construct and maintain gender inequality". Prostitution is understood as violence against women:

*"Additionally prostitution – like other forms of violence against women, is surrounded by old and new mythologies attempting to justify it" (page 4)*

The Chief Executive uses the metaphor of 'hunter/prey' in the Foreword to symbolise the client and sex worker relationship. This is an extreme, exaggerated and unrealistic account of the relationships that exist on a spectrum which includes consent and choice made by sex workers. Extensive quantitative and qualitative research on men who buy sex demonstrates that they are from a wide range of backgrounds, ages, ethnicities, social class, and are usually employed men in conventional relationships (see extensive work by Martin Monto)<sup>7</sup>. In addition, Home Office funded research by Hester and Westmarland (2004) notes that the majority of men they surveyed did not have criminal records. This reflects the evidence that men who buy sex are unlikely to hold rape myths or derogatory attitudes towards women (Monto and Hotaling, 2001). More recent qualitative data demonstrates that amongst men who visit off street premises there are clear codes of conduct around safe sex, the treatment of sex workers, staying within the boundaries of the commercial contract and recognising signs of exploitation (Sanders, 2008).

Instead of making reference to the extensive body of research on men who buy sex, in this report gender dynamics in the sex industry are represented simplistically. On the premise that women are victims and men are exploitative, it ignores the complex interplay of power between female sex workers and male customers noted by a range of researchers on the sex industry.

This position is reinforced in the "Setting the Context: Attitudes section of the Report":

"On a fundamental level prostitution is an absolute expression of men's power against women's subordination and lack of choices (Barry, 1979)" (page 8)

"Paying for prostitution services enables men to assert power and control over women in a way which would be deemed unacceptable in any other sphere" (page 8)

There is an ongoing theoretical and political debate about prostitution which we are not entering into this here, as the point relates to "bias". The press release attached to the report utilises inflammatory language. It quotes one of the authors of the report as follows:

"it has been said that we are never more than six feet away from a rat in London. Apparently, something similar applies to brothels, places where thousands of women are exploited regularly by men who buy sex."

Are brothels or men who pay for sex being compared to rats? This comparison to "rats" is inappropriate for constructive policy debate.

The view that prostitution itself is violence against women is the explicitly stated position of Eaves. Individuals and organisations have a right to hold whatever views they wish, but it is critical that where research is conducted there is consideration and reflection given to biases.

There is an ongoing debate within the social sciences about objectivity and whether any research can be value or bias free. Reflexivity is an important practice social scientists engage in to not only locate themselves in the same critical plane as their research participants but also to reflect upon their own subject positions, including conflicts of interest and views on the 'subject' they are researching. In social science research a check on bias involves adherence to rigorous and ethical social science research practice (see section 2.4).

## **2.3 Lack of Reliability: Information from Covert Calls Taken as Fact**

The main “data” on which this report is based consists of telephone calls made by male “researchers” presenting themselves as potential clients. Yet there are serious problems with the reliability of such data. The methods of phoning up numbers that are advertised on sex venue adverts and taking the information given by the receptionist as ‘fact’ is entirely flawed. What it provides is a snapshot of the marketing process to encourage clients to visit. This data needs to be triangulated with research visits, observations and interviews with clients, managers, and sex workers themselves.

Brothels work on a system of supplying lots of information, much of which is entirely part of the marketing process, to encourage men to visit (see O’Connell Davidson, 1998; Sanders, 2008). In posing as potential customers, the “researchers” have been presented with the usual ‘sales pitch’ and marketing ploy, which could be very different from the reality. The information given over the telephone to attract potential buyers does not necessarily reflect the full picture, particularly in terms of the age and ethnicity of sex workers, which is likely to vary substantially according to what the customer claims to want.

### **2.3.1 Ethnicity**

A good example of how information given on the telephone is not accurate is the ethnicity of sex workers. It is well documented that the ‘exoticisation’ of certain types of women’s bodies is one motivator for men to seek out women of certain ethnicities. Ethnicities that are considered sensual and sexy (for instance Brazilian, Thai, Chinese etc), are then used as advertising ploys to encourage men to visit the premises. Hence, information given over the phone from parlours/saunas and private flats is not a reliable method for establishing the actual nationalities and ethnic identities of sex workers working in parlours.

Indeed, the authors of the “Big Brothel” themselves highlight instances of “ethnic misrepresentation” (page 18). They point to cases where the origin of women may be concealed, such as women who have been trafficked forced to cover up their origin.

This is not to dispute that there are women in the indoor sex industry in London from a wide range of countries of origin. Available research and monitoring data from projects working with indoor female sex workers in London confirm a range of nationalities and a large proportion of migrant sex workers in the London indoor sex industry. ‘Migrant’ is not the same as ‘trafficked’, however, and evidence shows that many migrants make rational choices to travel from home and work in the sex industry (e.g. Agustin, 2006).

Outside of London the proportion of migrant sex workers amongst clients of sex work projects offering outreach to the indoor sex industry varies

considerably ranging from those with a small proportion (less than 10%) to some equalling the higher percentages reported in London. Most areas outside of London are still seeing UK sex workers as the main nationality working in the indoor sex industry. It is important to point out the UK nationality was the most common nationality found by the "Big Brothel" researchers; 194 women were reported to be English, 189 East European (and the second most commonly reported ethnicity) 146 'Oriental', 103 Asian, 41 Spanish, and 41 Italian (data from page 36). One other obvious problem with design is that the categories they use for "ethnicity" not only have nothing whatsoever to do with ethnicity (they refer to nationality, or regional or racial identity) but also are not mutually exclusive – one can be both "English" and "Oriental", "Arabic", "Black", "Asian", "African" etc. Certainly, they cannot produce data that speak to research questions about numbers of migrant workers in indoor prostitution.

### **2.3.2 Age**

A similar case can be made regarding the age of sex workers. Researchers who have carried out empirical work in the indoor sex industry and outreach projects offering support to indoor female sex workers report that it is a standard practice within advertising in the sex industry to not provide the actual ages of people working. The common practice is to present lower ages: for example it is normal for a woman aged mid 30s to have an "advertised" working age of mid 20s. There may be cases where in telephone promotions the presence of more "mature" women is stressed to appeal to men who prefer older sex workers.

Again this is not to assert that no abuse of children through prostitution occurs in the indoor sectors of the sex industry. Research on the openly advertised indoor sex industry reports few cases of the presence of under 18 year olds and that many establishments support government policy on the exploitation of young people, adhering to protocols that do not allow the employment of under 18s and also trafficked people.

There is also an awareness that the presence of young people under 18 would draw the attention of the police and other authorities. Research on the sexual exploitation of young people shows a range of settings in which sexual exploitation of young people occurs. Whilst some of this may be defined as "indoors" this may be in "private" locations such as private houses and flats, sometimes those of family members or neighbours.

## 2.4 Concerns about Ethical Practice

Page 15 sets out the methodology used to gain the information in the report. Male researchers were “trained” (we are not informed of what constitutes ‘training’) to call up numbers from adverts and ask a specific number of questions about the types of sex workers and sexual services offered in the establishments. The nature of the training is very unclear, suggesting that male researchers were left in vulnerable positions, unsupported, cold-calling brothels. Hence they adopted covert research methods, where participants are not informed that research is being carried out. There are many problems with this as a legitimate means of collecting information.

### 2.4.1 The Use of Covert Research

This covert research, where the participants do not know they are taking part in a data collection exercise, would rarely be ratified as ethical by a formal research body (for instance a university or research council) because the methods would not satisfy basic principles of informed consent or demonstrate a commitment to ensuring that the research is voluntary and will not produce harm or distress. The British Sociological Association guidelines warn against using covert research unless there is very clear evidence that the research cannot be carried out in any other way.<sup>8</sup>

The guidelines state that where covert research is used there is a clear acknowledgement that the investigations ‘violate the principles of informed consent and may invade the privacy of those being studied’ (BSA Guidelines, point 32). The guidelines go further and say that observing social situations without consent should rarely be used: ‘Participant or non-participant observation in non-public spaces or experimental manipulation of research participants without their knowledge should be resorted to only where it is impossible to use other methods to obtain essential data’ (BSA Guidelines, Point 32).

As a result of the absence of ethical approval or even a frank discussion of the covert nature of the research, the information used in ‘Big Brothel’ was obtained by deception, and used for purposes of which the respondents were entirely unaware. Covert research was also carried out by men posing as potential customers and visiting brothels, taking away information without informed consent.

Covert research is not justifiable on the grounds that the indoor sex markets are, to some extent, a hidden market, which is one of the reasons the researchers give for adopting this approach. There is a plethora of studies on this issue that have not needed to resort to covert means.

The researchers use as a “justification” for the use of covert methods the following;

*“For people in prostitution, to discuss harmful and illegal machinations of brothels could be dangerous or detrimental for them. There is no reason or incentive for controllers of prostitution to knowingly engage with this type of research” (page 13).*

They base this on what they claim is a “detailed review of research into off-street sex industries” (page 13) and conclude that covert methods are the most reliable way to obtain the data, ‘if not the only viable approach’. This is false on a number of grounds:

- a. First, it treats research participants as ‘subjects’: as if they are unable to decide for themselves whether to participate in the research. The authors have pre-decided that the research would be ‘harmful’ to people ‘in prostitution’, even though there is a substantial research base<sup>9</sup> demonstrating that, provided that research is conducted according to ethical principles that protect the safety and welfare of individuals, for example through assuring their anonymity, many people involved in the sex industry are happy to give informed consent to participate in research which asks them about their working lives, whether they are managed by anyone and if so, whom, issues such as their drug use and drug suppliers, their entry into sex work etc.

Of course, such research cannot be ‘quick and dirty’: it takes some considerable time to build up relationships of trust with research participants and may require initial access through gatekeepers. If done properly, however, such research will generate far more reliable data than a snapshot which sets out to deceive those who are being researched.

- b. Participatory Research Methods are a proven method of inclusive investigation, particularly in the sex industry. Extensive participatory projects have been conducted by Campbell and O’Neill, with all parties concerned with the sex industry, demonstrating there are clear lines of access and routes to extract data even in the hardest situations.
- c. Second, the report states that ‘there is no reason or incentive for controllers of prostitution to knowingly engage with this type of research’. Although the report claims to have undertaken a “detailed review of research into off street industries” (page 13), there seem to be some major gaps in knowledge here, either intended or unintended. A very quick search of the Home Office RDS website will reveal a report by Tiggey May, Alex Harocopous and Michael Hough (2000) entitled “For love or money: pimps and the management of sex work”. The researchers interviewed managers of massage parlours, pimps, sex workers and partners of sex workers. Rather than pre-defining the role of individuals, they allowed respondents to choose for themselves which category they felt best reflected their status.

This avoided the privileged 'outsider' researcher falsely categorising people's experiences based on what they think rather than allowing people to define their own experiences. Julia O'Connell Davidson (1998) also describes the numerous research studies she has undertaken with receptionists, brothel keepers, pimps, sex tourists (male and female) and others involved in the sex industry. None of these studies required a covert approach and, indeed, it would have gone against the professional integrity of the researchers to employ such an approach. See Table A for references to a range of other studies.

There has been a wealth of empirical research conducted in indoor sex markets (brothels, parlours, independent sex workers who work off the Internet- see Table A in Appendix), and there are established gatekeepers and access routes which are established methods of gaining access to sex workers and sex work venues. The authors make no attempt to use these established methods, or efforts to contact sex workers themselves. Nor do they make reference to, or acknowledge, these key empirical studies.

#### 2.4.1.1 Contravening Principles of Good & Ethical Research

The report cites guidance from the British Sociological Association which refers to participant or non-participant observation or experimental manipulation of research participants without their knowledge. While non-disclosure to all participants may be sometimes unavoidable when using observation as a method, this is generally to be discouraged. As Punch (1998: 180) notes:

*"In general, serious academics in a sound academic community will espouse trust, reject deception and abhor harm. They will be wary of spoiling the field, of closing doors to research, and of damaging the reputation to their profession – both as a matter of principle and out of self-interest".*

In the case of the report from the Poppy Project, however, the methods used were neither participant/non-participant observation nor experimental methods: the so-called research consisted of men posing as potential clients who set out deliberately to deceive the people they were researching. This is clearly in contravention of the principles of good and ethical research and cannot be justified. Similarly, the report has scandalously manipulated the guidance given by 'University Ethics Committees' (but did they actually run this past a university?). The name of the University should be stated and more details provided to convince the reader that this was a rigorous process. There is absolutely no evidence at all that a formal application was made to any ethical review board.

While the cited requirements are broadly correct, the research undertaken for this report clearly does not conform to these requirements, in that, as evidenced above, there **ARE** other ways of obtaining the information without resorting to deceit and, if research with sex workers and others involved in the

sex industry is undertaken rigorously and sensitively and in a way that protects the identity of individuals, it should not present harm to individuals or organisations. Clearly the authors either do not understand research or they have chosen to misrepresent the principles of research ethics to justify their own skewed position on the issues. There seems also to be a lack of understanding of issues such as reliability and a lack of knowledge of alternative research methods.

#### **2.4.1.2 Silent Voices of Sex Workers**

It is also important to note that as a result of the covert methods, no current sex workers themselves were interviewed regarding the nature and extent of services or sex workers in the brothels of London in the "Big Brothel" research.

Yet in the acknowledgments the authors thank:

*"all the prostitution survivors who generously gave their time to speak to use"*

Yet in the methods sections there is not further information about the inclusion of women who have exited sex work in the research. Hence, the status and nature of women's involvement in the research is not made clear. There is no information about what information was gathered from these people, how they were recruited to the study etc.

They are present in quotations, of which 4 are used in the report on pages; 5, 7, 12.

It is good practice to explain methodology used in all elements of research fieldwork drawn upon in a study.

### **3. SHAKY ASSUMPTIONS AND SKEWED REPRESENTATION OF FINDINGS: LACK OF EVIDENCE BASE**

The report makes no reference to the majority of empirical research literature on the indoor sex industry in the UK. Even if its “findings” are challenging previous findings it is important to locate research findings in the wider research literature.

#### **3.1 Growth in Brothels**

The press release published by Eave’s states that the report “exposes the alarming growth of the off street sex industry in London”. The report poses some interesting questions: namely, how is the sex industry in London evolving, changing, or growing? It is important for researchers and policy makers to monitor changes and trends in the sex industry.

However in this case, the means of investigating changes and particularly growth, avoids speaking to sex workers themselves. Calculations are made on the basis of un-validated sources (sex venue advertisements). It is common knowledge that one venue or sex worker may advertise using different names and places and even numbers. There are also issues with displacement as venues open and close regularly.

The assertions made about the growth in brothels in London are not backed by strong evidence. The challenge for all in assessing trends in the sex industry is the lack of reliable baselines from which to make assessments with regards to growth or decline in terms of numbers of people working and within which sectors. There has been no co-ordinated comprehensive national mapping of the sex industry in the UK utilising consistent and reliable methods. We are currently reliant on making assessments from sources such as area based studies (with just a handful of multi-sited studies and these tend to be in one sector), monitoring data from projects and police data.

#### **3.2 Location of Brothels**

The report identifies “brothels” located throughout the boroughs of London and presents this as something that is surprising or alarming.

*“The research shows the disturbing prevalence of the sex industry in every corner of London-fuelled by the demand for prostitution services” (page No.)*

Yet researchers and projects working with the indoor industry in the UK (including London) over the last 20 years have found and reported that indoor venues, be these private flats where one person works or a larger “brothel” presented as a “parlour” can be located in any area, be it town, city centre, suburban commercial high street or in some cases residential areas. Indeed some sex work projects have tried to raise awareness about

this to highlight that there are many areas where outreach and support services are not commissioned.

There has perhaps been a lack of awareness by the general public and others, due to the care establishments or individuals take to remain discreet and unidentified. (N.B. there are a smaller number of venues who utilise visible “shop front advertising”). This discretion is for a number of reasons: concerns not to impact on local communities; a response to an awareness that local authorities and police would not tolerate a “visible” sex industry; concerns to not draw attention to those working and their clients due to the stigma, judgement and social disapproval that can be associated with sex work (for example sex workers who rent their own premises for business and work from their alone or with a maid will take great care to work discreetly and not draw attention to their presence the same can be said for the managers and workers or other types of venues); and indeed in some cases for venues where there may be exploitative practices those responsible may take efforts to make location known only to certain individuals.

Whilst sex work venues can in theory be located more or less in any area this does not mean there are venues on every corner. It is important that authorities map the sex industry in their area carefully without making assumptions about the number of venues in their area. It is the experience of sex work support projects that numbers of massage parlours, private working flats etc can vary considerable across different towns, cities and other centres of population.

### 3.3 Safer Sex Practices

One finding of the “Big Brothel Report” is that safer sex is overwhelmingly predominant in the indoor markets. Page 6 cites that; ***“Only 2% of brothels admitted to providing penetrative sex without a condom”***

***“13% of brothels disclosed that they offered oral sex without a condom”***

This high rate of condom use and safe sex amongst indoor sex workers is in accordance with the longitudinal clinical research done by Ward et al (1999; 2004; 2005) and more recently by Jeal and Salisbury (2007).

Yet it is very concerning that the emphasis in the press release and in prominent sections of the report is on unprotected sex. For example, “What’s on the Menu in London’s Brothels” highlights the availability of unprotected sexual practices. Do the researchers stress that they found high levels of reported condom use? No. The press release emphasis, with regards to safer sex practices is as follows:

“...such as unprotected anal sex – available for as little as £10 extra in many of the 921 brothels surveyed”.

In the "What's on the Menu in London Brothels Section" the headline summary findings are;

*"Kissing, oral or anal sex without a condom for an extra tenner" (page 4.)*

There is a major misrepresentation here that sends out wrong message about safer sexual practices in the sex industry and may have a detrimental effect on the safety of sex workers.

There is now a wide range of studies that report considerable awareness amongst sex workers about safer sexual practices and report that the majority of sex workers practise safer sex in their commercial sexual encounters. All do highlight concerns about the persistence of reported unsafe sexual practices amongst some indoor sex workers and risk taking practices. For example many studies (see below) report higher levels of reported unprotected oral sex, this has been linked for example to gaps in knowledge about the risks associated with unprotected oral as well as competition within the industry. Despite this, the emphasis is on continuing high levels of safe sex amongst sex workers indoors, which is partly down to the harm reduction programmes that work tirelessly to access indoor premises.

**Jeal, N. and Salisbury, C.** 2007 'Health needs and service use of parlour-based prostitutes compared with street-based prostitutes: a cross sectional survey', *British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* 114(March): 875-881.

**Sanders, T.** 2008 *Paying for Pleasure: Men who Buy Sex*, Cullompton, Devon: Willan.

**Ward, H., Day, S., Green, K. and Weber, J.** 2004 'Declining Prevalence of STI in the London sex industry 1985-2002', *Sexually Transmitted Infections* 80(3): 374-376.

**Ward, H., Day, S. and Weber, J.** 1999 'Risky Business: health and safety in the sex industry over a 9 year period', *Sexually Transmitted Infections* 75(5): 340-343.

**Ward, H., Mercer, C. H., Wellings, K., Fenton, K., Erens, B., Copas, A. and Johnson, A. M.** 2005 'Who pays for sex? An analysis of the increasing prevalence of female commercial sex contacts among men in Britain', *Journal of Sexually Transmitted Infections* 81(6): 467-471.

The majority of research stresses the need for ensuring the delivery of sexual health promotion outreach services which deliver ongoing information, advice and access to sexual health services, encouraging sex workers and others in the sex industry to practice safer sex.

In addition to the above research there is a wider body of UK research studies related to HIV risk behaviour and sex work established since the late 1980s (Blakey, V & Frankland, J, 1995; Day, S, Ward, H and Perrotta, L, 1993; Kinnell, 1990; McCullagh 1998; McKeganey, N and Barnard, M 1992 & 1996; Morgan

Thomas, R 1990 & 1992; Scambler, G and Scambler, A 1995; Ward and Day, 1997; Ward et al, 2004). This research on the whole finds;

- low rates of HIV amongst sex workers,
- transmission linked to injecting drug use & unprotected sex with non commercial partner (drug using);
- that sex workers themselves are key health promotion agents, concerned about their own health and practices in the industry.

Overall this research on sex work and sexual health finds that sex workers practise safer sex when they are empowered to do so (i.e. have access to safer sex supplies and accurate information, not coerced, not under pressure to take risks and are able to control negotiations about condom use). Whilst most sex workers are knowledgeable and conscientious about safer sex practice, there are a number of factors which may disempower them and increase the possibility of "risky" practices:

- Pressure to maximize earnings: problematic drug use, pressure from coercers, the need to pay debts or fines, may make sex workers less resistant to offers of extra money for unsafe sex.
- Lack of up to date, accurate and comprehensible information about sexual health: this may be exacerbated for sex workers for whom English is not their first language.
- Lack of access to condoms: particularly difficult for those who are poor and whose earnings from sex work are committed to drug use or debts.
- Physical and sexual assault when 'risky practices' are imposed on the sex worker
- Criminalization and law enforcement practices, see below.

The Big Brothel report makes no reference to this established body of research on sex work, safer sex and sexual health.

Nor does the report make any reference to outreach projects that, as part of their work, carry out sexual health promotion with indoor sex workers. There are a number of such projects delivering services to sex workers in London, some of which have been established for over 15 years.

Despite the salience given in the report and press announcements to unsafe sexual practices, none of the recommendations made in the report address sexual health.

The misrepresentation and skewing of findings is also visible regarding the findings on the reported cost of sexual services (see 3.4).

### 3.4 Cost of Sexual Services

The authors appear to have little knowledge or understanding of the basics of survey design and analysis. For example, they present data on "average" prices without stating whether the figures they provide are arithmetic means, medians or modes. They look as if they are means, but since the range is from £15 to £250, and the distribution is undoubtedly skewed, it would be more useful if they provided the mode (i.e., most likely), instead of or as well as the mean.

The report has a number of attention-drawing headlines such as;

*"Full sex available for 15 quid" (page 4)*

Yet when you examine the report it turns out that the average price was much higher than this;

*"With the average price of full sex in a London brothel at a current estimate of £61.93"*

The range went up to £250.

Looking at the statistics provided in the appendices (p.33) it becomes apparent that only one establishment said they offered the £15 price and the majority were citing prices much higher than this; 2 citing £20, 1 citing £25, 64 citing between £25-£35, 175 citing between £35-£45, 112 citing £45-£55, 171 citing £55-£65, 30 citing £65-70, 35 citing £75-£80 and 121 above this. To cite the exception of one as being the norm in the headlines is extremely misleading and, when you consider that most readers will not get as far as the more detailed analysis, risks being deceptive. Either that, or it demonstrates that the authors do not have any knowledge about how to present findings from research in a balanced way that reflects accurately the data.

### 3.5 Indoor Sex Work and Safety

The authors assert that it is a myth that indoor prostitution is safer than other markets (page 12) yet this is in contradiction to (and without reference to) the body of detailed studies that examine the different characteristics and violence prevalence between sex markets. The authors show no awareness of the international literature that demonstrates that indoor sex work is markedly safer than street based markets, such as;

**Brents, B. and Hausbeck, K.** 2005 'Violence and Legalized Brothel Prostitution in Nevada: Examining Safety, Risk and Prostitution Policy', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 20(3): 270-295.

**Day, S.** 2007 *On the Game. Women and Sex Work*, London: Pluto Press.

- Hausbeck, K. and Brents, B.** 2000 'Inside Nevada's Brothel Industry', in R. Weitzer (ed) *Sex for Sale*, London: Routledge.
- Kinnell, H. 2008** *Violence and Sex Work in Britain*, Cullumpton: Willan
- Kinnell, H.** 2006a 'Murder Made Easy: The Final Solution to Prostitution?' in R. Campbell and M. O'Neill (eds) *Sex Work Now*, Cullumpton: Willan.
- Kontula, A.** 2008 'The Sex Worker and Her Pleasure', *Current Sociology* 56(4): 605-620.
- Sanders, T. and Campbell, R.** 2007 'Designing Out Violence, Building in Respect: Violence, Safety and Sex Work Policy', *British Journal of Sociology* 58(1): 1-18.
- Whittaker, D. and Hart, G.** 1996 'Research note: Managing Risks: the social organisation of indoor sex work', *Sociology of Health and Illness* 18(3): 399-413.

Again these studies do not deny the existence of violence in indoor sectors. They acknowledge the complex nature of violence indoors and analyse the nature of violence carefully. But a recurrent trend in the findings is that there are much lower levels of violence in many indoor sectors and this is the established position in the UK.

### **3.6 Anecdotal Indicators of Trafficking**

The Poppy Project is a specialist project which offers critical specialist support to victims of trafficking. The 'Big Brothel' report has one page of findings which relate to trafficking (see page 23) and is part of the Data Analysis: The Services, it has a sub heading "Anecdotal Indicators of Trafficking". Below this sub heading is text made up of predominantly from people answering the phones in "brothels".

Extracted from Big Brothel Page 23:

*"Anecdotal Indicators of Trafficking*

*What the Brothels Say:*

***Unprotected sex***

*Everything for a condom but for an extra £10 without?*

*"For no condom and anal call tomorrow, Eastern Europeans promised later in the week"*

***Anal***

*"£30 extra for anal if 'smallish' down there"*

*"Any price negotiable depending on size"*

*"The younger girl does anal"*

***Kissing & Unprotected Oral (Oral Without)***

*"French kissing £10"*

*"Kissing available for £20 'depending on what you look like'"*

*"Add £10 to prices for French kissing. Situated near a mosque and primary school"*

*"Get hand relief, oral without, full sex, kissing at £70 for 30 minutes, £100 for 1 hour"*

At the bottom of the page are two quotations both from "male sex buyers in London". One assumes these are men included in a study referred to in the acknowledgements (but not detailed), which authors carried out in December 2007 as part of a wider international project. These are;

*"Where they are cheap, there are usually trafficked prostitutes"*

*"She was frightened and nervous. She told me she had been tricked. I had sex with her and she seemed fine with the sex. She asked me to help her, but I said there was little I could do. She might have been lying to me"*

What is inferred from this? Is the availability of anal sex being suggested as an indicator of trafficking? Is the availability of French kissing an indicator of trafficking? There is no textual dialogue to explain what the authors are arguing here about advertised prices for services, available services and trafficking. It would have been useful to hear more from Poppy Project about this aspect of the data: considering the contact they have had with trafficked women there may be some useful lessons to learn about indicators of trafficking or other issues relating to circumstances and employment conditions for those migrant sex workers who have not been trafficked in the London indoor industry. Clearly the quotes from men who pay for sex do make reference to trafficking but these are not, as we understand, data collected via the hoax telephone calls and therefore seems unrelated to the project.

### **3.7 Diversity of Routes into Prostitution and Varied Experiences: Qualitative Experiences and Feelings of Women in Brothels**

At different points in the report comment is made of the experience of women in prostitution.

*“They (women in prostitution) often experience lack of adequate housing, poor physical health, psychological difficulties and emotional stress, financial problems (if the women do not have pimps as such, their money will be likely to fund their coping strategies, such as drugs and alcohol), children in care and criminal convictions”.*

This indeed does reflect the profile found in many contemporary studies of street sex work in the UK. However it does not reflect the profile found in contemporary studies of indoor sex work in the UK. Studies show many fewer markers of social exclusion amongst women in the indoor industry. For example; much better health status (Jeal and Salisbury, 2007); much lower levels of problematic drug use (Galatowicz et al, 2005); fewer criminal convictions (as they are likely not to have been subject to the soliciting legislation or being less likely to be class A drugs users less likely to have been convicted for crimes such as shoplifting and possession of class A drugs); and lower levels of violence against sex workers. Again the researchers do not find that these issues are not experienced by indoor sex workers, but describe the differences and complexities found in their empirical research.

On page 9 in the “Setting the Context” section of the report the authors are clear that they challenge as a myth that women can choose prostitution:

*“It is a choice through lack of choice. A significant number of women involved in street prostitution were groomed as children. Many enter through marginalisation, dependencies and/or economic necessity” (page 9)*

No reference is made to the fact that looking at research in the UK in the round shows a diversity of routes into prostitution, a diverse range of experiences within sex work and feelings about involvement.

Sadly, the uni-directional focus upon sexual exploitation, sex as violence, vulnerability and social exclusion (all of which are real for some sex workers), the questionable means by which the Big Brothel 'research' was undertaken and the lack of engagement with the wider body of research, including Home Office studies, opens the study to criticisms, misrepresentations and bias.

## APPENDIX

**Table A: Examples of Social Research on the Indoor Female Sex Industry in the UK**

AUTHOR/S	DATE	Title & Publishing Details	Methods
Sanders, T	2005	"Sex Work. A Risky Business", Willan Publishing.	Birmingham ethnographic study of indoor sex markets including 350 people, including 55 formal interviews
Galatowicz, L, Pitcher, J & Woolley, A	2005	"Report of the community-led research project focussing on drug and alcohol use of women sex workers and access to services" Terrence Higgins Trust, London.	Coventry study Interviews with 23 parlour based sex workers
May, T , Harocopous A & Hough, M	2000	For love or money: pimps and the management of sex work" .	79 interviews with people involved in sex markets (street and indoor, sex workers, massage/sauna managers, partners of sex workers and pimps) Additional agency interviews 35 police officers completed questionnaires 4 geographical areas
Campbell, R and Van Nooigen , L	2002	Seafarers, Scania's, Saunas and Sexual Health: The Portside Project Promoting Sexual Health in the Port of Liverpool A Summary of Findings, North Liverpool PCT and Liverpool Hope.	Merseyside study Interviews with 29 sex workers, receptionists & owners Survey of n=90 indoor sex workers Access to anonymised project monitoring data
O'Connell Davidson, J	1998	Prostitution, Power and Freedom	Ethnographic case study of Desiree, entrepreneurial independent sex worker

Whittaker and Hart (1996)	1996	'Research note: Managing Risks: the social organisation of indoor sex work', <i>Sociology of Health and Illness</i> 18(3): 399-413.	Examines the social organisation of working flats.
Brewis and Linstead	2000	<i>Sex, Work and Sex Work</i> , London: Routledge.	Emotional, physical, and sexual labour in the sex work environment
O'Neill and Barberet	2000	'Victimisation and the social organisation of prostitution in England and Spain' in Weitzer, R. (2000) <i>Sex for Sale</i> London: Routledge	Comparative research with England and Spain, 20 women interviewed, plus brothel and club managers, and sex worker support organisations in both countries

<sup>1</sup> The Declaration of Helsinki, <http://www.cirp.org/library/ethics/helsinki/>

<sup>2</sup> BSC <http://www.britsocrim.org/ethical.htm>

<sup>3</sup> BPS [http://www.bps.org.uk/downloadfile.cfm?file\\_uid=2B522636-1143-DFD0-7E3D-E2B3AEFCACDE&ext=pdf](http://www.bps.org.uk/downloadfile.cfm?file_uid=2B522636-1143-DFD0-7E3D-E2B3AEFCACDE&ext=pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Social Research Association standards of research

- safeguard the interests and rights of those involved or affected by the research;
- ensure legislative requirements on human rights and data protection have been met;
- establish informed consent even where this is difficult;
- develop the highest possible standards of research practices including in research design, data collection, storage, analysis, interpretation and reporting;
- consider the consequences of the work or its misuse for those involved in the study and other interested parties;
- ensure appropriate external professional ethical committee approval is granted where relevant.

<http://www.the-sra.org.uk/ethical.htm>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.nres.npsa.nhs.uk/home>

<sup>6</sup> BSA <http://www.britsoc.co.uk/equality/Statement+Ethical+Practice.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Monto, M. A. (1999) 'Clients of Street Prostitutes in Portland, Oregon, San Francisco and Santa Clara California, and Las Vegas, Nevada 1996-1999', Yale University.

— (2000) 'Why Men Seek Out Prostitutes', in R. Weitzer (ed) *Sex for Sale*, Routledge: London. pp. 67-83

— (2001) 'Prostitution and Fellatio', *Journal of Sex Research* 38(1): 140-145.

Monto, M. A. and Hotaling, N. (2001) 'Predictors of Rape Myth Acceptance Among Male Clients of Female Street Prostitutes', *Violence Against Women* 7(3): 275-293.

Monto, M. A. and Garcia, S. (2001) 'Recidivism Among the Customers of Female Street Prostitutes: Do Intervention Programs Help?' *Western Criminology Review* 3(2).

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Monto, M. A. and McRee, N. (2005) 'A Comparison of the Male Customers of Female Street Prostitutes With National Samples of Men', *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 49(5): 505-529.

<sup>8</sup>) Citing from the British Sociological Association Guidelines:

31) There are serious ethical and legal issues in the use of covert research but the use of covert methods may be justified in certain circumstances. For example, difficulties arise when research participants change their behaviour because they know they are being studied. Researchers may also face problems when access to spheres of social life is closed to social scientists by powerful or secretive interests.

32) However, covert methods violate the principles of informed consent and may invade the privacy of those being studied. Covert researchers might need to take into account the emerging legal frameworks surrounding the right to privacy. Participant or non-participant observation in non-public spaces or experimental manipulation of research participants without their knowledge should be resorted to only where it is impossible to use other methods to obtain essential data.

33) In such studies it is important to safeguard the anonymity of research participants. Ideally, where informed consent has not been obtained prior to the research it should be obtained post-hoc.

<sup>9</sup>There is a growing body of UK based research on the indoor sex industry, too numerous to list here. See table A on the following page for reference information about some key empirical studies of the indoor sex industry in the UK.