

Second class
citizens...

second class
women

The impact of gender inequality and commercial
sexual exploitation on transsexual women



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Introduction

In 2010 the LGBT Domestic Abuse Project and the Scottish Transgender Alliance published research looking at transgender people's experiences of domestic abuse. The research found extremely high levels of domestic abuse and lifted the lid on an area of gender based violence that we knew little about in Scotland. One of the most worrying findings from the research, however, related not to domestic abuse, but to another form of gender based violence. When respondents were asked about violence they had experienced from someone who was not a partner or ex-partner 10 percent of people said that someone had forced or tried to force them to engage in sexual activity for money.

Through interviews with women who identify as transsexual this research will aim to highlight the very specific ways that transsexual women experience gender inequality and in doing so, the impact that commercial sexual exploitation has on their lives. Using the lived experiences of these four women we will highlight the intersectional discrimination they face as a consequence of their gender and transgender identities. This research aims to give a brief insight into the ways in which these women experience everyday sexism and gender based violence, which is compounded by transphobia, the sexualisation of their bodies and increased vulnerability to abuse because of their gender identities.

Taking a qualitative approach, the research discusses the pressure placed on women to conform to narrow binary ideas of gender and gender presentation. In public and private life transsexual women in Scotland are caught in a double bind of visibility versus invisibility. Trans women often keenly feel the pressure to 'pass' as women in society. This is not just for physical comfort, in being perceived by others as one views oneself, but is often vital in order to stay safe and avoid harassment. However, there may also be danger in 'passing', as trans women are at risk of abuse and violence from men who make advances towards them.

Through discussing their experiences online, the women within this research showed the additional layers of harassment and discrimination that they experience due to their trans identities. Despite the internet being a space that has allowed trans communities to flourish, providing spaces to exchange information, advice and support, it has also been shown as a place where transphobia and sexual exploitation can manifest. Assumptions about trans women's bodies and the sexualisation of trans women through pornography are all

discussed as ways in which trans women are 'othered' and sexualised stereotypes perpetuated. The research also highlights the additional ways that trans women may be more vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation as a consequence of poverty, discrimination and because of men's demand for trans women's bodies.

The experiences of the women in this research quite clearly show the very real impact that gender inequality and exploitation has on their lives. These experiences can contribute a great deal to our understanding of these issues and how gender intersects with other identities and show the importance of including trans women's experiences in future work and research in these areas.

Key terms used

Throughout this research the term transgender, or trans, will be used as an umbrella term to describe a range of people whose gender identities and gender expressions differ in some way from the gender assumptions made about them when they were born.¹ The women who took part in this research all identify as transsexual women, or trans women. This term refers to women who were assigned male at birth, but identify as women. The term cisgender or cis will be used within this research to describe individuals whose gender identities and expressions align with the gendered assumptions made about them at birth.

Throughout the research gender based violence will be defined as:

“

Any form of violence used to establish, enforce or perpetrate gender inequalities and keep in place gendered orders. In other words gender based violence is a policing mechanism.²

”

Gender based violence can be seen within a framework of gender inequality and can include domestic abuse, rape and sexual assault, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and commercial sexual exploitation.

- 1 For more information on trans identities and definitions, see www.scottishtrans.org/Uploads/Resources/sta_gender_identity_introduutory_guide.pdf
- 2 Lang (2002)

Literature review

There has been a vast amount of research looking at gender based violence against women internationally and in Scotland, which has led to developments in terms of service provision, legislation and policy. Research has found that approximately one in five women will experience abuse from a partner or ex-partner in their lifetimes and one in four women will experience sexual assault.⁵ These forms of abuse, along with others, for example, forced marriage, child sexual abuse and commercial sexual exploitation, such as prostitution and pornography, are seen within a continuum of gender based violence, defined by the Scottish Government as a:

“

Function of gender inequality, and an abuse of male power and privilege[...]It is men who predominantly carry out such violence, and women who are predominantly the victims of such violence.

”

Research has highlighted the significant impacts on women who experience gender based violence, in terms of their physical and mental health, and the wider social implications, in terms of attitudes to gender based violence and the sexualisation of women through exploitation, such as pornography.⁴

Specific research on commercial sexual exploitation in Scotland and the UK has been focussed on the experiences of women, and on men's demand for sex.⁵ Research has found that 75% of women involved in prostitution in the UK became involved when they were under eighteen. Research also demonstrates that women involved in prostitution experience high levels of violence and abuse, with over half of women reporting having been raped and/or sexually assaulted.⁶ Research has also found links between involvement in prostitution and substance misuse, other forms

of gender based violence, and poverty.⁷ These links have also been identified in research looking at men's experiences in prostitution. Men who sold sex in Scotland were shown to experience high levels of substance misuse, homelessness, poverty and abuse.⁸

Recent research has sought to more visibly include abuse and violence experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people within this gender based violence approach. For example, writers have sought to include same-sex relationships within a gendered approach to domestic abuse.⁹ Furthermore, research has included other forms of abuse, such as homophobia, biphobia and transphobia within the gender based violence framework.¹⁰ Despite this move to inclusion and representation, there is very limited research focusing on the lives and experiences of transgender people in Scotland, particularly research with a focus on trans people's experiences of gender based violence. Most of the work that has been done looks more generally at LGBT people's experiences and for a variety of reasons often fails to have representative numbers of transgender participants. Recent research in Scotland has begun to focus more exclusively on trans people's experiences and has either directly or indirectly looked at experiences of gender based violence. Research looking at the lives of transgender people in Scotland found that sixty-two percent of respondents had experienced transphobic harassment from strangers and 46% of people had experienced transphobic abuse in relationships. Research looking more specifically at trans people's experiences of domestic abuse found that 80% of respondents had experienced some form of abusive behaviour from a partner or ex-partner, the most common type of which was transphobic (73%). The research also found that 10% of people reported someone forcing, or trying to force them, to engage in sex for money. Although extremely valuable for highlighting the abuse experienced by trans people in Scotland, the statistical nature of much of the research prevents us from understanding the personal experiences of the participants and the impacts and connections between the abuse that these people experience.¹¹

Internationally there has been a research focus on transgender 'sex workers' and HIV/AIDS prevention. This research is/has been primarily concerned with the spread of disease to the rest of the population and demonstrates, in the process, a general lack of understanding or engagement with trans people themselves, evidenced through, for example, widespread use of incorrect pronouns to describe people's identities. Such

3 MacPherson, S. (2002)

4 See, for example, Humphreys (2003), Campbell (2002)

5 Farley et al. (2009), Dickson (2004)

6 Home Office (2004a)

7 Ibid, Home Office (2006)

8 Connell & Hart (2003)

9 Whiting (2007)

10 Best et al. (2011)

11 Du Bois (1983)

work then does little to attempt to understand or challenge the socio-economic factors which contribute to create such experiences of gender based violence amongst trans people.

Despite general acknowledgement amongst scholars that there are high numbers of transgender people, in particular transsexual women, involved in selling sex throughout the world, there is actually very little research looking at this. What work there is has highlighted the violence and abuse that these people face from men who buy sex, the police and the general population.¹² Don Kulick's study of 'travestis' (who he describes as 'transgendered prostitutes') in Brazil explores the everyday lives of Travestis and their experiences of selling sex, their relationships with their bodies and interactions with their communities.¹³ Andrea Nichol's work with transgender sex workers in Sri Lanka highlights the intersectional nature of the abuse that these individuals experience due to their gender expression and sexual orientation.¹⁴ In addition her work showed the levels of verbal, physical and sexual abuse they experience from the police. Although these studies are valuable in highlighting the violence and abuse experienced by these transgender people who sell sex, they are very culturally specific. The multiplicitous and complex ways in which people define their own gender identities and expressions, and the particular social context within which people live in terms of trans-specific legislation, economic conditions and access to health care mean that individual experiences are hugely culturally and historically contingent.

There is, however, a growing body of literature focusing on the pathways into prostitution for young LGBT people and transgender young people more specifically. Research has shown the links between different forms of gender based violence, such as transphobia from families and within schools, domestic abuse and sexual abuse and routes into prostitution for young trans people. For example, research in Israel looking at the pathways to prostitution for young male-to-female transsexuals highlighted the lack of options for young people who wish to transition. From the perspectives of the young people who took part in the research, prostitution was unavoidable if one wished to transition in Israel.¹⁵ Research in the US and UK have shown that young people report having to sell sex in exchange for food, drugs or somewhere to stay.¹⁶

Despite the growing prevalence of research looking at commercial sexual exploitation online through pornography and through social media, very little

research has looked at the impact of this on trans people themselves. According to internet statistics, traffic to transsexual porn sites and dating sites has increased by 5000 percent in the last five years, with it being estimated that more than 188 million men worldwide have gone to these sites. In his research examining the development of what he classifies as a form of sexual desire that, '*did not strictly exist before the late 20th century*', Jeffrey Escoffier talks about men's desire for "pre-op" male-to-female transsexual women and the development of such desire through pornography. Escoffier states that transsexual women's bodies, and in particular their penises, '*offer a significant comparative advantage*' over cis female women and so these women may choose to postpone having genital reassignment surgery in order to make a living.¹⁷ Therefore literature on trans people online has thus far focused on trans women's bodies as a focal point of 'perverse' sexual desire and the male gaze. As a result there has been an absence of discussion on how trans women's lives and relationships are impacted by these representations of their identities.

There is a growing recognition that in order to fully understand the experiences of groups and individuals, it is necessary to acknowledge the many different identities and layers of both privilege and oppression that people experience, known as intersectionality.¹⁸ As Alison Symington states, taking an intersectional approach acknowledges that:

“

People are members of more than one community at the same time, and can simultaneously experience oppression and privilege... Intersectional analysis aims to reveal multiple identities, exposing the different types of discrimination and disadvantage that occurs as a consequence of the combination of identities.¹⁹”

”

12 Pettiway (1996)

13 Kulick (1998)

14 Nichols (2010)

15 Leichtentritt & Arad (2004)

16 Escoffier (2011)

17 Ryan (2006)

18 Symington (2004)

19 Ibid.

According to Andrea Nichols, '*defining oppression within a vacuum of only gender, or sexual orientation, or embodiment is too simplistic*'.²⁰ Writers such as Judith Halberstam have highlighted the many ways in which identities can intersect to influence our experiences of violence and victimisation.²¹ Julia Serrano uses the term 'trans misogyny' to describe the intersectional way in which trans women experience discrimination based not only on their trans identities, but also on their identities as women.²²

Overall it can be seen that research on trans people's experiences of gender based violence has thus far been limited, both generally and specifically in relation to commercial sexual exploitation. By failing to identify the specific and unique ways in which trans women experience discrimination and abuse, trans women's voices have been marginalised in work in this area. It is hoped that this research will contribute to allowing trans women's voices to be heard and their experiences of gender abuse and discrimination included in our understanding of this work.²³

20 Nichols (2010)

21 Halberstam (1998)

22 Serrano (2007)

23 Due to the sample who engaged with the research that research will be focussing on the experiences of trans women. See methodology for more details.

Methodology

The original aim of the research was to investigate the experiences of transgender people who sell sex in Scotland. However, after an initial attempt to recruit participants it was decided that the focus of the research should be widened to look more broadly at the impact of gender inequality and gender based violence on trans people. Due to the gender identities of the people who took part in the research, this research aims to explore the impact of gender based violence and in particular commercial sexual exploitation on transsexual women's lives. The aim was to allow participants to engage, critically reflect and contextualise their experiences of gender inequality, transphobia and other forms of gender based violence, including commercial sexual exploitation. For these reasons qualitative methodologies were used. Qualitative research is concerned with cultural and political meaning and it allows more scope for researching lived experiences than quantitative research. Furthermore, it is particularly well suited to researching the experiences of historically suppressed and marginalised people, such as women and other minority groups.²⁴

The research comprised semi-structured interviews with people who identified as women with a transgender identity or history. Semi-structured interviews, from a feminist perspective, aim to fundamentally empower participants, as they enable participants active involvement and inclusivity throughout the research process. These methodologies also assist in appreciating and valuing the opinions and life experiences of research participants.²⁵ Semi-structured interviews took place with four individuals. All of these people identified as transsexual women and were aged between 38 and 65.

SAMPLING

Transgender people in Scotland are a marginalised group, due to the intersectional layers of discrimination and inequality that they experience. Previous research with such marginalised social groups has advocated that the most appropriate method of sampling is through a snowballing technique.²⁶ This allows trust to be built through contacting people via networks and existing contacts and agencies. The call for research participants was distributed to individuals and trans groups, and through services that work with

transgender service users and individuals involved in prostitution throughout Scotland.

Once contact had been made by a potential participant an interview was arranged. The option of face to face interviews, phone interviews or live online chats was offered to participants in order to allow people to feel most comfortable and ensure that transportation was not a barrier to participation. However all interviews took place in person, by choice of the participants. The interviews took place in a partner organisation's offices, coffee shops and in one of the women's homes.

RECORDING OF DATA

Each of the interviews was recorded and later transcribed. Notes were also taken with regard to non-verbal cues and other specific details. Participants were asked if they were comfortable being recorded and all were happy for this to happen.

ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

INFORMED CONSENT

Before taking part in interviews the women were given full details of the aims, methodology and background to the research in order to obtain informed consent from each participant. A consent form was given to participants detailing this information along with the details relating to confidentiality. On completing the interview participants were asked if they were still happy to be part of the research and if they were happy for the information obtained to be used.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY

Data from interviews was recorded and the transcripts and recordings were stored securely in locked cabinets and password protected. Only the researcher and professional transcribers had access to the information. Transcripts and other information were kept completely separate from any personal information.

Transgender people in Scotland are a small but highly visible population. For this reason extra care must be taken to protect the anonymity of participants to ensure their safety outside of the research

24 Gamson (2000)

25 Harrison & Barlow (1995)

26 Peterson & Valdez (2005)

process. Any personal details that were disclosed during the interview process were removed from transcripts and indicated accordingly to ensure that the identities of participants were kept anonymised. Names were changed and participants were asked to decide on a pseudonym for the research to ensure that names picked were appropriate.²⁷

Findings

The women who took part in the research talked at length about their lives: as women and as trans people. Their words were ordered into three key themes that came across during the interview process. These related to the pressure on the women to conform to gendered roles, their lives online and trans women's vulnerabilities to exploitation. As much as possible their voices have been used to discuss these issues throughout the report.

PRESSURE TO CONFORM

Throughout the interviews a recurring theme is the pressure and expectations placed on the women to conform to very specific and narrow gender roles and expressions. These societal pressures seemingly come from all directions and are placed on the women from diverse sources, such as the medical profession, the media and strangers. The ability to live up to these expectations and the importance of doing so was a topic that was also brought up frequently. Doing this was seen to allow women to be able to get on with their day to day lives, avoid harassment and have the opportunity to access vital medical treatments. However, there were also dangers identified for women who were too successful, when they were discovered as having 'tricked' men.

For Jane, these pressures on all women stem from the same place:

“ I have been exposed to these pressures as well. They are massive and yes so we, trans women, are exposed to exactly those pressures as well because we are all suffering from misogyny. I mean... you are a woman you can just about be accepted as a human being provided you are blonde and you are slim.

I don't think there is a difference [between the experiences of cis and trans women] actually. I think it is the same. It all comes from, it all comes from misogyny and this is a profound and misogynist world that we live in. And when you are exposed to it

then, God, you know it is easy to collude with it, you internalise it. And I think it is particularly difficult for trans women because, we don't have a firm foundation.

”

While for Jane many of the expectations placed upon her were seen to be restrictive and a burden, it should also be noted that for many women these are extremely enjoyable and important parts of their gender identity and expression. For Helen, being able to go about her daily life in a way that aligns with her gender identity was something that she described as positive and affirming:

“

It's one of the things that you've always wanted to do. And my god, going through all this trouble, major surgery, From simply be able to dress as a female, have a hairstyle like a female, wear makeup, go out to restaurants and be treated like a lady. All of these things are things that I really enjoy.

”

MEDICAL PROFESSION

While conforming was seen as an on-going pressure, for Kate and Jane this pressure seems to have been more pronounced when they first began to transition. As Kate describes:

“

When I first transitioned, when I was experimenting with this, what they called at the time the target role, I was wearing heels, and makeup, and nails and all that. It was, I kind of rebounded, I went from what I was to this girly, girly thing and I realised that while this was kinda right, it was still kinda wrong.

”

In order for trans women to gain access to medical treatment that they need to transition to their true gender identity, they are often pressured into presenting in extremely feminine ways to show their 'commitment' to their gender identity. This can include feeling obligated to always wear make-up, have long hair and wear dresses or skirts at all times and present and identify in a very heteronormative way:

“

I[‘m] really, uncomfortable and I can’t breathe properly and I can’t move properly because this fucking skirt is so tight and I have to be continually pulling it down. Oh but I am happy, oh fuck off. So it is, it is all the crap that woman are subject to with this added thing that somehow you know I have to do this to be human or something. Do you know what I mean? There is an added layer of feeling crap about yourself.

The assumptions of the medical profession that trans women should fit within very strict binary understandings of gender went, for some of the women, beyond the focus on how they should behave and dress. When discussing her transition, Jane talked about her surgeon’s reaction when she told him she did not want vaginoplasty:

“

The surgeon was so angry, he just made the complete assumption that I wanted to have vaginoplasty by that stage I had decided I didn’t. That was his assumption. You are getting vaginoplasty. And he wrote me down, he wrote me down for it. He spoke to me like a child.

”

PASSING

The ability to ‘pass’ (i.e. people not questioning your gender identity) as a woman was concurrently discussed as simultaneously a source of pressure for many trans women but important in order to avoid harassment. In Scotland, trans people face extremely high levels of harassment and violence on the street and the women interviewed had numerous examples of this in their own lives:²⁸

“

I’ve been told on the street, to my face, that cunts like me should be rounded up in a field and shot, erm... more than once.

Or the alternative is to be shot at birth.

Erm, and that was quite a popular comment for a while. Er, and they, er, it comes back to men own the pavement. It is their given right to be lord and master of everything they see, whether it is their business or not, they feel free to comment on it, they feel free to interfere, they feel free to judge. They feel free, basically to do whatever they want.

I’ve been spat on, there have been all sorts of...I’ve been very, very lucky not to have the shit kicked out of me a couple of times.

”

While not necessarily in line with their gender identity or expression, presenting in a way that allowed the women the ability to live without people questioning their gender was seen as important in order to prevent harassment and abuse from strangers. It also brought with it a certain amount of legitimacy, both from the medical profession and the general population. Not being ‘read’ as a transsexual woman was seen as something that the women should aspire to, although it was something that Jane, in particular, felt very uncomfortable with:

“

I am interested in passing if I am out on the street, but otherwise I have no interest in it. I mean why would I want to lie about who I am? I think I am quite unusual in that respect.

”

THE MALE GAZE

While conforming to the gender binary had its benefits, there were also other problems for trans women who felt compelled to do this:

“

If I do the whole glam thing, then... I won’t get read straight away, but I do turn more heads and the turning of

heads is... quite uncomfortable... It's a pain in the arse. And standing in front of the mirror doing this with your eyelid and you think 'who am I doing this for, cos I'm not enjoying it!'. And I'm only doing it because it attracts more attention from people that I don't want attention from.

”

For Kate, presenting in a stereotypically 'feminine' way presents several problems. While allowing her to go about her life without so much fear of being 'read' and experiencing transphobia from strangers, there is the concern of attracting male attention. The overtly feminine identity that she presented when first transitioning jarred with not just her gender identity, but also her identity as a lesbian. As Kate describes, the male gaze is something that is not asked for and is a source of discomfort, but one which she has to put up with if she wishes to dress in the way that women are pressured to do within society. While this is true for all women, there are additional factors which make this decision more difficult for many trans women. As Kate describes:

“

For men, er, if they, don't clock that you are trans straight away...and they come on to you, or they flirt with you or whatever, and then they find out, you are in trouble because you have tricked them... you have made them gay. Because you're obviously some crazy poof who's trying to snare men into having sex with them. And you're like no actually, I'm not actually sexually interested in you at all.

”

The threat of violence and abuse, even murder, is a very real one for trans people. Internationally there are extremely high levels of murders of trans people, particularly trans women.²⁹ Men reacting with abuse to a trans woman when they find out that she has, to use Kate's phrase 'tricked them', highlights how sexism, transphobia and homophobia intersect. Trans women face discrimination and harassment

because they are women, because they are trans and - through ignorance of trans identities - because they are assumed to be gay men cross dressing. As Kate describes in an earlier part of the interview:

“

Well I don't think your layman on the street knows the difference. Because I've been in heels, full make up, hair all done up, holding hands with my girlfriend, and been called a big fucking poof. They don't understand the difference, because to them, sex, gender and sexuality is all the same thing. I am a sexual deviant, therefore I'm a poof. They're 'well, you're still a fucking poof mate'. Y'know? That's their attitude. That's their level of understanding of it.

”

So while for many trans women being able to live in the gender identity that they identify with can be a liberating and enjoyable experience, just as with women in general in society, for others this fails to fit within their understanding of their gender identity and gender expression. All women face pressure from society to conform to binary models of how women should act, dress and behave. The repercussions of not doing this, or failing to live up to these expectations, can include harassment, violence and homophobia. For trans women there are additional layers of gender policing and restrictions placed upon them. The experiences of the women in this research highlight the double-bind that many trans women experience, facing potential transphobia if they fail to live up to binary understandings of femininity on one hand, and potentially unwanted attention and violence on the other if they are deemed to have 'tricked' men.

BEING ONLINE

THE BENEFITS OF THE INTERNET

When discussing being online there was a general consensus amongst the women that the internet held huge benefits for trans people in terms of finding out information, being able to speak to other trans people and increasing awareness:

“

It expands horizons, it expands knowledge.

”

The importance of the internet for trans people in Scotland was highlighted due to the proportion of the population living in rural or isolated areas. For many of the women, when they were growing up there was no option of being able to talk about their identities with others. As Jane states:

“

When I was growing up there was no information about trans-sexuality at all. The words weren't even in use. And very early on I have a memory of looking at myself in a mirror and not recognising who I saw. I didn't know who I was. I didn't know that person. And I thought I was mad. You know, I was terrified of this feeling, but I couldn't talk to anybody about it. I just had this feeling...and just hating all the stuff I was supposed to do as a boy. Hating it and then, but I couldn't really, I couldn't make any sense of these feelings at all.

”

Being able to talk to other trans people and having information about gender identity, and even having an awareness of transgender identity existing were all seen as progress made within Scotland in the last few decades and advancements that young trans people were benefiting from. The internet was seen to be a source of progress for trans people, where they can communicate with people anonymously and build a community on an international level. It was also discussed as a place where trans people had agency and where

they had made their own space. Whether that was through providing support to others or creating virtual groups, the women interviewed talked about the value of this safe space.

SEXISM ONLINE

Despite the many benefits of the internet for trans people there were also stories of upsetting and difficult experiences online. For example, Helen told a story of chatting to a man online on MSN, which ended with the man exposing himself and masturbating on webcam. The experience that Helen recounts could be told by any woman. It is one example of the many ways in which men perpetrate violence against women online. The man that Helen describes treats her as a sexual object and one over which he has power. His assumed right to do this, however, is a new experience for Helen. After describing the incident, Helen said:

“

This might seem strange to you, but as a female, I really felt quite violated. I didn't know where he was, he could have been thousands of miles away, it didn't matter. Y'know, it wasn't like he could touch me, but I really felt taken advantage of. Maybe not violated, but I really felt taken advantage of and he'd used me.

”

For Helen, being sexually harassed because she is a woman is a new experience. Other research has also noted that for many trans women they have to quickly learn how to deal with sexist behaviour and stereotypes.³⁰ Whereas cis women develop these strategies during the course of their lifetimes, trans women have to do this extremely quickly when they begin to transition. Women reported feeling suddenly vulnerable when they transition, which then prevented them from doing things they would previously have thought nothing about, for example, jogging alone or going out at night.

It is also worth noting how Helen describes feeling after the incident. She first describes feeling 'violated', but then goes on to question this when she says 'Maybe not violated, but I really felt taken advantage of'. She later goes on to say, 'I felt like such a fool'. Women are often blamed for the abuse they

30 Roch et al. (2010)

experience for a variety of reasons and studies have shown how women often downplay or minimise abuse that they experience from men. The way that Helen tries to play down her feelings when discussing this event would mirror this.

DEPICTIONS OF TRANS WOMEN ONLINE

As well as experiences of sexism and harassment focused on their identities as women, the women who were interviewed also spoke of specific abuse and harassment based on their transgender identities. Many of the examples provided by the women happened online. Sam describes:

“

I would say that on there even if you go in the chat only room you will get people making comments and trying to private you and trying to ask you to go out with them and in some cases they even offer monetary inducements

okay this is quite naughty; this one came on and he said to me, we could get together and we could play with our willies you see and I said really, that would be quite difficult, I said, because mine's in Brighton.³¹

”

The assumptions made by men online were that the women that they were speaking to had penises and were sexually available to them, and often at a price. The men in both of these examples presumed that the woman that they were speaking to was available to buy, and while Sam was able to handle the unwanted attentions of the man in question by making a joke of his ignorance, that is not true of everyone. The women interviewed made clear links between how trans women were perceived online and the prevalence of a specific type of depiction of trans women within pornography. Throughout the interviews ‘she-male’ porn as a growing sector of the porn industry was discussed by the interviewees. Kate drew parallels between the representations of trans women in pornography and her own experiences of men:

“

[When I] was pre-op I had to beat them off with a shitty stick. Y'know with a nail in the end. Erm, men... felt that I had a functioning penis and a B cup, and that was their idea of heaven, that was the best of both worlds, no matter what angle they came at.

”

The unrealistic expectations that men had of trans women and their bodies from pornography was also discussed by Kate when she was describing some of her heterosexual acquaintances:

“

It was website for trans women and y'know, admirers of trans women. And they would regularly go on a date with someone they had met... they would come back and the quite often the story would go along the lines of, ‘well you're not really what I was expecting’, because what they were expecting was this porn star glamour and y'know, the wildly exaggerated hips and the... the reality is not quite is never the same as the fantasy. And they come to this with this fantasy and then they get a real person and they don't know how to relate to a real person, they only know how to relate to an object. And, er... when their perceived object turns out to be a father of two, and work as a bus driver!...

”

The expectations that these men had of the women they were meeting were, for Kate, as a consequence of their understanding of trans women through pornography. As other research has shown, pornography impacts on how boys and men view women's bodies. As Sam described:

31 Here Sam is referring to a gender reassignment clinic that is based in Brighton.

“

I'm not a prude in that I've seen things through my life over the years I've seen one or two weird and wonderful things but I think, yes I think it does denigrate, I'm not sure it's a good thing but I'm ambivalent about...if people want to watch it that's okay but I think it probably does stereotype both women and trans people.

”

But while men meet and socialise with cis women in their day to day lives, they are far less likely to knowingly meet trans women regularly. Therefore, for some men their only experiences of trans women are through porn. These depictions are almost universally of extremely feminine, conventionally attractive women with penises, who are sexually adventurous and objectified. While men can see that images of cis women they see in pornography do not relate to the cis women that they know in real life, they do not have the same ability when they see images of trans women. Just as few cis women can identify with the sexualised images they see within porn, trans women are similar:

“

I don't know that there are many trans women er.... Who see themselves that way.. just like non-trans women don't feel like porn stars either.

”

Negative attitudes to transgender people in general are prevalent in Scotland³² and the discrimination that trans people face impacts on their ability to work, socialise and be 'out' about their gender identities.³³ This lack of visibility can only perpetuate these negative stereotypes of trans women within our society and while trans women's voices are marginalised trans people themselves will be unable to break the cycle of silence and challenge the discrimination that they experience.

So while the internet has been an empowering space for many trans women to build a community

and obtain and provide valuable information, it has also been a space where they have experienced sexism and gender inequality. The issues that these women and their acquaintances experienced were not purely about their trans identities, but rather as a consequence of both their transgender identities and their gender.

VULNERABILITY TO EXPLOITATION

DEMAND

None of the women who took part in the research disclosed that they had ever been paid for sex but despite this they had many stories and experiences of how commercial sexual exploitation had impacted on their lives. Just as with all forms of gender based violence, prostitution does not just affect those who are directly involved or experiencing it. It impacts on everyone within that group. For some of the women who took part in the research this impact could be seen in very direct ways and for others, it was more subtle. We have already heard Sam's experiences of being propositioned for money. Kate also had this experience:

“

I was asked a couple of times if I wanted to come and work for someone. Erm... but I didn't, I couldn't.

”

Both Kate and Jane talked in detail about men's demands of trans women's bodies when buying sex, either through direct experience or through the experiences of trans friends:

“

As soon as a transsexual sex worker has the operation, they lose their money-maker. They literally become someone who isn't worth a fuck, because who'd wannae fuck that? Er, y'know if you're gunnae fuck a fanny fuck a real fanny. And... er... so... y'know, that's the main money-making opportunity I had went when I had my surgery.

32 Ormston et al. (2011)

33 Morton (2008)

One thing about her was last time I knew her, she had had facial surgery, but she hadn't had genital surgery. Because it was important for her work that she continued to have a functioning penis. [...] if she had had full surgery, well then she would just be like a woman. Prostitute. It is awful isn't it. And a lot of her market value would be lost.

”

As previously discussed, there is an assumption that trans women will still have a penis. For trans women involved in prostitution this is not just an assumption; it is vital for them to be able to sell sex. According to the women I spoke to, the market value for men, of trans women, is their unique bodies. So for trans women involved in prostitution, their transitions and their bodies are determined by men's desires. This supports research that has looked at men who buy sex in Scotland and the demand-led nature of prostitution.³⁴

EMPLOYMENT OPTIONS

Research had found that there are a range of factors which make people more vulnerable to exploitation through prostitution.³⁵ These include socio-economic factors, such as poverty, unemployment, substance misuse and gender based violence. Research has also found that trans people are more likely to experience these factors.³⁶ There are also additional factors and experiences that trans people face that are unique to trans people's lives and that may make them more vulnerable.

In Scotland, and throughout the world, trans people are far more likely than the general population to experience unemployment or work in low paying jobs. As was noted by some of the women who were interviewed, while the levels of education attainment are high amongst the trans population this is not reflected in their incomes. Research looking at transgender experiences in Scotland found that although 55% of respondents had a HND, degree or post graduate degree, 48% of people had an income of under £10,001.³⁷ Although it was noted throughout the interviews that there are trans people in Scotland with good careers they are seen to be, in Kate's words, 'the very lucky minority'. Both Kate and Jane discussed

the reduced career options that many trans people have, either from personal experience, or the experiences of people that they knew. When talking about a friend who was involved in prostitution, Jane explained:

“

The only jobs they could get were in call centres. Because they could use their male voice, but they couldn't get. I mean I think if you are outside the range of quite a narrow, you know there is a very narrow range of professions.

”

Kate's experiences were similar, with many of her acquaintances who were trans having difficulty finding and keeping work:

“

The trans people I know that work, they have quite a high turnover of job, because they'll start, they'll get found out, then they'll have to leave and start somewhere else. And that goes on.

”

Research that has focused on trans people's employment would support the views of both Jane and Kate. Transphobia and discrimination in the workplace is a reality for trans people, with high levels of people reporting having to leave jobs because of transphobic discrimination.³⁸ Kate, for example, had not 'worked properly' in ten years and felt that there was no possibility of her going back to the career she had before she transitioned. Despite people acknowledging that trans people in Scotland had far more options than many people throughout the world, the women interviewed conceded that due to the limited employment options for trans people selling sex could be seen as an attractive option when people were, to use Sam's words, 'desperate':

34 McLeod et al. (2008)

35 McKegany & Barnard (1996),

36 Morton (2008)

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid

“

Like I say the money, the numbers they were talking were very, very tempting.

But it was from that date on that she really started to work as a prostitute because she could earn much more money. You know, £90 for half an hour's work.

”

TRANSITIONING

Although not all trans women seek medical transition for many people this is a very important part of the process to live in their true gender identity. Although the women I spoke to were in various stages of medical transition and were choosing to have different types of medical transition, all of them talked about the importance of medical transition for trans people in general. Just as Scotland was seen as a place where there were more options for trans people in terms of employment, it was also discussed that the NHS and access to medical treatments for trans people made things much easier than for people in many other places in the world:

“

Because here you have the NHS, you can have treatment erm...and if you are prepared to not sell your body you can go through the NHS process paying the lip service to all the gatekeepers they have there and finally winning the funding, but... the rest of the world, prostitution is the main er... way of making money for trans people.

”

Despite that, the long waiting lists, the hoops that people have to jump through and the limited availability for procedures that are deemed ‘non-essential’, such as laser hair removal treatment, mean that for many people private treatment is their only option. And for many people, according to Sam, it is not just the medical aspects of transition that are costly. She talked about the other aspects of transition that women need to fund themselves.

“

People do it to raise money to buy dresses or to buy clothes because to have two wardrobes in some cases is expensive. To have the sort of secret life to be able to go and do things again costs money and people have, on occasion, done things to get things.

”

When considering the low incomes of most trans people and the high levels of unemployment, the costs involved for trans people to transition and to do so in a way that ‘conforms’ to societies expectations of how they look and behave can be restrictively expensive. It was felt by some of the women that trans women's needs to transition and the pressures placed on them to do so in a certain way made trans women vulnerable to being exploited.

SELF ESTEEM

One of the recurring themes throughout the interviews when discussing sexual exploitation was people's self-esteem and its links to vulnerability to exploitation:

“

There's so much more exclusion and... there is so much more to escape from. And these escapes, whether it is alcohol or whatever, these escapes tend to be used more often and ... the prostitution thing, I think it's a case of there by the grace of god, because I could so easily have been there, I could so easily have been, er... y'know, a week, any other frame of mind, I could have been, well, ‘y'know...’. And...I'm glad I didn't, because I'm not sure I could have looked myself in the mirror.

”

Linking all of the many layers of discrimination experienced by trans people generally and the women themselves, it was felt that these compound and can have significant impact on people's self-esteem. Jane had internalised her experiences of

discrimination so thoroughly that at points she had rationalised being unhappy as a consequence of her identity. She said:

“

It is because I am fucked up. Because I am sick. Do you know what I mean? I didn't see that as an oppression. I thought well maybe I deserve to be unhappy because I was a bad person, because I had internalised it.

”

Kate also talked about the impact that all of these things had on her:

“

When you are feeling vulnerable, or uneasy, or whatever, then it sticks with you. ...sticks and stones will break your bones, but names do hurt you. Y'know, when you get called the same thing every day, you will believe that. Y'know, if you go to school every day and you are called stupid, you won't learn. Because you'll sit there and go 'well, everyone's telling me that I'm stupid'. When you go out on your day to day business and you get called, your right to exist gets called into question, you question your right to exist.

”

Jane clearly connects all of these factors to people feeling that they could become involved in prostitution:

“

That feeling, yes if I am treated badly, it is because I deserved to be. That is just, that is just classic that is. So if I work as a prostitute and it is a crap job, it is because I deserve it.

”

While the cause of prostitution may be men's demand there are a range of factors which make people more vulnerable to sexual exploitation. As has been demonstrated, trans people are statistically more likely to experience factors such as substance misuse and low incomes. The women involved in this study have highlighted the many ways in which trans women are discriminated against and the impact that this can have on a person's self-esteem and confidence. This lack of self-esteem has also been highlighted in research on trans people's experiences of domestic abuse, where respondents talked about accepting abuse because that was what they expected from people because of their trans identities.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to find out about the lived experiences of trans women in Scotland and how gendered discrimination and abuse impacts on their lives. The experiences of these women demonstrate how gender based violence can be seen as a spectrum of abuse, where gender inequality links with transphobia, sexual exploitation and sexual harassment.

The experiences of the women in this study highlight how the pressures that are placed on all women to conform to narrow expectations of femininity are, for trans women, compounded and complicated by their trans identity. While women are told to dress, behave and be 'viewed' within certain parameters, for trans women their identities and gender expressions are narrowed, based on pressures from medical professionals and the wider society. For trans women, they face potential harassment and abuse for failing to conform to gendered expectations, but also face different abuse if they conform too well and are seen to have 'tricked' men.

The women in this study experienced abuse and discrimination not just because they were trans people but because of their intersecting identities as trans people and women. Their experiences highlight the ways in which different forms of gender based violence connect with one another, for example, how gender inequality and transphobia connect with commercial sexual exploitation. Their experiences support the work of writers such as Julia Serrano in her description of trans women's experiences as 'trans-misogyny'. As Kate describes in her interview:

“

Trans women aren't just second class citizens, they're second class women.

”

The experiences of the women in this study, the issues around conforming to gender norms and of gender discrimination fit within wider gender based violence frameworks, both in understanding violence against women and of other forms of gender based violence. This research has highlighted the valuable contribution that trans women can make to our understanding of gendered abuse and it is therefore vital that their experiences are included within work looking at violence

against women, both in terms of future research and in service delivery.

This research is an extremely small insight into the lived experiences of four trans women but it has highlighted many specific issues that we know little about. Further research should be done looking in more detail at transgender people's experiences of commercial sexual exploitation to ensure that their experiences are understood and that services working with people who experience abuse can support them appropriately.

The experiences of these women and the people that they know highlight the ways in which people can be more vulnerable to sexual exploitation. In doing so they support studies linking sexual exploitation with vulnerabilities such as poverty, substance misuse and gender based violence. It is therefore important that steps are taken at a local and national level to ensure that trans women are not made more vulnerable as a result of cuts to services, such as policing and support groups. This research recommends that funding towards tackling hate crime, gender based violence services and healthcare for trans people is continued. In the words of Sam:

“

But my main message would be please don't go back to the old days where people can be exploited more than what they are now. Please do not go back. Look at the surgery, look at the waiting list, provide the support, give a little bit of money to support groups, that would help.

”

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