

Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode 68: Sex workers' experiences of management and other third parties

Speakers: Dr Lilith Brouwers and Dr Jack Daly

[00:00:00] **Jack:** Hello and welcome to the Research and Innovation Podcast. I'm Dr Jack Daly, a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Work and Employment Relations at Leeds University Business School.

[00:00:12] **Lilith:** And I'm Lilith Brouwers. I'm also a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Leeds University Business School.

[00:00:19] **Jack:** So today we're going to be talking about Lilith's new report published from their PhD research, which is looking at sex workers' experiences of managers and other third parties. Could you tell us a little more about what are third parties, Lilith?

[00:00:34] **Lilith:** Absolutely. So third parties are any people in an employment context who are not the worker and the client or customer. So, when we think about third parties, let's say in a shop, we often think about a manager or colleagues or the contractors who sell their products to the shop, et cetera. So in the context of sex work, third parties are managers, colleagues, maids, drivers, cleaners, security staff, landlords, receptionist - all of those kinds of roles.

[00:01:08] **Jack:** And on a very similar note then, so what is full-service sex work?

[00:01:12] **Lilith:** My research only looks at full-service sex work. Sex work is a very broad spectrum of work and it involves things like camming, stripping, etc. Full-service sex work is the thing people often immediately think about when they think of sex work.

So things that involve in person physical sexual services. The word "prostitution" is often used in legislation to talk about it, but sex workers themselves often prefer to say "sex work" just because it emphasizes the importance of the fact that it is work.

[00:01:44] **Jack:** So who is this report aimed at?

[00:01:47] **Lilith:** Everyone, obviously. But we all say that about our reports. This report is aimed at academics who are new to sex work but know a lot about work and employment because it's on that intersection. It's aimed at people who know a lot about sex work, for instance, NGOs or grassroots organisations who might not have enough data about third parties. And it's especially aimed at policymakers both in the UK and wider.

[00:02:14] **Jack:** Yeah, I was gonna say, it's really interesting the way that it's been written and who you are targeting because, as someone who easily forms in the form of an academic who within

wider work and employment relations, it's really interesting to see the links of your research within this. So what made you decide to research this topic?

[00:02:32] **Lilith:** I actually didn't decide to research this topic. I spoke to several grassroots organizations that work on sex worker rights and asked them what topic they felt they really needed researching. And when they all got back to me and said, "well, there's a really large knowledge gap on third parties".

I honestly thought it might be a really boring topic, but it was very needed research. So I went on with it and I realized it's absolutely fascinating. And I did part of the research in cooperation with the grassroots organization, the English Collective of Prostitutes, and they shared their knowledge of 50 years of casework supporting sex workers, which helped me create an overview of the legal context of third parties and also how those third parties are policed in practice.

So it's very much a ground up research project, rather than one that I decided to do on my own.

[00:03:26] **Jack:** I do have to say I always find it quite fascinating hearing where different research ideas come from, and especially those grassroots ones where it comes from speaking to other people and realizing there's a research gap. I personally always think that those are some of the most interesting ones. But when it comes to the basics, and again, as someone like myself who isn't fully familiar with the area, what is the legal status of sex work and third parties in England?

[00:03:51] **Lilith:** That's something that even people who work in the field of sex work are quite confused about. So you are in very good company. Full-service sex work itself is legal to do in England, but only in isolation. That means that you're allowed to buy and sell sexual services. No problem. But management, co-working for safety, letting out premises, or providing other services to sex workers, they are criminalized.

However, sex worker rights organizations themselves say that criminalization reduces sex worker safety - it forces them to work alone, and it prevents them from accessing worker rights and workplace protections. So it's a very unique situation when we look at work and employment relations in that there's no other job that's in this position where you're forced to do it alone.

That's very unique to sex work.

[00:04:46] **Jack:** So how was the research done? Who were the participants? Who were you interviewing?

[00:04:51] **Lilith:** So the research involved a survey of 185 full-service sex workers in England and asked about their use of third parties and third party services in their work, their experience with those third parties, and then also their views on how to make work with third parties safer and better.

[00:05:09] **Jack:** And again, I think when it comes to the topic and the sort of goals of your research, it's really interesting and I think important how you were actually linking that in with grassroots organisations. To, I think, access the people who you would help perhaps the most or try and support in other careers and get the insight needed.

So again, as someone who comes into the topic with very little insight, what do we need to know about sex work and sex workers in order to understand the research?

[00:05:36] **Lilith:** The most important thing to keep in mind while thinking about sex work and employment relations is that sex work is work, meaning people do it because they need to earn money. It's more flexible than some work, than most work actually, and there's a social taboo on it. But in most ways, it's very similar to any other job.

Sometimes it's a bad job. Sometimes it's good. Sometimes it's boring. You can have a good time with your colleagues or you can complain about your boss or your clients. And as I feel like you and I both know, sometimes you spend your whole day answering emails instead of doing the work you actually get paid for. Sound familiar?

[00:06:17] **Jack:** Definitely. I think that was one of the most interesting things when reading through the report and seeing the real links and I think similarities between the experiences of your participants and anyone that's ever worked in office job. I think they'll be able to relate some of those. So what topics does the report cover then?

[00:06:37] **Lilith:** The report looks at the current legal context of third parties in sex work and it maps out which third parties exist in sex work and in what kind of roles we find them. Then we look at why sex workers choose to work with or without third parties.

There are sex workers who work completely without, and many work with some or a lot of third parties, , and why sex workers often change where they work or who they work with. And finally, it discusses what kind of changes sex workers want to improve their relationships with those third parties.

[00:07:13] **Jack:** So, what were the key findings of the report?

[00:07:16] **Lilith:** There were quite a few, which is exciting, but also a lot. So, the very big finding that I was most interested in and surprised me a lot was that the most commonly encountered third parties are sex workers themselves. They're not people who don't do sex work. They're sex workers as colleagues, or as housemaids, or who help each other out in other ways. For instance, by being security for each other.

Secondly, we found that sex workers have a mix of experiences with third parties, positive, negative, neutral, just like you would in any other job. But overall, participants describe more positive experiences with non-managerial third parties, such as colleagues or receptionists or cleaners, and more negative experiences with managers.

I feel like, again, one of those things that we just recognize from other forms of work. Then we found that, like in many other forms of informal work, third parties are often friends or partners. We see this in, for instance, rural work or other types of self-employed work as well. And we find that sex workers have very high levels of labour mobility use.

This means that they leave unsatisfactory work, situations and workplaces to work somewhere else, to work independently. And what makes a move a good thing for a worker is very personal as well. So some workers hate working alone and move into, from independent work, into brothel work,

because it just suits the way they work a lot more. And other people do the opposite move, because it's much better for them to have that freedom.

A really depressing finding was that many participants feel forced to choose between working alone or without support or risking prosecution for themselves or any third parties. And again, because these third parties are often friends or family or people they live with, they don't want to risk their safety.

And, most importantly, sex workers overwhelmingly argued for legal change to the status of criminalized third parties, so that their working conditions and relationships would improve. And in fact, when asked what would improve these working relations, 78% argued for legal change. And nearly 50% outright said, "we want decriminalization". So that's a really high number.

[00:09:49] **Jack:** Were there any findings then that really surprised you as you were doing the research?

[00:09:54] **Lilith:** So two things that really surprised me because I just didn't see them coming were - one, sex workers have such a high level of mobility. Not just they've worked in different workplaces, they've moved from, you know, one workplace to another. But also, sex workers have worked in different types of sex work, so people who have worked in brothels for instance very likely will also have worked for an agency and independently and maybe do some online work or stripping etc.

A lot of people assume that sex workers do not have the power to leave their work situation, a lot of people would not want to do that work and so they can't imagine someone making choices in that space, but actually what we see is people make a lot of choices in that space.

The second thing that surprised me is the very high level of sex workers who are disabled. So when I asked participants if they have a disability or chronic illness, 48 percent said that they do. That's one in two, basically. And at first that just surprised me, but then I realized that it makes a lot of sense because there's a lot of ableism and discrimination in the labour market. Sex work is very flexible. It often has an hourly rate that's higher than other forms of work. And although the income is very unpredictable, you won't get fired if you're too ill to work for a week or something.

So that makes sex work a lot more accessible than most mainstream work.

[00:11:21] **Jack:** I have to say, as someone who has already read the report, these were things that really surprised me as well. But I mean, having insight from the report now into what actually falls in the third party, was really surprising as well. And I can understand some factors such as maids, owners and managers.

But then seeing how drivers, security guards, or as you say, even your friends acting as colleagues, that breaks the law and all the different ways in which you can inadvertently then be breaking the law. But even though these, as you say in the report, these are third parties that bring values to the working lives of sex workers.

Again, you talk about security, this wasn't too surprising. And I could understand that, but when you were writing and participants were talking about company within the sex work, and this might be my old organizational behaviour brain coming into this, but seeing how people simply acting as a duo or

having colleagues and friends simply working together under the same roof to reshape the more monotonous administration to make and reshape not as boring work as enjoyable, was something really surprising to me, but obviously under this legislation, that's illegal, and how we have loneliness almost that's enforced through this, that was really fascinating and surprising.

[00:12:37] **Lilith:** Absolutely, absolutely. I think when we think about criminalized third parties in sex work, we automatically think, well, they must be doing something wrong. Otherwise, they wouldn't be criminalized, right? But in practice, we get, and I saw this over and over in the responses from participants, we get this kind of legally enforced loneliness and isolation.

That's really depressing for people. It makes their work hard. It makes their work more dangerous. But also we all, I mean, you and I are colleagues and we talk about our work plenty. It makes your life easier to have a problem in your work and be able to go to someone with it, or to have a tough day at work and to be able to tell people about it.

And if there is such a stigma on work, then often your colleagues are the only people you can talk to about it. So criminalizing colleagues has not just effects on your safety, but also on your wellbeing.

[00:13:33] **Jack:** Yeah, definitely. So, the labour mobility that you mentioned, what influences sex workers abilities to actually leave a workplace and then be able to actually go find a better place to work?

[00:13:44] **Lilith:** Yes, so I found that there's a range of factors on both sides. There are things that prevent workers from leaving a workplace that they don't like. And that's things like bad management, isolation from other workers, and stigma.

These will make it hard for workers to feel like they have other options or to just have the knowledge to find other options, whereas on the other hand, the factors that enable workers to change workplaces include having knowledge of the sector, having access to information and having access to a community of colleagues and fellow sex workers.

And I don't think that community should be in any way underestimated. It truly is a community. It's - yes, there's a union. Yes, there's grassroots organizations. During the pandemic, when most sex workers suddenly saw their income, obviously, overnight disappear, the grassroots organization Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement gave a quarter of a million pounds out in cash grants to sex workers, which helped them pay rent, buy food, prevent them from becoming homeless.

And organisations with that kind of skill can also connect sex workers to support, advise people on the safest ways to work, advise them what to do if their workplace or manager is unsuitable, things like that. So fighting against that isolation is very important.

[00:15:09] **Jack:** Definitely. And you do quote your participants a lot in the report. Why is that and what participant quotes have really stuck with you the most?

[00:15:18] **Lilith:** Honestly, so many. That is why I quote them so much. I believe that all workers, regardless of your field of work, are the experts on their own labour. Sex workers especially, because it's a very difficult area to get into and to get people to trust you. So I wanted to express their experiences in their own words.

Plus, the wording that the participants chose are often so much better than anything that I could have written. The quote that the title is based on is, "My geopartner, a friend outside of the industry makes me feel safe. She's been in the industry longer than me and has been so invaluable teaching me the small things a new worker would only learn through bad mistakes. I feel safe when I'm working with her."

And I just found that so powerful it had to be the title of the report. It just had to be. And often Participants don't just describe their work situation, but also analyze it. So, for instance, one participant has experienced high levels of control in their workplace, and she wrote, "We are not allowed to exchange numbers with other workers or the maids, and girls are separated on their day of work to keep them from organizing."

That's, that's analysis. That is a person saying, "Hey, here's what's going on, but here's what's behind it, why that's happening". Another worker discusses how criminalization creates a monopoly position, so they don't have a lot of options of brothels to work in, so they are kind of forced to stay in the brothel where the management isn't very good.

Again, that's great analysis. I'm happy to just cite that. And I also really want their voices to be heard as directly as possible.

[00:16:55] **Jack:** Yeah, I couldn't agree more. I think as researchers, it's really important, something that can be forgotten at times, especially as people within our fields where we're talking directly to people and gaining their own narrative accounts. That we shouldn't only be theoretically interpreting the words, but retaining their actual voices and narratives, especially where they're lending their time and give insight, sometimes into their own vulnerabilities, as I've encountered in my own research into inequalities at work, that we need to ensure that I think we capture those vulnerabilities and their own realities within their own voice, rather than trying to reinterpret them. You've done that really well, and I think it's really important to do so.

So, I know that you found that nearly all workplaces are criminalised. What effect does that have on labour relations and sex work?

[00:17:42] **Lilith:** A lot, as you would imagine. When your workplace is criminalized, it has, first of all, there's going to be fewer workplaces. Let's talk about brothels. If there are fewer workplaces, then your boss has more power over you, because they know that there isn't a brothel down the street where you can work.

Secondly, the people who manage those workplaces, they will be the ones that don't mind being involved in criminal activity. I think we can all imagine that that doesn't attract the best top of the line management practices or the best managers. So you have fewer options and worse management.

And then thirdly, you won't have an employment contract or access to labour rights. So if your manager tells you to skip lunch, work long shifts, say something racist, try to push you to see clients you don't want to see, then you don't have access to things like an employment tribunal to defend yourself, or to go into your contract and say, "hey, it says that I should be allowed lunch", etc.

And finally, criminalization also, even when we don't look at workplaces that are criminalized, pushes workers into being alone and isolated to avoid breaking the law. And I mean, I don't even have to explain why that's dangerous.

[00:19:02] **Jack:** Yeah, of course. So, why do research participants then argue for the legal change of the criminalisation of third parties?

[00:19:11] **Lilith:** For a lot of reasons, they firstly, and I heard this over and over, want access to labour rights and protections. If you do a job and you do that job to make money, then you need protections from a manager or a company that runs the environment in which you work.

They also want to not be forced to work alone, obviously. They want the ability to co-work with colleagues, not just for safety, also because it's just more fun. And they want more power in their relationships with third parties, which again, things like labour rights and protections would give that to them. They also want access to the justice system if they are the victim of a crime.

Right now, for instance, if you work in a criminalized workplace and you have a bad client, and that's something you might want to go to the police over so that they don't do it to someone else, you have to choose between your ability to go to the police and the option that maybe the police closes down your workplace. Or tries to see if you are maybe the perpetrator of a crime. So that access to justice is another thing they want.

And finally, all together, those things would increase safety at work, which is incredibly important. And I feel we all want sex workers to be safer at work.

[00:20:31] **Jack:** So, I mean, related to that, what does decriminalization actually mean then?

[00:20:36] **Lilith:** So decriminalization is different from legalization. And that's the thing that's very often confused. Most jobs are not legalized. Like you and I, we don't have a legalized job. There's just no legislation on it. There's no criminalization. And that's the same thing that sex workers argue for. They want their work and the work of a lot of third parties to be decriminalized.

So that the only thing that is protecting them isn't criminal law, but is employment law and things like that. So they would have the same rights and protections as other workers. If you want to know more about this, and I highly recommend that you do because it's a very interesting field there's a fantastic TED talk by Juno Mack, who is a sex worker herself. It's called The Law Sex Workers Really Want. And it's 20 minutes and you will know everything you need to know about this, so big recommendation for checking that out.

[00:21:31] **Jack:** It's always good as well to have further reading or citations and

[00:21:36] **Lilith:** in this case, just listening to someone explain it to you very clearly.

[00:21:40] **Jack:** Of course. So obviously in your report you look at a lot of things that decriminalization might solve. Is there anything that decriminalization won't solve?

[00:21:49] **Lilith:** Absolutely, there's plenty, because of course when we think about sex work, the only issues aren't, are you working safely, and do you, you know, do you have labour rights? The reason people argue for decriminalization is because it would create space for sex workers to defend themselves against bad managers and third parties, instead of constantly being forced to defend the existence of third parties.

Imagine if, you have a kind of rubbish management but then the government is threatening to close down the organization you work for. You would instantly stand side by side with your manager, right? And be like, "no, I need this job". That's the position sex workers are in now.

So, instead of decriminalization being the end of improving sex work, it really would be the beginning, because it would allow sex workers to focus on working conditions rather than legal context.

So the things that it wouldn't solve is things like whorephobia in society, and whorephobia is the term we use to talk about, prejudice towards sex workers. It wouldn't give you labour rights without having a union to fight for it, of course, which there is, but the union would have a lot more space to fight if workplaces were legal.

It wouldn't solve people being in sex work who don't want to be in sex work, that, that requires a whole load of other support and help, and it especially wouldn't solve the issues that make people start sex work in the first place, which are often things like poverty, expensive housing, the hostile environment for migrants, and especially, as I found, ableism and the inaccessibility of mainstream work.

And I think that that is such an important one, because right now the way legislation is set up, and the way the labour market is set up. Society leaves disabled people very few options outside of sex work, but then makes it very hard to make sex work into good, stable, and fair work.

[00:23:49] **Jack:** So I think that was one of the most interesting things that I pulled from the report as well, of looking at how even decriminalization will not really ensure good work in places. But what do you think is the take home message of the report?

[00:24:02] **Lilith:** The core message, and this is something that I wouldn't necessarily even have aimed to do and was a surprise to me as I was doing the research and getting the finding, is that third parties aren't universally good or bad but the criminalization of third parties makes sex workers less safe rather than more and that sex workers overwhelmingly want to have access to labour rights just like any other workers and in order to get that workplaces and third parties need to be decriminalized.

[00:24:34] **Jack:** And where can we find the report?

[00:24:36] **Lilith:** The report will be in the show notes, with all the other information. And I really recommend that you give it a quick look.

[00:24:45] **Jack:** That all sounds really great and I really recommend that everyone goes to read the report. It's one that I'm really glad that I've had the chance to read through. And as Lilith says, the

report will be available online in the podcast details. So thank you for joining and talking with me today Lilith.

[00:25:00] **Lilith:** Thank you very much for talking to me, Jack. That was really great. And thank you everyone for listening. Goodbye.

[00:25:07] **Jack:** Goodbye.