

Women's experiences buying sex in Australia – Egalitarian powermoves

Hilary Caldwell 

Centre for Social Research in Health, UNSW, Australia

John de Wit

Utrecht University, the Netherlands

Sexualities

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Abstract

Evidence in this article addresses two popular political and scholarly concepts, female sexuality and sex-worker rights, which limit gender equality. Through description of interviews with 21 diverse women buying sexual services in Australia, and examination using interpretative phenomenological analysis, we introduce new ideas about women's therapeutic and pleasure-based motivations to buy sex and their concerns about their safety, money, laws, and stigma. Interviewees of the study described feeling transformative powers in pleasure as they gained skills and confidence to initiate, negotiate and control sexual activity. The experiences of the women who bought sex in this study directly challenge concepts of female sexual passivity and objectification generally and specifically in commercial sex settings. This article also promotes aspects of the sex industry as beneficial to society and demonstrates that destigmatisation and decriminalisation of the sex industry has potential to reduce harms experienced by sex workers and their clients.

Keywords

Australia, female clients, female sexual agency, sex industry, sex work, women buying sex

Introduction

Women buying sex say they are empowered to initiate and control sexual activity when and how they choose to. Contrary to feminist theory about compounding gender inequality when men buy sex from women, this research about women

Corresponding author:

Hilary Caldwell, 26a Templestowe Av, Conder, Australian Capital Territory 2906, Australia. Centre for Social Research in Health, UNSW Sydney, Sydney 2052 NSW, Australia.

Email: caldwell@pcug.org.au

buying sex suggests that power relations in commercial sex that occurs in patriarchal and capitalist settings, are influenced by structures of race and socioeconomic status as much as by gender and that power in commercial sex is not necessarily harmful or destructive. Women describe receiving therapeutic benefits physically, emotionally and socially when they engage a sexual service provider. Women buying sex are exercising a feminist powermove toward equal sexual opportunity, gaining knowledge of their own desires and power to practise boundary setting and consent negotiation. Women are buying sex as a political intervention and rebellion against expected female sexual passivity, and are obscured and invalidated in dominant popular discourse which gives impressions of commercial sex services as strictly gendered and essentially physical.

Women who buy sex remain an under-examined population group because of their own non-identification, societal denial of their practice, the typical focus of sex work research being on male buyers, and because of the narratives about male exploitation of female sex workers which obscure women buying sex. Women do not often report that they have bought sex when asked in surveys. For example, the periodic Australian study of health and relationships (ASHR) surveyed 9134 women in 2004/2005, finding 0.1% who reported ever paying for sex (Rissel et al., 2005). Of the 10,038 women participating in 2012/2013, 0.3% reportedly had ever paid for sex (Richters et al., 2014). In contrast, 16% and 17% of the participating men, respectively, reported ever having paid for sex. In part, this difference may be due to women not framing their sexual service use as buying *sex*. Sexual services are diverse, Harcourt and Donovan (2005) found over 25 different types of sexual services in Australia, and some services may not be conceptualised as *paying for sex* by women or any gender. This may be particularly likely when sexual services do not conform to stereotypical perceptions of commercial sex as a singular, overtly negotiated cash exchange for penetrative sex devoid of emotional involvement. Taylor (2006) found that 60% of her sample of female tourists in the Caribbean who initially denied commercial sex with locals, did report transactional relationships when questioned further. Commercial sex is often negotiated in covert ways and sometimes involves emotional attachment (Bernstein, 2010, Caldwell, 2012, Sanders, 2008). Further, exploitation narratives regarding the sex industry that centre on male perpetrators and female victims, obfuscates other genders and roles. Low rates of women buying sex found in large surveys should be viewed cautiously.

The research underpinning this article builds on two earlier studies. The first study aimed to identify contemporary discourse about women buying sex in Australia (Caldwell and de Wit, 2015). Discourses were identified through an examination of online audience responses to commentary on a televised commercial advertisement depicting sexual tension between an Australian woman holidaying in Bali and a local waiter. Three distinct discourses regarding sex work were noted in audience contributions: sex work is work and women who buy it are empowered; sex work is inherently exploitative and if women buy it they are as bad as men; and stigma is gendered, whereby men who buy sex are seen as abusive

and women who do so are either victims or sluts. The discourse analysis study found that initially few people viewing the television commercial possibly portraying female sex tourism interpreted this as commercial sex. Only after this was suggested by a journalistic commentary did two-thirds of the audience participating in the online debate agree the portrayal was commercial sex. The lack of audience sensitivity to the possibility of women buying sex illustrates that women's sexual agency to buy sex is not foregrounded in dominant social understandings. Denial, indeed sanitation, of female sexual desire and practice, is also prevalent in academic discourse, exemplified by articles positioning female sex tourism as *romance tourism*, a phenomenon separate from male sex tourism (Pruitt and LaFont, 1995, Taylor, 2006, Tornqvist, 2012). Women who buy sex have only recently attracted attention from researchers (Kingston and Hammond, 2016, Minichello and Scott, 2014).

The other earlier study drew on data from interviews with 17 sex workers about their female clients, and found that sex workers perceived an increasing female market, which was diverse and not limited to stereotypical rich, bored, older, heterosexual women (Caldwell and de Wit, 2016). Interviewed sex workers noted only minor differences between the behaviours of male and female clients, with women seen as more likely to use gendered language and to express awareness of the importance of continued and enthusiastic consent. Jointly these earlier studies provide evidence of women buying sex and some of the social attitudes they may encounter, but lack the richness of understanding that may be gleaned from the study reported here that draws on the experiential expertise of women who buy sex themselves.

Until recently, there seemed to be a hesitancy in social and academic discourse to understand the activities of women buying sex as other than (misguided) romance, reinforced by neo-abolitionist scholars who wish to abolish the sex industry. Jeffreys (2003) accuses academics who give significance to women buying sex as politically motivated to de-gender the sex industry while claiming that women do not buy sex like men and, further, that the scale of women buying sex is too small for analysis. However, the examination of the experiences of women buying sex is important to extend our understanding of female sexuality and the sex industry and may reveal that the scale of women buying sex is not accurately reported in surveys. This study interviewed women who had bought sex in Australia and describes the ways in which they went about it, the types of services they bought, their motivations for buying sex and the outcomes they experienced.

This article provides women who buy sex with a voice in sex-industry debate they are otherwise excluded from through non-identification likely related to stigmatisation and social and academic denial of their existence or importance. This is the first study of women buying sex in Australia, successfully reaching this often-elusive population, and we firstly describe our methods in detail. We then describe how and why women went about buying sex and how they thought buying sex affected them. In this way, the concerns of these women about female sexuality and the sex industry are highlighted. This article provides first-hand empirical evidence

of women buying sex with details of their intimate experiences opening up new, important and challenging arenas for sex-industry research and debate.

Methods

This explorative study had a qualitative, post-structural design, as it regards a topic that has not been previously researched and occurs within existing known power structures of patriarchy and capitalism. The study used an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), to keep interviewees' stories as a primary focus, acknowledging them as the experiential experts in the topic, while contextualising their experiences (Smith, 2011). In this way, IPA is exploratory (Creswell, 2013) and honours the processes made by interviewees to make sense of their experiences through a process which Smith (2011) refers to as the hermeneutic nature of IPA, giving freedom to interpret emotions and attitudes not explicitly expressed, rather than a phenomenological reductionist method (Giorgi, 1994; Moustakas, 1994). In addition, IPA particularly endorses an inductive coding of data to encourage discussion of existing psychological theories, models and approaches and is flexible enough to engage with new areas without a theoretical pretext (Brocki and Wearden, 2006). Hence, IPA is particularly suitable for understanding personal experiences (Brocki and Wearden, 2006).

Interviewees were recruited via advertisements placed on Facebook and other websites where sex workers advertise such as Locanto. Most people who responded to the advisements and identified as women and who had bought sex were interviewed using a semi-structured style via a video conferencing tool. Respondents who were not interviewed had less experience or similar experiences to women already interviewed, and purposive sampling deliberately sought diversity in participants. For respondents who were interviewed, each was asked to tell her story about buying sex, and women recounted their stories largely uninterrupted. Prompting questions were used when interviewee accounts lacked substance in key areas such as why they bought sex, the types of services they bought, the accessibility of buying sex, any outcomes they experienced, and whether they were aware of their power or the effects of stigma. Following this, and after a rapport had been established between the interviewer and the interviewee, questions were asked regarding socio-demographic characteristics such as age, relationship status, educational level, ethnicity and income to provide background information on the sample. A verbal summary of the interview was given at the end of each interview giving the interviewee an opportunity to correct any researcher misinterpretation. Two summary memos were made directly following each interview, one for researcher self-reflection and the other, a summary of each interviewee's unspoken data, including their mannerisms, and non-verbal expression of emotion. Data from the memos enabled an interpretive analysis beyond a rudimentary thematic approach. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and deductive and inductive data coding was undertaken in NVivo. Theoretical saturation was reached in data collection and analysis when themes from inductive and deductive

coding were reliably distinctive and consistent and no new themes developed. Brocki and Wearden (2006: page 91) reviewed 52 studies using IPA and are concerned about ‘themes subsequently elicited being greatly similar to topic areas’ in interview schedules. The reliability of the coding process and development of themes are evidenced in this article by comparing the similarities and differences in the final themes versus the interview schedule, and through the use of verbatim extracts of transcripts representing the most articulate expression of particular themes.

Participants

The sample was purposive in that advertisements were placed at different times, in different Australian jurisdictions, and targeted women of different sexual orientations throughout the interview period to ensure diversity. Eligibility for interview included being female-identifying and having bought a sexual service in Australia. At the end of the interview process, 21 self-identified women, including one trans-identifying woman, had been interviewed. The sample was almost equally divided into heterosexual women ($n = 11$) and women identifying as other sexual orientations ($n = 10$), and there did not appear to be any particular difference in demographics between these two groups.

The age of women interviewed ranged from 18 to 69 years, and they were from most jurisdictions of Australia, with nine living in New South Wales, seven in Victoria, two in South Australia, and one each in Australian Capital Territory, Queensland and Western Australia. In regard to the educational level of the women interviewed, 15 were university graduates or post-graduates, three had secondary schooling, and three did not state their educational level. All interviewees self-identified as white or Caucasian. Seven women interviewed described their incomes as high, seven as medium, four as medium to low, and three described their incomes as low. At the time of interview, the women described themselves as being single ($n = 12$) or partnered ($n = 9$), with seven describing their relationships as open and most saying they had bought sex for several years while in and out of various relationships.

Almost all the women in the sample had bought sex multiple times. The services they sought were heterosexual sex ($n = 13$), same-sex attracted sex ($n = 7$), threesomes with any gender ($n = 6$), fetish services described as bondage and discipline (BDSM) ($n = 4$), and educational services such as body work therapy ($n = 2$).

Results

To honour the interviewees as experts in their own lives, the stories of the 21 women were largely heard without interruption and a memo was written directly following their interviews about their non-verbal communication including the emphasis placed on specific issues. This approach determined the concepts that each interviewee was most keen to impart, creating a hierarchy of what was motivating each interviewee to be involved in the study. A desire to see stigma reduction

for people connected to the sex industry was of most concern for nine interviewees, three of whom wished to 'give back' to the sex work community. Five other interviewees recognised study participation as an opportunity to talk about taboo topics and four wanted to promote sex as therapy. A feminist stance was taken by three interviewees who wished that men and women would have equal sexual opportunity.

Inductive analysis of the content of the interviews found initial themes consistent with interview questions about motivations, outcomes, power, and stigma, and emerging themes regarding women's feelings about safety, various laws, and exchanging money for sex. Through further deductive analysis, initial themes were clarified, the motivation was divided into subthemes, and a new theme was identified about how women came to realise they could buy sex. In the following sections, these themes are presented in roughly the order of occurrence in women's narratives proceeding from how they realised they could buy sex, to their multiple motivations for therapy, to learn about themselves and their sexuality, and to experience intimacy and pleasure. We then present the women's feelings about safety, power and stigma. Finally, we document their opinions about how various laws affect their activities and their thoughts about exchanging money for sex.

How women found out and went about buying sex

Given the dominance of social discourse invalidating female sexual agency to buy sex, this study investigated how individual women found out about the possibility of buying sex. Slightly less than half of the women ($n = 10$) knew a sex worker or allowed someone else to research services. Three of these women were current sex workers (one becoming a sex worker after buying sex for several years) and two others had worked in the sex industry in the past. Two other interviewees had contact with sexology communities who influenced their use of sexual services. A slight majority of the women in this sample ($n = 11$ of 21) had no contact with the sex industry prior to buying sex, having only read media articles about women who had bought sex. Google was the research tool used by most interviewees, irrespective of their prior knowledge of the sex industry, and seven cited a single newspaper article, written by Silver (2013a) about a counselling client who had been a sex tourist. Three of the women bought sex prior to the internet age and used newspapers for research.

The decision the women made to buy sexual services while simultaneously denying they bought sex *per se*, supported previous research findings about female sex tourists who denied buying sex, in part, due to a dominance of impressions of commercial sex services as unemotional and essentially physical. Of the four women who participated in the study because they wanted to promote the sex industry as therapeutic, three objected to the idea that they were buying sex, describing sexual services as 'physio', and defining 'commercial sex' as a service for people who desired sexual pleasure in the absence of other motivations.

Two further interviewees, who had recently bought sex with a focus on pleasure, 'remembered' they had bought somatic (hands-on) sexual education in the past and only identified these services as sexual services while being interviewed. Others denied buying sex per se, such as interviewee 13 who was 'not looking for a prostitute service' because she paid for a 'VIP companion escort who is a lot more caring and intimate than you would expect'. These distinctions as to the definition of buying sex, are based on individual motivations and illustrate the limitation of social narratives about buying sex as deviant, exclusively male, or exploitative.

The women who were interviewed expressed overall satisfaction about buying sex. However, seven women described situations where sexual services did not meet their expectations. Some female clients felt discriminated or rejected by some sex workers who were 'not into girls' (interviewee 2), or by sex workers who failed to show, were late or disorganised. In addition, the women interviewed were not impressed by sex workers who advertised as 'sex gods'. For example, 'I think that men just promote themselves in a fashion that is completely over the top... They are all very good looking and they are all Valentino, and they are all studs in bed, and all the rest of it. And the reality is very far removed from that' (interviewee 8). One woman felt that a male sex worker had been patronising toward her, and some male sex workers were seen as wanting ongoing relationships with female clients outside of business transactions. It must be noted that the services bought by the women in this sample were well researched, meaning that sex workers who were likely to deliver bad services, such as men posing as sex workers or sex workers without experience, were not engaged. Despite these experiences, the women all described being open to buying sex in the future.

Motivations to buy sex

Scholarly research about male motivations to buy sex included a desire for intimacy and affection, to seek sexual variety, and, out of convenience (Bernstein, 2010; Birch, 2014; Caldwell, 2012; Holt and Blevins, 2007; Pitts, et al., 2004; Sanders, 2007). All of the interviewees for this study stressed multiple motivations to buy sex, meaning there was some cross-over between the motivations of buying sex for therapy, to learn, for intimacy and, for pleasure, and these are exemplified in the following sections.

Buying sex for therapeutic reasons. Almost half the sample (10 of 21) framed their primary motivations to buy sex as therapeutic. Underlying conditions indicating a need for therapy were vaginismus ($n=3$), healing from intimate partner violence ($n=3$) and childhood sexual abuse ($n=2$), 'trans issues' ($n=1$), and depression and stress ($n=1$). The combined therapeutic goals were to achieve physical penetration, to learn about bodies and sexuality, and to practise good sexual communication around boundaries and consent.

Interviewee 12 had a strong argument for the need for hands-on sexual health practitioners:

I had major difficulties with sex in my relationships and I really wanted to get on top of that problem, to be able to rescue my relationships... I was eventually diagnosed with vaginismus, which got to a stage when I couldn't even have a pap smear done... so all my issues in relation to sex, especially penetrative sex were primarily medical but I couldn't get them addressed because it was impossible for me to have an investigation... I went back to the therapist [who mentioned sex surrogacy]... I did have a couple of days with a straight male sex worker... knowing that he [the sex worker] knows women and knowing that he knows women and knowing that he was experienced in this field again reassured me that I was in safe and comfortable hands... So he [the sex worker] actually wrote me a list of things he wanted to talk about, a list of things he wanted me to learn and he gave me homework!... and I am in a relationship now. I've been able to have my pap smear... I actually just think that this is a fantastic avenue for women who have these kinds of issues.

Some other interviewees also indicated that sex was not particularly important to them, but relationships were. For example: 'you can beat around the bush all that you want, but a relationship that is unfulfilled is going to break down' (interviewee 12), and: 'I can't have a relationship because I can't fuck. You know?' (interviewee 16).

The transwoman interviewed said that it was important for her to be treated as a woman during sexual activity and that sex workers were more likely to be non-judgemental than general hook-ups. Thanks to the therapeutic outcomes these women felt they achieved, several interviewees suggested sexual services should be rebatable from Medicare.

Buying sex to learn. A desire to learn more about sex was also mentioned as a therapeutic motivation to see a sex worker by several interviewees. They wanted to learn about their sexual functions (interviewees 3, 5, 10, and 17) orientations (interviewees 15, 20, and 21) and particular sexual acts (interviewees 1, 3, 7, and 17). Interviewee 10 said:

I learnt through this particular male sex worker so much about my own sexuality and my own body which I didn't even realise which he had taught me. And it opened my eyes up completely.

Additionally, interviewee 20 reported:

I realised that I had always had feelings for women and I didn't really want to talk about it with my husband. And it surpassed my wildest expectations about how healing it was for me as a woman. And I can easily identify as being bisexual or queer. I feel more authentically myself.

Of the women seeking same-sex-attracted services ($n = 7$), about half indicated that they were exploring their orientation and only two identified as lesbian.

Interviewee 1 said she bought sexual services to learn about and experience specific acts:

I am really into BDSM and so is my partner but the problem is, like, we are both submissive. If you see, like, lots of different people then you kind of experiment with each part of your sexuality.

Three interviewees (10, 11, and 12) complained about their lack of sex education from parents and school, and considered learning about sex to be an investment. Additionally, some interviewees spoke about paying for sex as a rebellion against perceived restrictions and shaming of female sexuality.

Buying sex for intimacy. Most interviewees expressed a desire for intimacy when buying sex. For some, the word intimacy may have been used as a euphemism for sex, possibly to disguise their desire for sex as a physical act. Others explicitly separated intimacy and sex, and expressed a desire for intimacy alone, describing intimate acts such as hair stroking and affirmations. Interviewee 10 said, 'I just felt, I needed to feel a love, some intimacy. Someone to hug me. Just to feel that'. Interviewee 13 said she bought sex for intimacy and quantified it by saying, 'with my 15–20 years of marriage versus with my escort, um, I would say that the escort sex is a lot more caring, a lot more intimate'.

Real intimacy was determined by authenticity of the sex worker for seven interviewees. They said they did not want fake, forced or awkward communication. For example, interviewee 8 was scathing of insincere flattery and wanted only genuine exchange, and interviewee 21 said it was difficult to find a worker who is '100% into it'. In this way, sex-worker pleasure was seen as being authentically intimate.

Buying sex for pleasure. Foucault introduced the idea of pleasure in his, *History of Sexuality* (Foucault, 1978), which he said has the potential to 'reorganise experiences of embodiment and hence sexual subjectivity' (Jagose, 2010: 523). Research regarding eroticism and pleasure for clients of sex workers struggles for academic legitimacy in a system that Agustin (2007) maintains is one that considers commercial sex as only a moral issue. Sexual pleasure is particularly relevant for female clients of sex workers because women have traditionally been socialised to be passive sexual objects (Budgeon, 2016). An influential portion of sexual socialisation occurs during school-based education programmes in which Fine (1988) found that an active and positive discourse of female desire was missing. The sexuality education that girls receive may limit their sexual expectations and experiences. Women who initiate the purchase of sex to satisfy their own desire for pleasure, may be demonstrating Foucault's (1978) 'passport to pleasure', as an ethical and political intervention in freedom, privacy and selfhood which may be invaluable for normalising the force of sexuality (Jagose 2010).

One of the major reasons for buying sex in this study was for pleasure ($n = 8$). For example: 'it was based around my wanting to get off' (interviewee 2), and 'I don't need to be massaged. I don't need gently. I don't want to be romanticised. I am paying for sex because I want sex' (interviewee 9). Some women described their desires for receiving (as opposed to giving) pleasure in sex as selfish, such as; 'with the sex worker, maybe it sounds slightly weird to say this, but you can be a bit more selfish' (interviewee 7), 'you don't really have to put any effort in' (interviewee 1), 'this is all about me' (interviewee 11), 'you just want to be totally indulged, that is what you get' (interviewee 8) and, 'you can be completely selfish' (interviewee 16). Feeling selfish when receiving one-directional commercialised pleasure in sex might be an expression of internalised feelings about the role of women as sex givers (de Beauvoir, 1997) or reflect broader constructions about sex as a shared pleasurable activity.

Living in a culture that does not place emphasis on women's sexual pleasure and which considers sex to be a private activity, most of the women interviewed were surprised and excited about being able to express the sexual pleasure they experienced when buying sex. Interviewees said; 'I didn't think I would have that much of a good time that I did. It is just, kinda really fun' (interviewee 1), 'I've had some fantastic experiences' (interviewee 2), '... really good fun...' (interviewee 4), 'Our sexual pleasure was going to be the most important thing' (interviewee 5), 'I got exactly what I wanted and numerous orgasms' (interviewee 9), 'It wasn't horrible. It was lovely. It was really nice' (interviewee 10), 'Joy, is what I think I got out of it. It makes me grin. Not just smile, but grin!' (interviewee 11), 'It was good. It was brilliant' (interviewee 14), 'I have been walking around with this big smile on my face' (interviewee 16), and 'It was spontaneous, it was fun and I enjoyed it' (interviewee 18). The exuberance of these comments emphasise the importance of experiencing sexual pleasure to these women, which should not be overlooked as frivolous in academic work. Allen and Carmody (2012) argue that sexual pleasure should be normalised as it has potential to be transformative for women. However, female pleasure is considered a contentious issue between feminists who support women's sexual freedom and those who view sexual pleasure as a potential danger for women. Potential dangers were also a concern for the interviewees.

Concerns about safety

Women who are motivated to buy sex must navigate the social context in online and print media in which danger is a dominant theme. Examples of particular dangers include blackmail (Shaikh, 2006), being conned in 'love scams' (Silver, 2013a), emotional pain (Silver, 2013b; Stichbury, 2016) and sexually transmitted infection (STI) (Campbell, 2013). Emphasis on possible dangers of buying sex appear to be directed at women only; men are most likely represented non-compassionately as perpetrators of violence (Weitzer, 2009).

Most women interviewed referred to their physical and emotional safety as important issues with mixed levels of concern. Some felt that 'safety' is part of

what you pay for, and interviewee 10 used the word 'safe' nine times in her one-hour interview. Some interviewees explicitly said buying sex was safer than picking up, for example; 'I can make the choice to go out to a bar and pick someone up, which is certainly less safe' (interviewee 15), and:

it didn't occur to me in that circumstance that I wouldn't have been safe. Clearly, he had been around too long... No no no. Oh Christ, yeah, I've got so many friends who ended up being stalked... Any guy you meet in the bar can turn out to be a nutter. (interviewee 11)

As expected, being nervous or fearful about buying sex was a common theme throughout the interviews. However, women who had contact with the sex industry prior to buying sex said they did not suffer nervous feelings; the key was knowing what to expect (interviewee 5) and having a gradual introduction to the idea (interviewees 3 and 4). The most affected by feelings of fear, were women who bought heterosexual services. Some examples include; 'I nearly called the whole thing off' (interviewee 11), 'I was so scared I didn't even want to ring the doorbell. Literally scared out of my mind' (interviewee 12), 'I was freaking out' (interviewees 6 and 13), 'for me it was huge, I was beside myself. I have never had so much adrenaline and nerves in my life' (interviewee 14), 'I was incredibly nervous beforehand' (interviewee 7), 'I don't think I have ever been so nervous about anything' (interviewee 17), 'I was fucking scared' (interviewee 19), 'I don't think I have ever been so nervous in my whole life. I wanted to run away' (interviewee 20), 'I was very nervous' (interviewee 15), and 'the first time you are going through this huge turmoil' (interviewee 16). As illustrated, women graphically described the fear they felt before buying sex as being most likely due to the perceived possibility of male violence. Their fear may be rational. Most of the heterosexual women interviewed who framed their sexual services as therapeutic, also voiced a history of male violence and/or anxiety issues. Men, too, suffer nervousness prior to buying sex for the first time (Horswill and Weitzer, 2018), although they are unlikely to be as concerned about their physical safety as women. Three interviewees used a safety technique of having a friend to call for security backup upon arrival and departure from the sex worker's premises. Although women described the fear they felt before buying sex, the concept of safety was not only constructed as physical.

Buying sexual services was viewed as more emotionally safe than non-commercial sex. The women explained that sex workers would not pressure clients into doing anything, will not stalk clients afterwards, and will respect boundaries and consent. To illustrate: 'and it's like a security thing, like, I never feel kind of pressured into doing anything that I don't want to' (interviewee 1). Interviewee 1 also mentioned that specialist BDSM practices require training for safety purposes, and that a sex worker felt more experienced in this regard. Interestingly, interviewee 12 said; 'seeing a sex worker who is accredited, who is tested, who is professional gives me the reassurance that I am safe'. This point demonstrates feelings described by interviewee 12 but needs clarification because there are no accrediting

bodies for sex workers, which is not the same as registration required in some states. Mandatory testing for STIs does occur in Victoria, but does not ensure that a sex worker does not have an STI. Interviewee 12 may have a sense of safety in these matters based on a sex worker's professional standing.

Emotional safety was also touted by women who bought sex as an important factor in their decision to buy it. Like men who bought sex for convenience, interviewees said they enjoyed being able to decide when, where, how and with whom to have sex. Women said they felt safe from rejection as a 'sex worker won't belittle you, or be hurt, if you are unattractive or bad at sex' (interviewee 12). Interviewee 4 said that paying a sex worker ensured emotional safety to be treated as her identified gender, and to be respected. In a similar way, interviewee 7 valued being authentic and not having to try hard to be sexy or desirable. The women interviewed said they assessed sex workers by the way they communicated the concept of safety in their online presence, through their reputations, and by demonstrating good oral communication.

Being in control: Power and confidence

In the study, six interviewees said they felt powerful through having increased confidence as a result of buying sex. Six further interviewees described their experience as 'empowering'. Interviewee 7 said; 'it felt like a real feminist moment'. The women who bought heterosexual services ($n = 13$) seemed particularly struck by how buying sex had extended their sexuality. Interviewee 13 said '[buying sex] managed to assist and restore my confidence as a woman', and interviewee 14 noted:

I kind of feel more alive and I notice now that other random men look at me. I didn't know if they were looking at me before but, I just didn't notice because I had switched that part of me off. But I sort of, I do, I feel alive now. I have learnt quite a lot about myself I think.

For women buying heterosexual services, feeling desired was considered important because women have traditionally been constructed as objects of male desire, whereby women experience their sexuality through the desire they elicit from men (Budgeon, 2016, Fine and McClelland, 2006). Further, women's expected role in 'giving sex' to men was described, such as by interviewee 9 who revealed how her commercial sex changed her thinking:

I don't believe I should be giving them oral sex when I am paying for it. It was sort of like a battle with my own mind. I actually think that they wouldn't have been phased if I didn't even put my hand on their penis at all. If I am going to pay for it, I am not going to make any moves.

Interviewee 9 went on to say she can now negotiate with casual sex partners more effectively because she realises that previous pressure she felt to perform for male

partners pleasure was coming from internal thinking rather than her partner's demands. Interviewee 17 described a new feeling of confidence:

that freedom, and being able to explore different things and, not feeling judged or stupid. Or not, you know, this may sound awful, but really not needing to take care of him. Of really, understanding my body. From being someone that people might call a bit frigid, in a way, to being really sexually experimental now.

The women interviewed noticed conflict in their construction of female roles when they initiated and wanted to receive sex without feeling obliged to give sex in ways that men might expect of them. Receiving sex in this way was regarded by the women as liberating and empowering.

Women feeling empowered with increased sexual confidence as a result of buying sex may be seen by feminists as a positive step toward gender equality. Some feminist theory about men feeling powerful when buying sex is said to compound gender inequality as sex workers are characterised as women exploited by men (Jeffreys, 1997; O'Connell Davidson, 2002; Pateman, 1988). Patriarchy is undoubtedly implicated in gender inequality, although a perfunctory gender swap where sexual power is positively affirming for women and avaricious for men does not adequately describe gendered power relations in commercial sex.

The concept of power in commercial sex relationships has only recently been examined in a scholarly fashion. Monto and Milrod (2019) sought to understand the degree to which male sex buyers possess and experience power when buying sex from women. They describe using Giddens' structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) to examine the reciprocal connection between social structures and inequalities, and individual interactions of paid sexual services, which actively contribute to social structures. Monto and Milrod (2019) also used social exchange theory principles (Emerson, 1962) which regards all social interactions as occurring within a cost-benefit analysis and that power differentials occur when one actor is less dependent on the exchange than the other. The analysis concluded the men buying sex do not universally perceive themselves as having more power than their female providers. They suggest that personal qualities, relationship characteristics, and larger structural inequalities combine to affect power relations in commercial sex. However, Monto and Milrod (2019) acknowledge that the relative power of sex workers is also variable and unknown. In another examination of sex-buyer power, Vaughn (2019) conducted a quantitative analysis of condom use among clients of sex workers to investigate the relationship between the structural power and subsequent behaviour. Vaughn (2019) then describes how systems of power such as race and socioeconomic status influence client–sex worker interactions including how actors perceive the interaction, and summarises that male clients determine their power based on their perceptions of sex-worker power. Monto and Milrod (2019) and Vaughn (2019) examined male clients and not the relative power of female sex workers, in efforts to begin to investigate the multiple power structures which underwrite feelings of power by individual actors. These studies demonstrate

that power in commercial sex is not drawn from gender alone, and further, power in commercial sex is not necessarily harmful or destructive.

The experiences of feeling powerful may be different for men and women, as women interviewed felt power was more about expecting boundaries to be respected. Some interviewees specifically used the word 'control' as an indication of power. For example:

women have learned that we are just 80% in control of something, in an arrangement like this we are 100% in control. Obviously you read the boundaries beforehand, but within those boundaries you are 100% in control. (interviewee 12)

Interviewee 10 said, 'I always had control of everything', and implied that she does not always feel she has control in non-commercial sex. The interviewees positioned their consumer status to be able to control sexual acts as more powerful than their status in non-commercial relationships. Almost all of these women's constructions of power and control were describing sexual acts that were performed on them. In contrast, the men in Monto and Minto's (2019) study described their power as being able to perform sexual acts on others. Although women buying heterosexual services challenge gender roles in regards to initiating sex, they may not be experiencing power the way men say they do when they buy heterosexual services.

Another source of feeling powerful for women was explained by interviewee 17, 'the power is in learning to understand and communicate your own sexual needs. Women are not in positions to learn that from sex ed[ucation]. It is a confidence thing'. Exercising sexual power is to know, to communicate and to expect to receive one's sexual desires, which was experienced at vastly different levels by interviewees and still described in similar fashions. For example, interviewee 15, a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, felt she had not yet learnt to verbalise her sexual needs, but had progressed to being able to 'move his hand to the right spot'. She also said, 'the first time we had sex and I felt some pain and I said stop and he did. That was the first time I said stop and somebody did'. The interviewees described how buying sex had affected their lives and what this means for them. For example, 'I walked out much more grounded' (interviewee 4), '[it was] transformative' (interviewee 5), and 'the mental impact it has had on me is, that is like priceless. It is reaffirming my own sexual power' (interviewee 9). Learning about sex and feeling confident about expressing sexual desires are not necessarily thought of as features of commercial sex, however these accounts question whether power in commercial sex should universally be viewed negatively, or as a singular control over another.

The notion of power as a gender issue was further examined in the study through interviews with women who bought sex with partners in threesomes ($n=6$). Three interviewees bought threesomes as a result of a male partner's idea, and two of these women went on to buy sex independently. A perception of power may relate to the initiation of commercial sex. Interviewee 6 was very clear that it was her male partner's idea to buy sex and she had control over the situation and did not sincerely enjoy herself, 'there was nothing unpleasant about

it... yeah I'm doing it for you and not me [as if speaking to her boyfriend]. In contrast, interviewee 18 said it was her idea to buy sex and her male friend was 'just tagging along for the ride'. These particular accounts suggest that the concept of gender power needs to consider feelings of control, which are relative to the power of the other actors and yet, are not limited to an idea of 'more for me is less for you'. The concepts of power and control were negatively affected by the concepts of stigma for the interviewees.

Awareness and experiences of stigma

Goffman (1963) characterised stigma as arising from participation in a deeply discrediting or discreditable activity. Weitzer (2017) and Phillips, Benoit, Hallgrimsdottir and Vallance (2012) found stigma surrounding the sex industry manifests in labelling, stereotyping, separating, status loss, discrimination, and negative representations in public opinion, the media, and political discourse. In an earlier study, sex workers who were interviewed said they thought their clients were generally considered to be 'creepy and ugly and horrible' rather than regular people, and that women who bought sex were considered anomalies and not like other women (Caldwell, 2018). While men certainly experience stigmatisation when buying sex, there may be gender differences in experiences of stigma.

A negative consequence reported in the media for women consuming sexual services and commodities, are particular dangers of female sexual promiscuity (West Morris, 2012). For example, a YouTube documentary about female sex tourism, 'RedNightCity', portrayed women buying sex as being dirty and promiscuous (RedNightCity, 2012). Female promiscuity narratives highlight damage to one's reputation and are enacted in society through a process of stigmatisation called slut shaming (Attwood, 2007). Attwood (2007) describes the effect of slut shaming as a disempowering process, which ultimately is used to police female submission to men. Slut shaming is a stigma directed exclusively toward women.

Weitzer (2017) describes how individual sex workers resist stigma by emphasising they have control over their working conditions and relationships with clients, describing their work as a profession particularly in terms of providing therapeutic services, and denial of harm to workers and clients. Similar techniques were used by women buying sex when they spoke of being empowered and emphasising therapeutic benefits. Specifically, interviewee 5 said of women who have not bought sex, that 'it is stigma that prevents women buying sex and missing the therapeutic benefits'. It might well be that some people who are otherwise motivated to buy sex, do not do so because they fear the response from others. The implications of stigmatisation were clear, for example interviewee 17 said, 'the risk of being publicly shamed is like, really scary'.

To further explore stigma, interviewees were asked if they would recommend buying sex to a friend and how many people they told about their experience of buying sex. In practice, most interviewees told very few people, reflecting that they were aware it was a stigmatised activity. At the same time, 12 women who had

bought sex said they would unconditionally recommend it to friends. Interviewee 18 said, 'if I met [a good sex worker] I would give his business cards to all my friends'. Interviewee 1 'highly recommends it', and went on to say: 'some [people] get offended and it is like . . . yeah, go home and make your own coffee then and don't buy one in a shop either'. Others would conditionally recommend buying sex to friends, 'it would depend on the circumstances. But I would not, not recommend it' (interviewee 6), 'if I think someone was not coping then yes' (interviewee 10), and 'if I had that sort of relationship with a friend' (interviewee 11).

Interviewees 9 and 10 initially denied feeling stigmatised about buying sex, however interviewee 9 said, 'I've told everyone except for like, my parents and relatives, yeah. Like, about 10 people, I have told', and interviewee 10 said that she kept her buying sex a secret from most of her friends. The remaining interviewees described feeling stigmatised, and interviewee 16 said she told all manner of strangers and health professionals about buying sex but not a single friend or family member. In addition to secret keeping, another method of managing stigma was expressed by interviewee 2, who said she only associates with sex industry allies. Exceptions to keeping secrets were interviewees 13 and 15, who told most people important to them including extended family and work colleagues.

Some of the women who bought sex were aware of social narratives regarding the victimisation of female sex workers and the demonization of clients, such as labelling them as perpetrators of violence. Interviewee 8 said these narratives 'make sex buyers into uncaring people' and interviewee 11 'found the current positioning of sex work as assault to be deeply offensive to everyone engaged in it and particularly to women cast as victims'. Interviewee 15 said she tried to advocate women buying sex on Twitter and was publicly shamed and accused of being exploited by a male sex worker. She found the conflation of childhood sexual assault and sex work to be 'deeply disturbing and disrespectful'. Interviewee 17 complained that clients of sex workers are talked about with 'no authority', and neglected during public inquiries. She said, she 'feels like a really strong feminist but there are other women out there who are going to shame me around this. They are pushing my story underground'. The women who bought sex and were interviewed for this study were adversely affected by exploitation narratives, and their experiences caused them to question the truthfulness of negative sex industry narratives.

To explore views on gendered stigma, interviewees were asked if they thought that it was men or women who suffered more stigmatisation when buying sex. Interviewee 11 said she 'suspects women buying sex suffer less stigma than men' due to exploitative narratives. Most answers, nevertheless, revealed that women who bought sex were aware of, and affected by, stigmatising notions of slut and sexuality shaming. Some interviewees felt that slut shaming is grounded in ideas that 'female pleasure is not regarded as important' (interviewee 5), and is 'unauthentic and dirty' (interviewee 20), and female sexuality 'makes people deeply uncomfortable' (interviewee 17), because the 'stigma is about women having sexual desire full stop' (interviewee 19). Complaints regarding gendered

stigma related to sex included expressing beliefs such as, there is more stigma for women with sexual dysfunction than men with sexual dysfunction (interviewee 12), men buy sex for entertainment and it is expected of them (interviewee 7), and men are perceived to have high sexual desire yet women are supposed to desire love (interviewee 9). Interestingly, interviewees 7, 8, 9 and 12, all said they thought women are expected to get free sex and not pay for it, the stigma being as much about sex as it is about the exchange of money.

Several women interviewed expressed the feeling that stigma about buying sex was also related to additional stigmas they experienced. For example, interviewee 2 felt stigmatised for identifying as gay, and interviewee 3 felt her interest in BDSM was stigmatising. Interviewee 4 said she experienced such excessive stigma around being a person who is transgender that buying sex seemed insignificant, and interviewee 6 said there was stigma in couples buying sex only when it was for a man's benefit. Interviewee 3 would like to work as a sex worker were it not for the stigma, and she said; 'stigma steals power'. Experiencing sex industry stigma has many well-recognised harmful consequences and affects one's status in broader sociocultural structures, including social welfare policies and other determinants of health advantage and disadvantage (Cama et al., 2018; Phillips et al., 2012). One factor that influences the degree of stigma about buying and selling sex on a societal level is the method of regulation (Weitzer, 2017).

Legal frameworks and regulatory environments

Some of the women interviewed had much to say about the way society treats the sex industry, which likely prompted their participation in the study. Some women interviewed were knowledgeable about Australian laws that govern the sex industry and considered that Australian law and regulation had influenced their experiences when buying sex. At the time of conducting the interviews, there was a surge of media attention related to a New South Wales (NSW) Parliamentary Inquiry considering the introduction of the Swedish model to criminalise clients, largely relying on narratives framing female sex workers as exploited (NSW Parliament, 2015). Interviewee 10 said that decriminalisation of the sex industry supported her decision to buy sex, and interviewee 12 said: 'which is um, a legal activity to do. And I was very lucky that it was legal and it is still legal'. Interviewee 10 said she was scared of being criminalised, she did not 'feel like a criminal', and felt she was being accused of raping a male sex worker.

Decriminalisation of the sex industry was acknowledged as a positive model of regulation, currently used in NSW, and laws used in other Australian jurisdictions restricting the way sex can be sold were negatively critiqued. Interviewees in Victoria said they were concerned about and questioned the validity of Victorian advertising law which forbids adequate descriptions of services and location laws which prohibits sex workers working in their own space. Interviewee 3 said she was critical of laws that 'make it particularly prohibitive for people to have these services and to find these services more openly, in locations that are safe'.

Interviewee 16 complained that 'escort agencies can't actually describe what the services are'. Interviewee 5 said it was 'silly and illogical that you can't technically do things in your home' and several women complained about having to pay for a hotel room as well as escort services.

The commodification of sex

The cash price of buying sex was mentioned by most interviewees as a consideration to proceed, or not, with buying services. Interviewees said: 'So, I can't afford it all the time. Because it is expensive' (interviewee 10), 'I have to get a carer for [partner with dementia] so it is an expensive business. It [commercial sex] is frighteningly expensive. If it is an agency they certainly take their cut. I hope that the escort still gets the lion's share, as it were, but God it is expensive. It is shockingly expensive' (interviewee 16), 'Price is a massive barrier for a lot of people' (interviewee 17), 'we have to keep saving up because it is expensive' (interviewee 20), and 'I've been reluctant to try again due to financial stress' (interviewee 21). Women interviewed who framed their purchase of sexual services as primarily therapeutic were more likely to rationalise the expense as an investment. For example, 'he is not the cheapest obviously, but I looked at it as an investment that I have to do to address this situation once and all' (interviewee 12), 'if I spread the money out that I spent on that over the year, it is a very good investment. It is investment in myself' (interviewee 19), and 'I was willing to pay... my psychiatrist said to me that I had probably saved quite a bit on therapy fees' (interviewee 15). Therapeutic perspectives on buying sex appear to fare better than an entertainment view in terms of cost/benefit analysis.

Money was not an issue, however, for all women seeking fun and entertainment when they bought sex. Interviewee 8 said, 'I've had experiences with really high-end sort of female providers, in the sort of \$800/hr-plus category'. Interviewee 9 chooses 'lower end' escorts because they come to her place, saying, 'I am an independent woman. I make money. I am allowed to spend it however I want to'. While the cost of paying for sex may be a barrier for some people, interviewee 8 made an important point in saying that many women 'believe in their entitlement to free sex', effectively preventing their purchase of it. An entitlement to free sex may be an ideological position that sex should not be commodified, and it may also reflect social discourse assuming female privilege to *score* sex.

Buying sex, considered a predominantly male activity, triggered some interviewees to specifically note a gendered difference in the price and type of sexual services available for male or female clients. For example, 'I have a perception that fewer women just go and pay for a half hour session like men for just a blow job or whatever' (interviewee 19), and 'for good experiences women buying sex need a nice hotel and an expensive escort. But men can go to brothels' (interviewee 7). Budget sex markets were noted as available for men and not women by several interviewees, however none of them said they would attend regular brothels or be inclined to access short sessions. Interviewee 1 found an alternative method of

paying less than men:

the first girl was really expensive. Then, the dungeon [BDSM service] was a lot cheaper. When you are a woman you don't care if you can't stick your penis into their vagina because you don't have one, so it's like, I was getting the same service and it cost less. Sex is the thing that is expensive.

The interviewees may have felt excluded from traditional male markets or consider their roles as sex buyers to be different from male sex buyers. The decision to buy sex and to pay the price depended on the type of sex purchased, individual motivations, and on structural concerns such as how society treats the commodification of sex including gendered inequities.

Conclusions

The findings of the analysis of in-depth interviews with women provided first-hand empirical evidence of women buying sex and details of their intimate experiences. The women interviewed who had bought sex were diverse except in ethnicity and a greater number were under the age of 45 than older. Some of the women identified as sexual therapy users and expressed a desire to only classify women buying sex for pleasure as sex buyers. Although these interviewees suggested a hierarchical system of sexual service classification separating sex buyers based on their motivations and goals, such a whore-archy of sexual services is undesirable. A whore-archy, where some sexual services are more valued than others, perpetuates unnecessary devaluation of sexual pleasure and paints a stereotypical representation of pleasure-focused sex buyers as deviant. About half of the women interviewed in this study considered their primary motivations to buy sex were for fun and entertainment. Also, there were no notable differences between the therapeutic buyers and the pleasure buyers. In addition, there were no particular characteristics of women buying sex in this study that might distance them from women who have not bought sex.

Analysis of the types of sexual services women bought, most often from private escorts or through agencies, does suggest a slight difference in the way men and women buy sex. A section of the low budget market available to men, brothels or *quickie* services, were not utilised by any of the women interviewed although several complained about their lack of choice in types and prices of services and a lack of providers. The women interviewed in this study were generally concerned about gendered differences in the total price of services where they felt they needed longer bookings than men and location laws meant paying for hotel rooms was an additional cost that men who visited brothels were not subjected to. Any gendered differences in the price and types of sexual services may reflect a smaller market, perhaps the result of social discourse regarding female sexual desire as less voracious than male, female sexual arousal as more complicated than male, or 'pussy power' where sex workers said higher value is placed on female service provider

genitals (Caldwell, 2018). The small differences in the way men and women buy sex do not warrant gendered differentiation such as men buy sex and women buy romance. Some of the women felt they challenged traditional femininity and practised a more 'masculine mode of sexuality' when they sought and bought heterosexual services however, they maintained a feminine role of passive desirability which does not fully destabilize conventional gendered constructions. Buying sex per se, is not a gendered activity.

There has been infrequent attention paid to therapeutic motivations to buy sex in the limited scholarly literature regarding male clients of sex workers (Bernstein, 2010; Sanders, 2007). Therapeutic sexual services may be marketed as body work, a combination of *hands on* with talk therapy (for example: *sexologicalbodyworkers*, n.d.) or sex surrogacy, which usually involves a counsellor or psychologist to instruct a trained surrogate to have structured sex with a client. Sex surrogacy is not common in Australia, probably because sex-work regulation and decriminalisation of clients allows legal access to general sex workers, many of whom advertise therapeutic services. Common conditions that are treated through therapeutic sexual services include trauma recovery, and physical issues such as vaginismus or inability to orgasm. Possible explanations for about half of the women interviewed in this study identifying therapy as a motivation when buying sex include: that women may have more sexual trauma and suffer different physical issues than men (Vanwesenbeeck, 2009); sex is marketed to women as pleasurable self-help (Attwood, 2005); men have a tradition of seeing regular sex workers who, consciously or not, may satisfy a need for therapy (Sanders, 2007); and some women may wish to avoid slut-shaming stigma through constructions of their desires as therapeutic rather than sexual. Regardless of individual motivations to buy sex, the women's feelings about the therapeutic value of receiving sexual pleasure was joyfully shared during the interviews.

The primary concerns that women had about buying sex were navigating laws and regulations and experiencing stigma. The women interviewed favoured a decriminalised model of regulation of the sex industry, as they felt buying sex should not be considered to be harmful to the actors or to society. Sex industry abolitionists have made a political push to criminalise sex-industry clients in an effort to reduce the demand for sexual services (NSW Parliament, 2015). However, scholarly research on the practices of men buying sex indicates that criminalisation of clients has negative effects on sex workers and does not reduce demand (Phipps, 2017; Vanwesenbeeck, 2017). There are gendered differences in the experiences of stigmatisation when buying sex, revealing that the source of discomfort when women buy sex lies in mixed messages about female sexual agency and in narratives which conflate sex work with male violence against women.

A contradiction was expressed by women who initially feared for personal safety and later realised their sexual power. Women who feared for their personal safety before buying sex were mainly buying sex from men, they rationalised buying sex as safer than picking up, and their fears were unrealised in hindsight. Women buying

sex spoke about their choices of not picking up in a bar or club, and some said they ironically felt pressure from society to have free sex and not pay for it. Women buying sex who were interviewed implied their consumer power gave them permission to state their needs and expect to have them met, affording them feelings of power they may not have experienced in non-commercial relationships. This study contributes to broader client power understandings in presenting women buying sex as empowered, however it is beyond the scope of this study to speculate about all power structures which may affect perceptions of power, including legal structures. However, it can be argued that this Australian study, where women buy sex in largely decriminalised and legal settings, legal status may be of less consequence than in jurisdictions where buying or selling sex is criminalised. Regardless of the power women buying sex felt, their empowerment cannot be wholly realised when sociocultural resistance to dominant heterogender norms receive intense scrutiny and hostile surveillance enacted through slut shaming (Budgeon, 2016; Gill, 2007).

This qualitative study is limited by the small sample size and findings should not be extrapolated to the population of all women who buy sex. Nevertheless, the evidence of women buying sex this study provides challenges stereotypes and suggests more research about any aspect of women buying sex is necessary. Acknowledgement of the gendered narratives about buying sex assists our understanding about why women are less likely to identify as having bought a sexual service, which may have significance in future survey designs which ask women about their sexual activities. Women buying sex may challenge gender roles in their assertive initiation of sex, and also more privately in individual sexual acts, when women learn about their sexuality without feeling pressured to please men, and remind us that pleasure should not be overlooked in academic debate. The small gender differences suggested by this study in the way people buy sex do not detract from the circumstance that women are buying sex. The evidence presented in this article leaves no room to deny women's capacity to research and contact sex workers, make appointments, and negotiate and consummate commercial sex transactions. Women's voices are vital to challenge gendered narratives about their sexuality and to bring understanding to the diversity of the sex industry. Unfortunately, stigma prevents most women from publicly admitting sexual purchases. This project gave some women who have bought sex a voice.

This study of women's experiences in buying sex opens up a new, important and challenging area for sex-industry research, debate and theory. The particular scholarly and political narratives challenged by evidence of women buying sex include those which reinforce female sexual passivity through characterising women as not desiring commercial sex or suggest women buying sex do not behave as men who buy sex. Further, this article represents a digression from highly gendered and problematised debate about assumed harms from gender and consumer power within the sex industry. This article evokes new theory to conceptualise a valuable role that a destigmatised and decriminalised sex industry could play in a healthy and more equitable society.

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ORCID iD

Hilary Caldwell  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2030-6077>

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Hilary Caldwell's PhD at UNSW is about women who buy sex in Australia. Her publications and conference presentations can be viewed at: <https://www.drhilary-sexologist.com/>. Hilary previously completed a Masters thesis about men who buy sex. Her background is nursing and counselling, she has a Masters of Health Science in Sexology at USyd and works as sex therapist in Canberra.

John de Wit (PhD, MSc) is Professor of Interdisciplinary Social Science: Public Health at Utrecht University, The Netherlands, and Professor of Social Research in Health at UNSW Sydney, Australia. John has 30 years of experience of research into sexuality, health and well-being and he has published widely on a variety of topics. His current interests encompass social inequalities in health and well-being, in particular in relation to sexual preferences and practices. His research is focused on strengthening theory-informed understandings of sexual health and well-being to inform best practice policy and programmes.