Organised Crime and the ecosystems of sexual exploitation in the United Kingdom: How supply and demand generate sexual exploitation and protection from prosecution

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Abstract

Thinking about organised crime as an ecosystem is not only novel but also offers much potential to add to the theoretical and policy-based literature in this area. While organised crime is often analysed as relationships between criminal groups and consumers of illicit goods/services, little work has analysed specific forms of organised crime activities as ecosystems where different constituent parts are dependent upon each other for the crime activity to occur. This paper analyses the organisation of sexual exploitation by entrepreneurial organised crime groups selling sex in the United Kingdom. Based upon 30 interviews with 23 law enforcement forces in England and Wales and five interviews with Adult Service Website Operators; it identifies how an ecosystem is built that ensures (a) profit generation and (b) avoidance of legal prosecution. Our analysis not only illustrates how a market 'supply' and 'demand' ecosystem is generated through mutually convenient 'organiser', 'marketer' and 'buyer' relationships, but also how the roles of these actors ensure sexual exploitation continues.

Keywords Organised crime · Human trafficking · Modern slavery · Sexual exploitation · Adult service websites

The organisation of organised crime, criminal networks, and sexual exploitation

A key observation about Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) is how the formulation of their networks and the opportunities for criminal activity are often presented through the everyday routine activities of licit society (Felson 2006; van de Bunt et al. 2014). While debates exist over what is meant by 'organised crime' most would accept

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that criminal networks exist – many of whom routinely operate long-term to generate profit from criminal activity. The most used definitions of organised crime are derived from the United Nations Palermo Convention of 2000: 'a structured group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offences established in accordance with this Convention, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit' (UNODC 2004: 5).

Among the illegal activities OCGs engage in is human trafficking, the exploitation of humans for monetary gain or benefit (Keskin et al. 2021) through the violation of immigration laws for the purpose of getting people to a desired destination country (Kleemans & Smit 2014: 381). Sexual exploitation provides a lucrative means for OCGs to traffic humans into the UK, earning money off their non-consensual sexual activities. It has thus become a focus of policy attention in the UK, though this is often considered along with concerns over 'border' or 'immigration' crime. For example, UK Serious Organised Crime Threat Assessments have identified 'border vulnerabilities' (NCA 2021) as a key generator of organised crime, focusing on the activities of human trafficking, immigration crime and modern slavery. The movement of people who can be routinely exploited is of considerable value to OCGs. For most commodity-based offending (such as drugs or counterfeit goods) profit is only generated once, at the point of sale. However, if OCGs can move people and 'own' them for sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, or other criminal activity, then that person becomes an asset that generates profit continually over time – thus making the movement of people a very attractive business proposition (NCA 2021: 24).

Although human trafficking features heavily as policy priority across the UK (Home Office 2021; APPG 2018), surprisingly little published academic research has analysed (1) the ecosystems that support such networks and (2) the challenges this poses for prevention. Many scholars have considered ecological approaches to understanding crime events, with Felson (2006) developing the concept of organised crime as an ecosystem. It is argued that much criminal cooperation takes place within the everyday routine activities of ordinary life and analysis of crime events can help us to understand how the routines of everyday life support crime. Felson is critical of organised crime research suggesting it has been too obsessed with understanding the structures and composition of OCGs and to build preventative approaches, more analysis is required of the 'acts of organised crime' rather than of the 'criminal organisations'. Thus, the structures of criminal cooperation need to be understood. These structures include the acts of crime, the sequences of crime events and the settings of these events. Such an approach to analysis facilitates an understanding of how goods and services reach their marketplace, transactions occur, and organised crime activity concealed.

Despite its obvious potential as a framework for analysis and prevention, no previous research in the field has analysed the processes or ecosystems that support sexual exploitation. Within this paper, we forward the notion that the ecosystem of sexual exploitation involves four main actor groups who either ensure the supply services or create the demand for the services. These include (1) an OCG/network sufficiently motivated to engage in the crime activity and supply people for sexual exploitation; (2) the marketers, who advertise sexual services and ensure exploited/

purchaser connections are made; (3) people (the exploited) who become the commodities that are transported, sold for sex and satisfy the market demand and; (4) the demand/ purchasers/buyers of sexual services.

(1) The Organisers/criminal networks

The central point of the ecosystem is the core organised criminal group, conceptualised as the motivated offenders – those who seize the opportunity to sell sex, set up the business and ensure the commodities required (the sexually exploited) are supplied to meet demand. Despite the challenges of measuring the extent of sex trafficking, in 2020, 16,658 human trafficking victims were identified worldwide, of which 10,836 were victims of sex trafficking (Polaris 2020). Similarly, according to the UNODC (2020), in 2018 approximately 50% of all identified human trafficking victims were trafficked for sexual exploitation, whilst 38% were trafficked for labour, and 12% for other purposes. In the UK, of the 8,240 cases of Modern Slavery identified by the Modern Slavery Helpline, 1,236 of these were related to sexual exploitation (15%). Meanwhile, the number of potential victims referred to the UK National Referral Mechanism (NRM)[1] has risen from 2,340 in 2014 to more than 10,000 in 2020 (Home Office 2021). However, the exact number of victims is unknown due to both a lack of awareness and understanding of trafficking and victims' willingness or ability to report (Cockbain et al. 2020).

However, little research has analysed the types and structures of OCGs specifically involved in trafficking for sexual exploitation. Bouche (2017) analysed 862 US human trafficking cases with 2,096 defendants from 2000–2015. It was observed that 58% of the cases were part of an organized crime group. The most common group were "mom and pop" organisations (35%) (those with ≤ 30 family members and friends), "crime rings" (33%) (those with ≤ 30 acquaintances or strangers), and the least common was criminal syndicates (0%). It is unknown whether similar statistics can be applied to the UK. But it is known that trafficking networks and organised crime groups are reaching out internationally, perpetrating a crime in one country, whilst residing in another (Di Nicola 2022). However, with the development of the internet for communication and work, this new mode of criminality allows researchers, police, and lawmakers to explore and understand the ways organised crime groups are utilising the internet for gain (Huang et al. 2022; L'Hoiry et al. 2021).

While relatively little research has explored the structures of such groups, studies have explored the methods of operation of 'sex market facilitators' (Horning & Stalans 2022; Hagan 2006). Whilst not necessarily exclusive to OCGs, the research begins to identify means and methods of maintaining control over the sexually exploited. Sex trafficking operations run by organised crime syndicates are highly organised (Horning & Stalans 2022) and are typified by the inclusion of rules and secrecy, hierarchies, illegality, and violence (Hagan 2006). Indeed, those trafficking

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[1] The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is a framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery.

individuals for sex will control where and how they work, who the clients are, other aspects of their lives (such as place of living, finances, purchases) and control over earnings (Horning et al. 2022).

(2) The marketers

A growing body of research has acknowledged the ways that OCGs are utilising the digital environment to expand their criminal operations (Huang et al. 2022; Skidmore et al. 2018; Latonero 2011; Di Nicola 2022; L'Hoiry et al. 2021). Di Nicola defines 'cyber enabled crimes' or 'hybrid crimes' as traditional crimes to which the Internet has presented new possibilities, magnifying their scale (also see Wall 2007). Lavorgna (2015a, b) notes the criminogenic opportunities provided by the internet for OCGs in terms of facilitating communication between their network and potential customers (*communicative opportunities*); to improve their market efficiency to changes in demand (*managerial opportunities*); to enable the expansion of criminal relationships (*relational opportunities*); and to understand customer needs and promote their services (*promotional opportunities*). Much of the literature on digitally facilitated crimes by OCGs focuses on human trafficking and sexual exploitation (Antonopoulos et al. 2020; Di Nicola et al. 2013, 2017), with a body of research focusing on the use of Adult Service Websites (ASWs) as promoters of human exploitation and enablers of criminal profiteering (L'Hoiry et al. 2021). The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Prostitution and the Global Sex Trade (2018) has argued that ASWs often serve to hide sexual exploitation in plain sight. It has been argued that while ASWs not only allow OCGs to recruit and communicate with clients across wide geographical spaces (Fraser 2016), they also allow traffickers to post false ASW profiles, inaccurately portraying the advert as consensual, legitimate, and independent.

At this point it must also be flagged that there is deep criticism of the links made between what happens on website and the broader issues around human trafficking. In light of the blanket approach from the US Government to introduce the Sesta/Fosta laws in 2018 which effectively banned online websites for sexual service advertising by removing website immunity in an attempt to 'stop trafficking', there has been heated criticism of these conflations. Russo (2019) notes that the broad-brush approach ultimately has a backdrop to prevent free speech and stigmatises sex workers in the industry leading to legislation that is 'more harmful than helpful' (p.314). Pennybacker (2021) notes how anti-trafficking NGOs specifically exploit the stories of trauma of female sex trafficking victims to suit their own narratives perpetuating specific exclusionary narratives around women who are victims. Tripp (2019) goes further by questioning the relationship between online platforms and sex trafficking noting that the over censorship to try and reduce sex trafficking has reduced safety options for the majority of online sex workers. Such criticisms of the Sesta/Fosta law and the over focus on sex trafficking online has led to several calls to repeal the law (Jackson and Heineman 2018) and highlighted poor data on sex trafficking, as data often comes from anti trafficking NGOs (see Musto et al. 2021).

Whilst the distinction between legitimate ASW profiles and those of trafficked victims is sometimes difficult to spot, police worldwide are attempting to develop an understanding of the indicators of modern slavery and human trafficking to identify suspect profiles and the OCGs sitting behind them (L'Hoiry et al. 2021). The style of adverts on ASWs may be indicative of exploited victims, with Hagstedt et al. (2009) asserting that the same style or layout being used in numerous adverts can be an indicator of an 'organised' sex trade. However, online advertising on ASWs is both anonymous and an efficient method for traffickers to exploit victims (L'Hoiry et al. 2021).

Indeed, the ability to reach more consumers through ASWs and other online platforms (Reynolds 2021; U.S. Government Accountability Office 2021), cross geographical boundaries with relative impunity (Latonero 2011) is an attractive way for traffickers to generate larger profits than previously made (Giommoni and Ikwu 2021). According to a US federal human trafficking report (Lane et al. 2022), 85% of sex trafficking cases filed in the U.S. Federal Courts in 2021 used the Internet as their primary method of solicitation.

Although the aim for networkers is to camouflage exploited adverts to make them appear like adverts for the services of consenting independent sex workers, there can be lots of indicators of OCG activity and sexual exploitation (see L'Hoiry et al. 2021; Ibanez & Suthers, 2014; Ibanez & Gaza, 2016; Giommoni & Ikwu 2021) such as:

- Different ages used in same picture/profile;
- The same phone number on multiple adverts/across several locations;
- Language in adverts suggests it was written by a third party (use of third person);
- Provision of unusual or risky sexual services (such as bareback or sex without a condom);
- References to size/weight (can relate to the provision of underage girls);
- Reference to being 'new in town' (can suggest mobility/movement);
- Subject will not travel to buyers' home / subject only accepts in-calls;
- Low cost of services;
- Chat rooms or John sites where posters discuss law enforcement avoidance techniques;
- The same background across profile photographs (indicates groups of photographs being taken at the same time or location);
- Lack of willingness to confirm client identity through a video call before service delivery.

However, some of these on their own do not constitute exploitation and may be present in consensual sex worker activities. For example, some sex workers go on tours around the country showing extensive mobility and groups of migrant sex workers have agents consensually organising their work and acting as a point of contact (Agustín 2008). Thus, it is important to distinguish modern slavery from consensual sexual activity (Grenfell et al. 2022). However, what is evident is, are the opportunities ASW platforms present to OCGs who capitalise on their knowledge of the sex industry to market exploited victims as consensual sex workers.

(3) The exploited

Some research has directly focused upon the sexually exploited, who they are, and the root causes of exploitation (see for example Turner 2016; Mai 2016, 2013). Turner's (2016) research considers the root causes of transnational sex trafficking noting the process of globalisation – improved transport, integrated economic systems, and advances in technology as facilitators of exploitation. Several authors have noted that globalisation provides fertile ground for trafficking with factors such as poverty, failing states, wars and inequalities all disproportionately impacting upon women's risk of being trafficked and exploited (Berger 2022; Hoff & de Volder 2022; Sheu et al. 2021; Obokata 2020; Latham-Sprinkle et al. 2019; UNODC 2018). Furthermore, catastrophic events, such as the war in Ukraine, compound opportunities for crime, particularly among displaced women and children (Cockbain & Sidebottom 2022). The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC 2022) identified the risks of trafficking and smuggling related to war, including displacement, the vulnerabilities of refugees, and exploiting the needs of migrants in trying to access safety and essential services.

Furthermore, it is suggested globalisation produces patriarchal gender orders that make women more vulnerable, dependent, and subordinated to men (Turner 2016). Such vulnerabilities may drive women to seek opportunities for work beyond their own countries, though while taking advantage of new opportunities for social mobility, physical mobility can result in falling into the hands of traffickers with labour migration becoming a 'journey of jeopardy' (Turner 2016: 202). Whilst the economic vulnerability of women helps to produce a ready supply of victims of exploitation, globalisation also ensures that demand markets for such exploitation can be satisfied. Indeed, sex trafficking is based around patriarchal gender orders 'where women are subordinate to men' (Turner 2016: 196) and the buyer/seller relationship is one where men (predominantly) buy access to women's bodies (*ibid.,* p.197). Further to this, globalisation can also both ensure 'ethnically niched prostitution' and that demand for women with particular 'looks' can be satisfied (Viuhko et al. 2008).

(4) The buyers of sex

Little research has focused on the buyers of sex in the context of human trafficking and sexual exploitation. However, Janson (2023) analysed 1,684 messages posted on 'Johns' boards in Illinois, USA and although the work does not specifically focus on those purchasing sex from the sexually exploited, it reveals much about the 'manosphere' of sex purchasers and law avoidance tactics. Such forums create a 'virtual brotherhood' who often see themselves as victims of feminism and use coded language to share and reinforce common heteronormative values around the purchase of sex and to empower against external threats (such as law enforcement). Furthermore, users of such sites demonstrate awareness of the law and swap information about new laws, police tactics and purchase tactics for evasion.

While the work of Janson (2023) suggests many sex purchasers operate with knowledge about how to work around the law (including where there is sexual exploitation), research by Sanders et al (2020) suggests that some sex buyers are concerned about exploitation in the industry and want to take responsible action. At the same time, buyers tend to be reluctant to come forward and report issues due to fear over their anonymity and the growing concerns around the criminalisation of the purchase of sex. Buyers of sex are likely to be in a personal romantic relationship and are aware of the stigma towards sex buyers, so want to have confidentiality.

The focus of this paper is to analyse the unconscious interplay between these four actor groups. Using data from a research study that focused on investigating Adult Services Websites (ASWs), primary data from interviews with police officers and Adult Service Website Operators involved in the investigation of sexual exploitation are presented. The structure of the paper is arranged into three main sections. First the methodology is presented. Second, we present data in relation to each of the key actors outlined above and consider their role in the ecosystem. Finally, implications for prevention and further research are discussed.

Methodology

The data presented in this paper was collected by the authors in partnership with the National Crime Agency, National Police Chief's Council, and the charity Unseen who run the UK's Modern Slavery Helpline. The study explored the ways Adult Service Websites (ASWs) have facilitated and responded to modern slavery human trafficking (MSHT) and sexual exploitation online in the UK. The policy and legal landscape under which regulating modern slavery and human trafficking falls is significant, including the ongoing development of the UK Online Safety Act (House of Commons 2022). The objectives centred on creating new knowledge to influence future law and policy reforms.

1) Improving evidence on how ASWs can act as prevention stakeholders in MSHT by exploring which data could facilitate police investigations and good practice safeguarding mechanisms.
2) Gather the views of ASWs operators regarding prospective laws to regulate their platforms to give insight into how regulatory reform should be designed to ensure compliance.
3) Identify the risks associated with policing around ASWs regarding victim identification and apprehending offenders to ensure any regulation does not displace MSHT or make spotting victims harder.

Greater detail on the methods can be found within the published protocol by Keighley and Sanders (2023). The data presented in this paper are drawn from police respondents (n = 30) with responsibility for intelligence gathering, analysis and investigation of human trafficking and online exploitation across 23 English and Welsh police areas (out of a possible 43). All forces were contacted through various force mailing lists, however only 23 responded to the call for

interview. Officers interviewed held a variety of experience, ranging from less than one year on a modern slavery team to more than 20 years in force. We also interviewed officers from some Regional Organised Crime Units (ROCUs) and the Tackling Organised Exploitation Programme (TOEX). In addition, interviews were conducted with five ASW operators (staff members) from different platforms. ASWs within this space are hesitant to engage in both academic research and public/policy debates. The principal investigator on this project utilised her contacts from previous research with ASWs (Sanders et al. 2023), however the appetite for engagement was low due to fears of stigma regarding the sex industry. Those interviewed held several positions within their website service, including Head of Safety and Compliance and/or the platforms' CEOs.

Interviews with law enforcement were designed to explore law enforcement investigations into modern slavery online, their working relationships with ASW operators throughout this process and the effectiveness of current criminal justice systems to investigate and respond to modern slavery. This included an assessment of the barriers to policing, whether the current laws facilitate or limit investigative procedures, and the roles and responsibilities of ASWs. Interviews with ASW Operators were designed to understand their platform infrastructure and how they currently approach the prevention of harms. Furthermore, we explored their knowledge of modern slavery and human trafficking facilitated on ASWs (including their own platform), and how they have dealt with cases of exploitation (including working with the police, sharing data and an assessment of their moderation methods).

The interviews were carried out and recorded via Microsoft Teams. Verbal consent was given by participants to be recorded and the interviews were transcribed. The data was analysed using thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling 2001) which enabled links between interviewee conversations pertaining to ASW current regulatory practices, law enforcement criminal investigations, forthcoming legislation, and barriers to policing and regulation to be identified. Through organising these themes in codebooks, it was observed that 'organised crime' and 'crime networks' were common themes. Consequently, the findings presented here focus on the organisation of sexual exploitation and how OCGs have taken advantage of the weak legislative conditions which govern the online space.

The ecosystem of organised sexual exploitation

In this section, the structure of the ecosystem and its actors will be presented with references to the themes of MSHT and to previous studies identified within the literature review.

The Organisers/criminal networks

In line with previous research, our interviews revealed the nature of 'control' exercised by OCGs and criminal networks over the sexually exploited. Threats

of violence are often made against trafficked victims who want to leave the sex trade, with promises made of the potential use of violence against their family members in their home countries. To de-empower, OCGs will also limit the money the sexually exploited have. Our data also highlights many other aspects of the 'business' that allow it to function over time and to remain out of reach of law enforcement. In terms of the business operation, there was evidence that OCGs have sufficient resources to heavily market their product (and thus secure a large client base) through spending large sums of money on adverts, controlling multiple adverts and women from one account:

> 'We had a Chinese OCG which was vast, it was an organised crime network … That was the one where the OCG has spent £290,000 of the year on adverts.'
> *Superintendent and Director of Intelligence, East England*

Thus, OCGs have the financial assets to monopolise the UK sex industry, camouflaging exploited women alongside adverts published by those working consensually. As the following extract demonstrates, this monopolisation is helped by developing a supply of women who are available 24 h per day and are moved from location to location to ensure new women are always available.

> 'What we do see time and time again is once an address has been established, 1 Smith Street and we know the girls are moved around every 7 days, the client still goes to 1 Smith Street regardless of the girl, of what country they're from, what they are because it's a guaranteed service at that address.'
> *Detective Sergeant, Southeast*

Therefore, a service is provided that helps ensure a loyal client base is built. The use of 'dynamic adaptation' of OCGs to rotate victims across cities and websites refers to their modus operandi to avoid police detection, whilst serving the sex buyer market who frequently want new women (Konrad et al. 2016: 3). It might also be suggested that the business practices observed share some similarities to county lines drug dealing, where in order to capture a loyal client base, the commodity (quality drugs) are available 24 h a day and the groups are prepared to use violence to control markets (Harding 2020). At the same time, while the business aspect of the service might be developed to ensure customer loyalty (and profit maximisation), the operation of the business also ensures minimum risk of capture by law enforcement. Our data illustrates that the OCGs commonly distance themselves from the workers – with operations run from abroad or the people upstream running the operations will not be anywhere near the sexually exploited. The organisation [i.e., the main organisers] make sure they are well removed from the madams, who are those organising on the ground:

> 'Even if you were to arrest all the people that you found in that address, you've not really tackled the OCG because we know that the main players within an OCG would not be sat within that address.'
> *Modern Slavery Coordinator, Southeast*

Our interviews point to several other tactics used to distance OCGs from evidence of sexual exploitation, including making the victims of exploitation buy their own transport tickets to sites where sex is sold (also see Europol 2016a, b), ensuring any evidence is on the phones of the exploited individual (rather than OCGs) and that bank accounts are in the names of the exploited (but controlled by OCGs) (for further examples see: Giommoni and Ikwu 2021). Another method to ensure OCGs distance themselves from the exploited is to use untraceable financial payment methods for services, including PaySafe cards or cash. This ensures police investigations, which aim to track financial transactions, are made more difficult.

The marketers/ advertisers

As presented in the literature review, research suggests that the role of ASWs is pivotal in maintaining the sexual exploitation ecosystem with advertising sites facilitating client (exploited)/buyer relationships.

> 'Well obviously, those adult platforms can be a good place for that type of content to go up in the past due to lack of security or safety measures, and also depending on the type of business models ... I think we're definitely seeing that with certain types of [sites] where there's automatic upload without verification, or without consent verification for third parties, that then that is where there can be an increase in that specific type of exploitation-ary content.'
> *ASW Operator, Sex Education and*
> *Adult Content Social Media Platform*

Thus, the lack of a cohesive regulatory framework has allowed for illicit activity to be advertised alongside licit sexual services, as many ASW platforms do not engage in moderation or verification measures to authenticate the consensual nature of the people being advertised. More concerning in relation to maintaining the ecosystem of sexual exploitation are findings from our primary research that some ASWs are hesitant to engage in law enforcement activity or to clamp down on OCG controlled adverts, as this could have a detrimental impact on their income:

> 'I don't know whether there's a reluctance of the websites to necessarily accept their role within it. They're a business, they're set up to make money, and they want to present as operating clearly within the law. But how willing they are to look for that exploitation, because that potentially loses revenue for them. I would imagine if we took out all of the exploitation from the adult services' websites, there would be a significant decline in their revenue. And so their profit margins, does that influence their willingness to actively pursue exploitation and stamp that out on the website? Are they turning a blind eye because actually that's making them some money?'
> *Police Constable, East England*

Whilst ASWs are not generally proactive in removing or identifying potentially exploitative content, our data suggests they will cooperate with police when asked, though this is not a priority for them. Furthermore, whilst there exists

some promising practice among the ASWs interviewed (i.e., some are willing to engage with law enforcement and ensure only consensual activities are advertised on their platforms), many ASWs remain reticent to engage with law enforcement. Indeed, they will only hand over detailed information after law enforcement have overcome several gatekeeping barriers:

> 'I don't think I've ever experienced a website coming to us proactively and saying, "you might want to have a look at this girl because we think she's being exploited". Far from it, I think certainly the enquiries we do and the processes that we've had to go through to get information out of them, in certain circumstances and with certain websites, it feels like they're less encouraged to give us the information and we have to jump through a lot more hoops now and be a lot more specific around what we're trying to achieve.'
> *Intelligence Officer, Greater London*

One ASW which responded to our interview questions via email noted that there should be a basic benchmark for all platforms to share suspicious information with law enforcement agencies and that there are intentions to demonstrate better practice in efforts to circumvent the general opinion that these site operators are immoral:

> 'Doing more than any other adult site, only one talking to law enforcement, only person engaged. Trying to share information next year, should be base line standard, we want to show what we do as best practice with NGO to add weight, always seen as bad guys.'
> *ASW Operator, Pornography and Streaming Website*

However, it was not clear whether ASW companies are always *unwilling* or *unable* to proactively screen adverts to spot things of concern and/or to identify patterns in adverts that may suggest exploitation or organised criminality. While some evidence suggests that ASWs have no incentive to join these dots and contact law enforcement over concerns of organised crime, in other instances, it seemed they do not have the infrastructure or resource to make these links between multiple adverts.

A further challenge reported by law enforcement is that, even when suspicious adverts are identified, tracing those responsible for placing the adverts can be problematic. OCGs utilise hidden and untraceable methods to publish and pay for adverts and in some instances, companies are unable to identify shared bank details or points of contact, particularly when organised crime groups are getting wise to detection methods and adapting their financial processes as a result. While untraceable payment methods are a good way for OCGs to avoid detection when they hold multiple adverts, sometimes they use their vast network of contacts to hold adverts meaning it is hard to trace all adverts back to one source.

> 'The organised crime groups, they learn very quickly … they will adapt very quickly to what the police are looking at. So, if they know that we're looking at profiles that are females of a certain age, of certain backgrounds, or the language that's used indicates to us that they might be potentially exploited. They

will adapt to that. They've started making profiles very good with a lot of good language, good English so it looks on the surface very good.'
Modern Slavery Coordinator, East England

It was also evident that the ecosystem is maintained by ASWs due to a lack of knowledge and training about exploitation. Thus, ASW operators are not able to identify exploitative practices. Nor are they necessarily aware of current legislative changes in the UK, shaping the responsibilities of ASWs to identify and respond to exploitation and organised criminality. However, within this is a recognition and a desire by some platforms to improve their knowledge, as they constantly seek to adapt their services through greater safeguarding and protection methods:

'We are aware that ASWs remain a significant enabler within the sexual exploitation, modern slavery, and human trafficking threat and we strongly believe that any business operating in this space has a responsibility to understand the risks involved, and to mitigate those risks to the best of its abilities.'
ASW Operator, Free Classified Advertising Website

However, what remains evident are the various ways the current operational mechanisms of ASWs are enabling victims of exploitation to be advertised online. Through a combination of a lack of knowledge regarding the indicators of exploitation, a focus on an income-based business model, lack of responsibility and lack of cohesive regulatory framework, ASW platforms provide the perfect environment for OCGs to abuse the system to hide exploitation in plain sight (APPG 2018).

The exploited

In line with previous research on exploitation, our data points to the life contexts of women as providing ideal opportunities for exploitation which help to maintain the ecosystem. First, structural inequality plays a role in reinforcing the ecosystem for exploitation. As the following extract suggests, OCGs will sell migrant women a dream of glamour products/goods and a better life from the one they are currently leading:

'[OCGs] have used that vulnerability and then try to sell the dream, either the dream of coming into sex work, having the Louis Vuitton handbags and all the rest of it and "putting a roof over your head, make a difference for your children, get some cash, get out of this place, it's doable in a 12 month stint", or they're a little bit more surreptitious in how they persuade them to get into another country on the promise of work and earning money, and then they divert them into the sex trade.'
Detective Inspector, Northeast

Thus, the exploited are incentivised to enter an industry that they believe to be genuine, before their ID documents are taken away, their access to external support removed, and they are exploited for sexual services. Once in this situation, survivors are not willing or are unable to come forward to report their experiences. Some interviewees suggested that the trafficked are 'treated horrendously but to them it's better than a life

back home' (*Detective Inspector, England*) and thus a lifestyle they are willing to keep. For others, the threat of deportation, having their identification documents withheld, and in the current UK political climate, being treated like an offender of illegal immigration, rather than a victim of modern slavery are all factors that make them unwilling to come forward (Home Office and Prime Minister's Office 2023):

> 'Unless you have a sex worker prepared to give a statement, prepared to go to court, prepared to name everyone, they will not treat them as a victim.'
> *Detective Sergeant, Southeast*

Meanwhile, as discussed, the OCGs develop their recruitment and exploitation tactics, particularly with exploited migrants to treat them just well enough so that life is better than 'back home', but with the fear of repercussions if the survivor wanted to escape exploitation (see: Garbers 2021; Costantino and Nicola 2021). Thus, control is asserted by OCGs and the criminal justice system is not set up to offer them the support and care they need to leave exploitation. Furthermore, survivors of exploitation often mistrust the police, commonly because of prior experiences with law enforcement in their home country.

> 'The difficulty is that the majority of them are foreign national victims that the policing in their own country is sometimes, dare I say it, a corrupted process and so their trust of the police force in the UK is poor, so you're always battling against that tide. And we've had circumstances where police officers in those countries have been involved in the recruitment of these females so again, actually it's very difficult to say, "you come with me and you'll be safe", when actually the experience they've had is far from it.'
> *Intelligence Officer, Greater London*

While this creates further disengagement with the criminal justice system, respondents also noted how OCGs have begun to give the exploited a script to follow if they are approached by the police. In such cases, victims will typically claim to be consenting adults in the sex industry:

> '99% of the time, they'll either deny the entire scenario or they'll say, "Yeah, I am a sex worker, it's my choice, I'm not being exploited, please leave me alone".'

Detective, Northeast

The buyers of sex

Whilst laws in the UK currently seek to regulate the online sex industry in terms of improving regulation and identification of illegal activities (such as modern slavery), it is noted that some buyers might view the law as becoming too risky. As a result, they may abandon the purchasing of sex altogether (English Collective of Prostitutes 2022), or purchasing activity may be displaced to new locations (such as on street sex work or encrypted services), increasing the vulnerability of women to exploitation.

However, the purchasers of sex could be a route towards identifying and reporting sexual exploitation. Yet, our evidence points to two main ways buyers help maintain the ecosystem. First, our interviewees mentioned a lack of incentive to report suspicions to the police and/or ASWs, whether due to fear of increased surveillance, mistrust in the police or a desire to remain anonymous. Second, it was suggested that many buyers of sex might simply be unaware that they could be paying for sex with somebody who is being sexually exploited as the following extract suggests:

'If they're paying for that service, they would like to think that the person who's providing that service to them is doing it willingly. And I know that the structure of most of the adverts and the way they're worded goes to some lengths to say that the woman wants to provide this service, enjoys providing this service, loves doing X Y and Z.'
Police Constable, East England

Indeed, the organised crime literature often refers to the 'consensual' nature of organised crime (Kleemans & Soudijn 2017: 396) where buyers and sellers are happy to do business. In relation to the buyers of sex, as money changes hands, it might also be the case that they perceive those who are actually sexually exploited to be fully consensual in the activity. With that in mind, one modern slavery coordinator suggested that a lack of knowledge about how to spot the signs might also be allowing client/sexually exploited transactions to occur.

'I think they need to have a look at clients as well, maybe even work with the clients … Because if more people also are educated … ensuring that those people know what exploitation is, how to spot the signs, and actually if they do they need to hopefully have the decency and the morals to actually act and notify and report, etc..'
Modern Slavery Coordinator, East England

Discussion and summary

Conceptualising the supply of sexual services by OCGs as an ecosystem that supports and maintains this criminal activity is a novel way of theorising this form of organised crime. While the concept of ecosystems has been applied to organised crime, it is relatively under-utilised. This is surprising as a key function of organised crime is to (a) identity where there is demand and (b) supply products or services. This requires favourable ecosystems that allow for the commodities of demand (here the sexually exploited) to be supplied to buyers willing to pay for their sexual services. As with any regular illegal activity, this is dependent upon key relationships – in this case, between OCGs, marketers (ASWs), the sexually exploited and the purchasers/buyers of sex—becoming embedded (see Kleemans & Smit 2014; van de Bunt et al. 2014) in everyday routine activities (Felson 2006).

This paper has started to tease out who the key actors are and how they operate to maintain the ecosystem. However, further questions surface about how such

an ecosystem can be disrupted to prevent sexual exploitation. With so many actors being consensual in a mutually beneficial ecosystem, developing preventative strategies is challenging. For example, OCGs are adept at providing the commodities through exploiting the vulnerable, whilst maintaining their distance from selling sex. ASWs allow services to be advertised through a desire for financial profit, but there is also a lack of knowledge/due diligence about those selling and buying sexual services on their platform. Buyers not only provide the demand for sexual services but are often thought to lack awareness about sexual exploitation and are unknowingly complicit by not questioning sexual service practices. The sexually exploited are motivated by the desire for a better life and are often reluctant to come forward due to a mistrust of police.

While the ecosystem is developed to be resistant to law enforcement disruption, it was also observed that it is aided by frailties in the legal system – especially when trying to prosecute OCGs and traffickers. While the Modern Slavery Act (2015) sought to simplify and streamline modern slavery and exploitation legislation, many investigators described difficulties with prosecuting offenders using this legislation due to high threshold for evidence of trafficking (movement of the victim) required the Crown Prosecution Service.[2] This leads to a sense that the risk of prosecution and conviction for OCGs is low and the repercussions if caught are so minimal that it does not disincentivise illegal activities.

In addition, our respondents were also critical of the current move to view *victims* of modern slavery as *offenders* of illegal migration. This not only represents a significant barrier to safeguarding those trafficked into exploitation, but an advantage for OCGs recruiting victims. This allows OCGs to operate utilising the criminalisation of migrants and victims of modern slavery as leverage to prevent them from reporting and/or escaping their exploitation. Indeed, the Nationalities and Borders Act (2022) and the Illegal Migration Act (2023) are set to victimise targets of modern slavery whilst failing to criminalise offenders and OCGs. In March 2023, the UK Government introduced the Illegal Migration Act purporting to "prevent and deter unlawful migration, and in particular migration by unsafe and illegal routes". The Act seeks to deny support and may result in the detention and deportation of people who are recognised to be potential victims of modern slavery if they do not provide information about their trafficking experience and are viewed as damaging their credibility (Home Affairs Committee 2022). This is predicated on the UK Government's assumption that people are abusing the National Referral Mechanism and modern slavery system through falsely claiming victimhood (Home Office and Prime Minister's Office 2023).

Furthermore, the current UK government escalated the 'Hostile Environment' agenda via the new Nationality and Borders Act that includes provision to deport asylum-seekers to Rwanda. These measures have been criticised by anti-trafficking NGOs as being inhumane, flouting international refugee and human rights law, and actively fuelling trafficking and exploitation risks (Simpson 2022; Taylor et al.

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[2] The Crown Prosecution Service is the agency responsible for deciding whether there is sufficient evidence to prosecute in a crime investigation.

2022). The debate centres on the combined fate and culpability of freed victims of slavery/exploitation and the rights that should and should not be extended to those liberated from modern slavery, similar to historical debates over the rights of freed slaves (O'Connell Davidson 2017). Indeed, many officers in our study expressed concern regarding these developments arguing that modern slavery is not an immigration crime and by potentially deporting victims this will not serve to prevent human trafficking.

Lewis et al. (2014) have documented the 'hyper-precarity' of asylum-seekers that make them especially vulnerable to being victims of trafficking. There exists a false analogy between trafficking and its link to migration, as immigration policy seeks to encourage measures to prevent certain forms of movement (O'Connell Davidson 2017). The 'problem' of undocumented migration has been used to justify the extreme controls States implement to prevent immigration. This results in the State justifying the removal of victims of trafficking from the country, under the guise of migration policy (O'Connell Davidson 2017). These interventions do not deal with the underlying motivations and environment which facilitates trafficking and exploitation but increases the control on migrant and sex workers' lives (Lammasniemi 2017).

While this paper clearly presents evidence that supports the notion of an ecosystem of the supply of sexual services by OCGs, it is not without limitations. The analysis was based on only 35 interviews with law enforcement and a small number of ASWs who were clearly concerned about the integrity of their businesses and the processes of regulation soon to follow. Towards this study criticism can also be levelled regarding policing culture and our understanding of sex work as labour where it is consensual and therefore different from sexual exploitation, with some narratives suggesting a lack of distinction. Yet the guidance for police from the National Police Chief Council does distinguish the importance of safeguarding *victims* from those who *voluntarily* engage in sex work thus illustrating nuances in police narratives 'beyond prostitution and vice' (see Sanders et al. 2021). Of course, also missing from the sample are buyers of sex and members of OCGs. With this in mind future research might include these groups and also increase sample sizes (for example our sample only include five ASWs). However, these groups are incredibly difficult to engage.

It would also be prudent to consider what sorts of interventions could prove fruitful in disrupting ecosystems. Further to this, it is also evident that there might be different types of ecosystems that support sexual exploitation, involving a range of different types of actors across different geographical and virtual contexts. Thus, future research should uncover different constellations of these ecosystems and how they operate. Furthermore, our conceptualisation of the ecosystem is limited not only by its focus on the supply of sexual services in the UK context, but also by the absence of analysis in relation to the laundering of profits made via the enterprise, potentially another key part of the ecosystem (see Kleemans & Smit 2014). Indeed, while this paper makes a useful theoretical contribution by developing the notion of an ecosystem of sexual exploitation, it is open to refinement. With this in mind, we welcome further development and understanding to both disrupt and prevent sexual exploitation of vulnerable populations in future.

Data Availability The project details and tools are open access available on FIGSHARE link. The datasets are not open access due to the highly sensitive nature of the content.

Declarations

Ethics and informed consent The project received full ethical approval from the University of Leicester on 28th July 2022. The Ethics committee reviewed the design and methodology for interviewing and surveying human participants and approved the informed consent approach adopted. All participants signed informed consent forms. All data was anonymised and securely saved on university systems.

Conflicts of interest None.

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