

Purchasing Sex in Sweden—A Risky Business

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This article is based on a study exploring how men who purchase sex in Sweden experience and navigate risk. The focus is on individual assessments of risk in relation to experiences of crime, exploitation and stigma. Based on interviews with 30 Swedish men who purchase sex, an inductive thematic analysis has been applied. The participating men had different strategies to avoid crime and exploitation and they navigated in relation to stigma when purchasing sex. Their risk assessments and conceptualizations of purchasing sex were based on own experiences and on the normative discourse on commercial sex in Sweden. Their fields of action were structured through discipline, governing and responsabilization, and they tried to distance themselves from being defined as ‘sex buyers’ and to purchase sex in ‘good’ ways.

Key Words: purchase of sex, buying sex, commercial sex, risk, stigma

INTRODUCTION

Commercial sex has long been considered dangerous and risky, mainly due to its association with different forms of criminality, such as organized crime, drugs and violence (Jakobsson and Kotsadam 2013; Deering *et al.* 2014; Sterling and van der Meulen 2018). The dangers of commercial sex have also been associated with its links to an underground economy (Sanders *et al.* 2020). Discussions of danger, crime and risk in commercial sex have mainly concerned people who sell sex and who are exposed to procurers, buyers or others (Deering *et al.* 2014; Platt *et al.* 2018). Men who purchase sex have primarily been understood as causing risks for sellers (Sterling and van der Meulen 2018), and to a large extent as individuals who contribute to commercial sex being a risky environment. Less attention has been paid to buyers’ perspectives on risk and their individual experiences of risk linked to the purchase of sex, especially in a national context in which the purchase of sex is a criminal offence (Hammond 2015; Grönvall *et al.* 2021b).

Commercial sex is a phenomenon that involves several actors, and where interactions and perceptions of risk are interwoven on different levels (Monto and Milrod 2020). Previous research has shown that sex buyers are aware of or relate to the exploitation to which sellers are exposed, which affects their behaviour in different ways (Grönvall *et al.* 2021a; Sanders *et al.* 2020). Men who purchase sex manage risk and make risk assessments when purchasing sex,

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both in relation to sellers and third parties. Additionally, they risk becoming crime victims when purchasing sex (Sanders *et al.* 2020). There is also risk related to the fact that purchasing sex is a stigmatized and, in some national contexts, criminalized activity, with a potential risk of being exposed as a sex buyer (Kotsadam and Jakobsson 2014; Hammond 2015; Grönvall *et al.* 2021a).

Despite the way in which different structural conditions shape experiences of commercial sex, lived experiences of the phenomenon are characterized by complexities (Weitzer 2010). Individual, interactional and structural aspects influence how a phenomenon is interpreted and understood. Taking this into account – how do men who purchase sex in a context in which their activities are criminalized understand and perceive risk? The aim of this article is to explore this question among men who purchase sex in Sweden. More specifically, the article will focus on individual assessments of risk in relation to experiences of crime, exploitation and stigma.

THE PURCHASE OF SEX IN SWEDEN

Sweden has a long history of striving to control or combat prostitution (Erikson 2011). The Swedish Government has a neo-abolitionist approach to the phenomenon, and the Swedish context is coloured by an understanding of prostitution as an expression of structural gender inequality and gender-based violence (Erikson 2011; Holmström and Skilbrei 2017). Purchasing sex has been criminalized in Sweden since 1999, with sanctions ranging from a fine to one year of imprisonment (SFS 1998:408). The aim of the criminalization was to combat prostitution by targeting the demand side, in the short-term using repressive measures, and in the long-term by striving for normative change, such as changes in men's attitudes to purchasing sex (Holmström and Skilbrei 2017). Several countries have implemented similar laws regulating the purchase of sex, but Sweden's approach is still considered to stand out with regard to its firm base in a state-feminist ideology (Scoular 2015). In practice, the implementation of the legislation has meant that men convicted of purchasing sex are almost exclusively given a fine (Olsson 2020). Support for the criminalization of the purchase of sex has grown among the general public, indicating a normative change (Kuosmanen 2008; Svedin *et al.* 2012; Kotsadam and Jakobsson 2014). However, support for criminalizing the sale of sex has also increased, which indicates that attitudes among the general public have a stronger focus on repressive measures than previously (Kuosmanen 2011; Holmström and Skilbrei 2017).

Recent debate in Sweden has called for more repressive measures targeting men who purchase sex (for example, Johansson and Lindhagen 2020). In 2018, when the interviews for this study were conducted, plans were being discussed for a bill intending to make it a criminal offence for Swedish citizens to purchase sex abroad (Report of Committee on Justice 2018/19:JuU11). Since then, supplementary directives to Sweden's latest sexual crime inquiry have suggested investigating a stiffening of the sanction for purchasing sex by removing fines from the penalty scale (Government of Sweden 2020). Additionally, on a regional level, fathers who purchase sex are being reported to the social authorities, a routine that some politicians want to implement at the national level (Umeå kommun 2019). The legislation on sexual offences was sharpened in several respects in 2018, since which time Sweden's rape law has been based on consent. This makes it possible to prosecute someone for 'negligent rape', a criminal classification for performing a sexual act with someone when you should have realized that the person does not participate voluntarily (SFS 2018:618). This becomes relevant in relation to suspected procuring and human trafficking, and the provision has been tested in court in relation to the purchase of sex. One man has been convicted of negligent rape for purchasing sex from a woman he suspected was a victim of human trafficking (Svea Court of Appeal 2019).

The repressive approach targeting the demand for commercial sex has also become more prominent in practice, as the police's work in this regard has intensified in recent years (Polismyndigheten 2020). However, previous research on the implementation of the Swedish Sex Purchase Act indicates that the legislation has targeted a specific kind of sex purchases (and purchasers) more than others (Olsson 2020). Most arrests of men purchasing sex have been made in Sweden's three largest cities. The men arrested have overall had lower average incomes than men in Sweden in total, and a larger proportion had foreign citizenship than in the population at large. A relatively large proportion of the men had been arrested in 'open arenas', such as the street environment or at hotels (Olsson 2020). Previous research shows that men who purchase sex have different socioeconomic backgrounds, which indicates that the men being caught purchasing sex in Sweden are not representative of the group as a whole (for example, Sanders *et al.* 2020). Some studies have noted that those who are arrested tend to be inexperienced clients, which indicates that experienced buyers have learned to avoid the police (Monto and Milrod 2014; Sanders *et al.* 2020). Wealthy buyers tend to use more concealed arenas and experienced buyers use different strategies to avoid law enforcement (Lever and Dolnick 2010; Horswill and Weitzer 2018; Olsson 2020).

RISK AND CRIME IN COMMERCIAL SEX

As was mentioned above, the research on commercial sex as a risky and dangerous phenomenon for sellers is extensive (Deering *et al.* 2014). There is now a considerable literature illuminating the links between commercial sex and an underground economy (Sanders *et al.* 2020) and organized crime (Jakobsson and Kotsadam 2013), the violence and other crime committed against sellers (Platt *et al.* 2018), and the harm and negative effects on the sellers' physical and psychological wellbeing (Farley *et al.* 2004; Farley 2017). Men who purchase sex have primarily been viewed as producing danger in commercial sex – either by being the ones committing the crimes or exposing the sellers to violence (Deering *et al.* 2014), or by fuelling the sex trade and ensuring that the violence against sellers will continue (Harrington 2018).

However, some research has contributed to a broader picture of the risks of commercial sex by also focusing on men who purchase sex. The results from a quantitative study of commercial sex and digitalization indicated that a relatively large proportion of the men who participated in the study had been victims of crime, such as scams, financial crimes or physical violence. The men in the study were also concerned about their safety, and used different precautions when purchasing sex (Sanders *et al.* 2020). This has also been found in other studies, where men purchasing sex have expressed a fear of being exposed to blackmail, robbery and assault (Scaramuzzino 2014; Horswill and Weitzer 2018; Sterling and van der Meulen 2018). Fully researching sex providers and only having contact with those with good reviews were used as safety strategies to avoid being exposed to crime (Horswill and Weitzer 2018). Previous research on the purchase of sex also indicates that in national contexts where the purchase of sex is illegal, sex buyers experience a fear of law enforcement (Horswill and Weitzer 2018). Sterling and van der Meulen (2018) have studied men who purchase sex in Canada, which has a law similar to that in Sweden, and focused on the men's attitudes to the law and perceptions of risk. By studying conversations in online forums, the study showed how the men tried to manage the feeling of increased risk resulting from the implementation of the law by dissociating themselves from being defined as criminals. Other ways of managing risk involved increasing anonymity and changing communication practices. The men also avoided certain types of sex sellers whom they suspected were victims of trafficking and monitored by the police. Sterling and van der Meulen (2018) interpreted the risk management engaged in by the participants in relation to the law as hybrid risk knowledge production. The men based their knowledge on experience

and information gathered from different (more or less reliable) sources, a process that affected their behaviour in relation to sex sellers. Conversely, a study conducted in a UK setting indicated that internet technologies and the local infrastructure have made visits to sex sellers easier and led to sex buyers feeling safer (Pettinger 2015).

Previous studies show that men who purchase sex are aware and concerned about the exploitation they see, and that they have experienced situations in which they suspected that the seller was being exploited in some way (Hammond 2015; Sanders *et al.* 2020). By avoiding meeting sellers whom they thought were exploited, they tried to act upon or distance themselves from this exploitation. Sanders *et al.* (2020) have argued that 'environments have a huge effect on how clients manage risk in an unregulated and stigmatized industry and one where privacy in a digital world is increasingly surveilled' (p. 187). Additionally, some studies have shown how risk can be a tempting aspect for men purchasing sex, when it is a controlled and relatively harmless form of risk (Kong 2016; Grönvall *et al.* 2021a).

Individuals' perceptions of risk in relation to different forms of criminal activity have been studied in the field of criminology, with varying results. Perceived risks of arrest by the police and the severity of the punishment may serve as a deterrent if they are linked to previous experience (Lab 2020). However, a study on adult marijuana use found that severity along with combined legal factors have a minimal influence by comparison with social background characteristics and social support factors (Meier and Johnson 1977). Further, perceptions of stigma and social disapproval have been found to be the greatest concern, with the possibility of going to prison and being sanctioned by the legal system being less of a deterrent than these social factors (Williams and Hawkins 1986; Taylor 2019). Sanders *et al.* (2020) have shown how men who purchase sex navigate in relation to different forms of risk, indicating that fear of exposure to a partner or social network constitutes a bigger concern than fear of law enforcement. Another study has shown that men who purchase sex negotiate stigma by distancing themselves from the cultural and political discourse that depicts them as deviants or perpetrators. The men acknowledged that abuse and exploitation occur, but identified themselves as 'good' clients by distancing themselves from such activities and supporting responsible practices (Hammond 2015).

Thus, risk when purchasing sex involves more than only law enforcement, and the law may be understood as an inseparable dimension of social relations. It operates alongside other discourses and practices to shape the subjects, spaces and forms of power in commercial sex. Law have an ability to punish crime in a direct sense, but may also serve to normalize what lies 'outside' its field of regulation (Scoular 2015). Hence, the law has not become irrelevant, but the legal complex has become embedded in governmental strategies that increasingly centre on the routine administration of lives (Veitch *et al.* 2007; Scoular 2015). Prominent in the regulation of commercial sex are the modern forms of power and governance at a distance (Scoular 2015). By means of normalizing, disciplinary, responsabilizing and bio-political power, power operates through (not over) individuals by structuring their possible fields of action (Foucault 1978; Scoular and O'Neill 2007). The shaping of subjectivities and interactions among and between groups is constituted in the relation between normative value systems and legal processes and everyday practices (Sterling and van der Meulen 2018). By combining macro and micro approaches, the interplay of agency and structure in situ is made visible, which makes it possible to make sense of the social world of actors and the way agency is constrained by structure (Hayes *et al.* 2020). Subjectivities may employ different rationalities and strategies when navigating in relation to risk, which can be illuminated by using the subject's positioning as an analytical category (confer, Sterling and van der Meulen 2018). It is in this intersection between subjective experiences and normative value systems in relation to crime, exploitation and stigma in commercial sex that this study has its focus.

METHOD

This study is based on an empirical sample of 30 men with experiences of purchasing sex in Sweden and/or abroad. Advertisements for participation in the study were placed on two escort sites, on Facebook, on Twitter and in two local newspapers, where a majority of the participants were recruited through escort sites. Participation in the study was initiated by the participants responding to the ad by email or telephone, and they were given both written and oral information about the study procedure, participation and confidentiality. Their consent was either given in writing or was orally recorded. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, by telephone or via Skype, depending on the participants' preference. All interviews were conducted by the author. The author's previous working experience in the field and the participants' research of the author's background and publications before the interview, was perceived as helpful in creating a trustful space for the interview. The interviews were semi-structured and covered five themes: the meaning of buying sex, sexuality, partners and relationships, vulnerability and welfare efforts, which were used as a basic support for what the interviewees chose to talk about. The interviews were recorded (with the exception of three, where the participants declined recording) and then transcribed verbatim. The quotes included in this article have been translated from Swedish to English. Ethical approval was granted by the Regional Ethics Review Board in Lund (Dnr 2017/983).

A reflexive methodology has guided the thematization and analysis of the empirical material (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2018). Processing, reading and analysis has not occurred in separate steps but as a parallel process. The thematization of the transcriptions was guided by looking for dominant and recurrent themes, contradictions and slippages in the stories. The software package NVivo 12 has been employed (QSR International, Melbourne). The thematization and analysis have had a focus on subject positioning as an analytical category. This subject positioning has been explored in relation to the way in which these subjectivities employ different rationalities and strategies when navigating in relation to risk (Sterling and van der Meulen 2018).

All participants were men who purchased in-person sex from women. The participants had purchased sex as one-time visitors to different women and twenty-three of them had also had long-term paid relationships with a woman. There was a variety among those who purchased sex abroad, covering shorter visits to neighbouring countries, long-distance tourism and longer stays in a country due to work or private reasons. Sixteen were single and fourteen were married or had a steady partner. Fourteen had children. All but one had been born in Sweden. Twenty-one were employed or self-employed, two were students, four were retired, one unemployed and two lived on investment incomes. For an overview of the basic sociodemographic characteristics of the participants, see Table 1. Despite these variations among the participants, all of them were self recruited, which entails limitations for the study. Future research with other recruitment methods could give a wider sample, which might contribute to a broader understanding of risk in commercial sex.

RISK AND CRIME EXPOSURE

For all participants, purchasing sex was associated with various risks. One risk when purchasing sex was that of being exposed to violence or crime. For a majority of the participants, the purchase of sex was not something they did impulsively, but was instead well planned. They calculated risk and did research before meeting a sex seller to try to determine whether it was safe to purchase sex from that person. The research before meeting a seller was done by looking at ads and reviews, or by having prior contact with the seller. Yngve, a man in his thirties who purchased sex in Sweden, said: 'I spend quite a lot of time finding out who the person I'm going to meet is'. And Ulf, who primarily purchased sex at brothels abroad, expressed it in a similar way: 'You have to be careful,

Table 1 Participants ($n = 30$)

Sociodemographic characteristics	Number of respondents
Age	
20–29	4
30–39	6
40–49	8
50–59	5
60–75	7
Main arena for contact with sellers	
Internet	24
Brothels/sex clubs abroad	6
Outdoor sex markets	0
Years of purchasing sex	
0–9	11
10–19	10
20–40	9
National context for purchasing sex	
Sweden	10
Abroad	6
Both	14

where and how you buy sex as well'. The risk calculation was conducted before meeting a sex seller, for example, by avoiding specific sellers or arenas perceived as potentially dangerous for them. Yngve again: 'Well, some areas are a bit more, feel a bit more dangerous. I've read about people being robbed and so. And if it looks like a nicer neighbourhood, it feels significantly safer'. For many of the participants, this involved avoiding the street environment as an arena for coming into contact with sellers. The outdoor sex market was seen as potentially dangerous and as a difficult arena in relation to risk assessments (confer, Sanders 2008). The risk calculation also came to expression during the actual meeting with a sex seller. Björn, who purchased sex in Sweden, said:

I make sure that there is no one else in the apartment, or someone else who can enter the apartment. I don't let them in directly in the stairwell, for example. I always meet them at the street door. I don't want to be caught off guard by two guys standing outside. So yes, of course I've made a risk assessment.

The risk assessments conducted by the participants were based on the notion of commercial sex as a risky business, with different arenas or situations being assumed to decrease or increase the perceived risk (confer, Horswill and Weitzer 2018; Sanders *et al.* 2020). Consequently, how the men organized their sexual encounters with sex sellers was based on these risk assessments. Some of the participants had been victims of different crimes when purchasing sex. One recurrent experience in their stories involved being ripped off in different ways, with some of these experiences (such as robbery) being seen as a crime. This is how Klas, who had purchased sex in Sweden for two years, described an experience of blackmail from a presumed pimp:

Like blackmail. Not threatening with violence but with being reported [to the police], and exposure, so to speak. [Y Okay. How did you handle that?] Discussed [it] with him and then I actually paid a little extra to this girl.

On the question of whether he had reported the blackmail to the police, Klas answered: ‘No, I didn’t. I thought about it, but I can’t call the police without turning myself in’. The participants who had had experiences like this reacted in similar ways to Klas, and they also became more cautious when buying sex following this type of event. Being ripped off moneywise was commonly not considered a crime but was rather almost expected when one was inexperienced or bought sex in a risky way. For some, this was viewed as something they had to learn to handle over time, as with Jesper, who had purchased sex in Sweden for 15 years:

From the start I was a bit of a beginner, I was robbed, I was ripped off. But gradually I learned to select, and in the end, I only met a handful of people that I felt I could trust completely. Who trusted me as well.

The participants who had been victims of crimes handled this without contacting the authorities and changed their behaviour in response to negative experiences (Sanders *et al.* 2020). As they became experienced buyers, they developed the skills to avoid crimes and to purchase sex in less risky ways (confer, Horswill and Weitzer 2018). Despite a majority of the participants not having been victims of any crime, this risk was nonetheless taken into consideration. Björn, with a five-year history of purchasing sex, expressed this as follows:

No, I haven’t been the victim of a crime. But once I left the place because I felt that everything wasn’t right. And then I read in the newspapers a month later that there had been knife robberies against sex buyers.

Even if most participants had not been victims of crimes, the perception of commercial sex as dangerous and of sex buyers as potential crime victims affected their interactions and engagement in commercial sex. Due to the legislation, some participants perceived reporting experiences of crime to the police as an impossibility (confer, Sanders *et al.* 2020). One aspect of their risk awareness was a self-understanding of themselves as not ‘worthy’ crime victims and that they had themselves to blame if they were exposed to crime (confer, Heber 2012).

EXPLOITATION

Sellers’ vulnerability

A central theme in the participants’ reasoning about purchasing sex, was a perception of the sellers as being vulnerable in different ways. Different factors, characteristics or situations were viewed as signs of the sellers being vulnerable or exploited. For some of them, this reasoning was based on their own experiences, but in most cases, they were influenced by the media discourse on commercial sex. For many of the participants, the perception of vulnerability was closely associated with the sellers’ nations of origin. Women from Eastern Europe or African countries (such as Nigeria) were seen as being particularly vulnerable to exploitation by pimps or traffickers by comparison with Swedish women. Lennart, with a 15-year history of purchasing sex in Sweden, explained how he associated nationality with suspicions about organized crime:

... But when they post ads in English, then I skip them. Because then, it may well be quite true that it’s a Spanish girl on a month’s holiday in Sweden, who is taking the opportunity to earn some extra money. It might be, but well, no, it’s so easy to say that you’re Spanish when you’re actually from Romania and you didn’t even write the ad yourself. Well, you know, it doesn’t feel, but it’s just a feeling that I have, I haven’t anything specific to go on.

For some of the participants, the sellers' nationality was associated with perceptions of intimacy and independence. Martin, who had purchased sex for 15 years in Sweden and Norway, expressed this in relation to his experiences of meeting Nigerian women selling sex:

It's partly the media image and partly it's the attitude they have, that they are very harsh and maintain a lot of distance, in how they treat you. You feel as if they are maintaining a distance even though they are in a very intimate act. And there is a difference between, well I shouldn't generalize, but the Swedish girls I have met, there is much more intimacy in those meetings. So of course, you feel that they might want to be somewhere else.

The participants based their assessment of the sellers' vulnerability on both nations of origin and on their performed authenticity or intimacy. Swedish women were associated with being both independent and intimate, while being foreign was associated with being coerced and alienated. The participants' perceptions of foreign women being forced to sell sex are close to media descriptions of prostitution and their depiction of trafficking in Sweden. These descriptions have been questioned by studies on migrant women selling sex, which indicate that media depictions uncritically conflate commercial sex with human trafficking (confer, [Vuolajärvi 2018](#); [Weitzer 2018](#)). Some participants expressed an ambiguity about differentiating Swedish sex sellers as independent and non-Swedish sex sellers as exploited. Björn said: 'Because of ignorance I guess, I don't believe that Swedish girls are exposed to trafficking. I may be wrong, but I don't think so.' The participants also talked about vulnerability in relation to socioeconomic factors in various ways. A recurrent theme related to poverty and needing money to whether the seller was selling sex out of free will. Björn, who bought sex in Sweden, said: 'A single mother with two children who sells sex doesn't do it voluntarily. She has to, to make everyday life go round'. Lennart, who also purchased sex in Sweden, reflected about free will in relation to the sellers' life situation in a similar way:

It doesn't feel like they are feeling really well. How voluntary is it to make the decision to sell sex? Yes, it's voluntary, but the circumstances that lead to that decision, well, that I'm more hesitant about.

The vulnerability and independence of the sex seller were for some presumed to be associated both with language skills and educational level. Östen, who had purchased sex in Sweden and abroad for 25 years, said: 'But if the person speaks Swedish well, or is fluent in Swedish and so on, then it's a person who is educated or in control, or at least more in control of her life'. Another aspect was the arena in which the seller offered her services. Isak, who had purchased sex in Sweden and abroad for two years, said:

I have avoided street prostitution, not so much because it's an open arena that is more easily monitored. For me that doesn't matter, since the risk of getting caught is almost non-existent. I avoid the street environment because, which has been known for a very long time, it's where it's most common with abuse and social problems. It's mostly for that reason that I avoid that arena because, maybe it's for my own peace of mind, it's a rather exposed environment, which I feel I don't really want to support.

The participants tried to assess the sellers' vulnerability based on different features or characteristics associated with powerlessness and exploitation. They based their ideas of sellers as being vulnerable both on their own experiences with sellers, and on the normative discourse in Sweden that depicts commercial sex as oppression and exploitation (see [Scoular 2015](#); [Monto](#)

and Milrod 2020). These ideas were interwoven with racialised and classed notions of autonomy when selling sex, which the participants' reflections about free will in relation to the nation of origin and socioeconomic situation both reproduced and questioned (Agustín 2007). Some of the participants did extensive research before contacting a sex seller, trying to obtain a picture of her situation. One way to go about this was by talking to the seller before a meeting. If the seller seemed bothered by having this contact before the meeting, this was taken as a sign of exploitation or pimping. Nils, who had purchased sex in Sweden and Denmark for more than 30 years, described his experiences:

You get the feeling that someone else is behind it... So last time I called, and then they didn't want to answer, they just wanted to text. So, we texted for a while, but I wanted them to send a picture, and then she sent a picture, and then I wanted them to send a video call or something like that, that made sure that she was the one in the picture. But she didn't want to, since she said getting her picture would be enough. 'No, but I want it confirmed', I said. And then the person in question wrote, I suppose it was a man, 'don't you understand that I'm a middleman' or something like that. I don't remember exactly what he wrote, but that he was a pimp.

The content of the ad and how it was formulated could lead the participants to suspect that the woman had a pimp organizing her business. Anders, who had purchased sex in Sweden for five years, said: 'In some of the ads that I have seen, it says "it turns my partner on to see me having sex, so he will be watching", but that's nothing but a pimp'. It could also involve checking up numbers, trying to make sure that the woman worked independently and was not part of an organized network, as Jesper, who had purchased sex in Sweden for 15 years, described it:

I've googled the number and then I've seen that this and that number appeared on this and that ad. Then I've checked by using different tabs, and it becomes clear that it's different girls on every single fucking ad. Something isn't right.

Noticing other people in the apartment when coming for an appointment with a woman was seen as a sign of pimping or trafficking. Fredrik, who had purchased sex in Sweden for five years, said:

These girls are probably vulnerable in that way, and then you avoid it for two reasons primarily, I would say. Partly because it's probably trafficking, that there's some kind of trafficking involved or some pimp or whatever. And that it's presumably dangerous for me to be there, because there may be a risk of robbery or that they steal my stuff while I'm undressed or stuff like that.

Even if the participants said that they had not met sellers whom they thought were exploited, they were affected by stories about the exploitation of sex sellers presented in the media, which Klas expressed as follows:

I've read a bit about girls who have been exposed in different ways, either abused or that their customers have crossed boundaries, so it turned into a rape and so. And the response from the police hasn't been the best. These are just anecdotes, so I don't know how common it is, but I can imagine that in most cases it's not even reported.

The participants expressed that they wanted to avoid purchasing sex from someone in a vulnerable situation, or someone who had a pimp or was a victim of human trafficking. Robert,

who had purchased sex for 15 years in other Scandinavian countries, expressed it in the following way:

You want to know that nothing strange is going on. You want to know that it's not human trafficking, and you notice that in how money is handled and what kind of arrangement it is. If the person has any injuries. And you make this assessment for your own sake and for theirs.

No participants (except one) had contacted the police when suspecting exploitation. However, the indicators they used to detect suspected exploitation, such as the sellers ethnicity and the ad's appearance, as well as its limitations, were similar to those suggested by researchers and used by the police (for example, [L'Hoiry, Moretti, and Antonopoulos 2021](#)). One way to avoid sellers whom they suspected were being exploited was to meet one woman regularly. The participants expressed that this decreased the risks of exploitation and crime at the same time as it made the paid sexual encounter feel more intimate and real. But meeting one woman regularly entailed other risks, such as emotional engagement and the seller becoming financially dependent on them, which in some cases was more difficult to handle (confer, [Grönvall et al. 2021b](#)).

The role of the purchaser

There were several reasons for avoiding sellers who were presumed to be vulnerable or exploited. In part, it was a question of the participants' own safety and part of their risk assessment for avoiding crime and law enforcement (confer, [Sterling and van der Meulen 2018](#)). A central theme when talking about the sex sellers' vulnerability was a fear of exploiting or hurting the person from whom they purchased sex. Many of the participants were careful to clearly distance themselves from forms of commercial sex that might be associated with exploitation or organized crime. Dan, who had purchased sex in Sweden for 4 years, put it as follows:

I'm extremely negative to trafficking and the kind of prostitution that has to do with someone being exploited. And then you can argue, and I have my arguments, I'm sure they wouldn't hold up in a debate, but for you to understand how I reason, or at least how I try. I think that in the Thai massage world, it may not be trafficking in the same way. Or maybe it is so, but you don't see it that way. But I've never been interested in going to prostitutes whom I suspect are involved in trafficking.

Trying to avoid sellers who were exploited or forced to sell sex was also linked to the participants' pleasure when buying sex and a desire for the sexual encounter to include some kind of mutual pleasure. Anders said: 'I think that I would never get an erection if I knew I was using a girl like that'. One way to avoid vulnerable or exploited sellers was to buy sex from someone who was involved in a sex workers' organization. Henrik, who had purchased sex in Sweden and abroad for 30 years, said:

In fact, there are several who are members of sex workers' unions and things like that. Then I think, I don't know where I got this from, that they are probably not exposed to trafficking. It seems so when they describe different things, and then it feels a bit better. Because I don't want to be a part of someone getting hurt.

In understanding their own experiences, the participants mirrored these against the normative discourse on commercial sex as exploitation and tried to conceptualize them by distancing their experiences from the exploitation discourse (confer, [Hammond 2015](#)). Some said that assessing the sellers' vulnerability was something they had learned from experience. Xander, who

had purchased sex in Sweden for 30 years, put it like this: ‘No, but it must feel pretty right, and if it’s a younger girl, then I always ask, “are you really sure that you are okay with this”. Well, over the years you somehow learn to read people’. Becoming an experienced and skilled client was not only an advantage in relation to avoiding law enforcement but also in relation to becoming a responsible sex purchaser (confer, [Hammond 2015](#); Horswill and [Weitzer 2018](#)). For some, the fear of being an exploiter was associated with shame and a bad conscience, which Robert, who only purchased sex abroad, expressed as follows: ‘The first time, in Prague in 2004, I got a lot of anxiety at first, that I had bought sex. Because I had learned how wrong it was’. Xander, who only purchased sex in Sweden, said it in a similar way: ‘I want everything to be as decent as possible, as simple as that. If there were to be any coercion or so on, it wouldn’t be, my conscience as I said, I have two daughters’. The participants navigated in relation to the Swedish discourse on commercial sex, but also in relation to stories they had read in the media or had encountered themselves. In this negotiation that they conducted in relation to a discourse, and also in relation to (more or less ideologically coloured) observations and descriptions, they tried to distance themselves from the idea of commercial sex as exploitation and of sex buyers as perpetrators (confer, [Hammond 2015](#)). Some pointed to the difficulties in detecting whether or not the sellers were being exploited. Fredrik said:

I won’t say that it’s some kind of fair-trade business I am doing. But you try to make sure that this is someone who seems to be an ordinary Swedish girl, or ‘an ordinary girl’, but someone who isn’t any kind of trafficking victim. You never know of course, but you still try to keep a track of it.

Robert felt the same, and he expressed the ambiguity associated with trying to do good while at the same time being involved in a phenomenon that is perceived to be pervasively bad:

And then, the thing with their vulnerability, it’s very difficult to know no matter what you consume, if someone may have been hurt on the way. And I don’t know, I think we live in a world of easily bought credibility.

Participants also reflected upon the responsibility of the individual sex buyer in relation to the wider phenomenon, as Ulf did: ‘But still, the question is whether it’s me, if I get a good feeling and it still isn’t so. Is it me who is making the mistake or the one who has exposed her, or am I part of the problem?’ These reflections can be viewed in relation to the way in which the political ambition in Sweden has been formulated: commercial sex as a phenomenon is understood as an expression of structural gender inequality, but the buyer is held responsible for his actions at an individual level ([Scouler 2015](#); [Monto and Milrod 2020](#)). This could lead to an ambiguity between the structural understanding of the phenomenon and individual responsibility. Some went through with the purchase even if there was something that did not feel good about it. This is how Fredrik explained why he purchased sex from women, whom he suspected being victims of exploitation:

Well, I have usually done my business and then I’ve left. There is nothing I would, once you are there, the desire is usually so great that it’s not worth it. I won’t do anything about it then, it’s not my problem. It sounds so cynical but that’s how it felt.

This was expressed by others as well, that in the moment they were caught up in their own desire, and that it was only afterwards that they saw the situation from a more sober perspective. Gustaf said: ‘You are expectant, eager and then the sick pallor of reflection may come later. And

then you understand that this might not have been that good'. Even if most of the participants tried to avoid buying sex from someone whom they thought was being forced to sell, some had experiences of having unintended contacts with presumed pimps. Gustaf, who had purchased sex in Sweden for 20 years, described such an episode with a presumed pimp in the following way:

It was some kind of scheme, some kind of fraud where there was a man involved. And I know that at some point I met a man and there was a woman in the picture as well and it seemed that she was quite controlled by this man and, well, it was him that I met.

Others spoke of bad experiences with sellers whom they suspected of being vulnerable, even if there was no third party involved. Lennart put it like this when he talked about an underage girl from whom he had bought sex: 'She was so broken. I shouldn't have done it. I still have a bad conscience that I didn't just send her home. I think she used sex as some kind of self-harm'. One aspect raised by the participants focused on being a nice and decent buyer, both when meeting the sellers and when talking about them. Erik, who had purchased sex in Sweden for five years, said:

Something I don't like about the ads, it's the comments sections, where you can write comments, and you quickly realize that there are many really sleazy types, as I said. Who comments on looks and so on. And that, no, I don't like that.

The negotiation, and distancing themselves from the 'wrong' kind of sex buyer, also involved mirroring their experiences against their perceptions of other sex purchasers. This created discomfort and unease when they crossed the line and acted in contrast to their own perceptions of the decent sex buyer (Sterling and van der Meulen 2018; Grönvall *et al.* 2021a).

THE STIGMA OF BEING A PUNTER

For some participants, the perceived risks associated with commercial sex were linked to its criminalization. Dan, who purchased sex in Sweden, expressed it like this: 'The fact that it's illegal makes it dangerous in itself, you live in a twilight zone where things can happen that cannot be controlled'. Björn, who also purchased sex in Sweden, described it in a similar way: 'I've made a risk assessment that if I bring a girl to my place, the risk is very small that the police will raid the apartment like a Hollywood movie'. For others, the risks associated with criminalization led to them not purchasing sex in Sweden, both due to the legislation and the perceived risk of being involved in illegal activities. It could be both about not wanting to commit a crime and a fear of the consequences of getting caught by the police. Per, who had purchased sex in Denmark for 10 years, expressed it in the following way:

You have to use your judgement, so you don't end up in ... And the choices I've made: if I don't buy sex in Sweden, I don't do anything illegal, as the situation is now, and I also minimize those risks. Of course, you can end up in a situation like that in Denmark as well. But there you have the opportunity to get confirmation via, for example Eroguide [a Danish escort guide with ads, a forum and reviews], that it's legitimate, and then it feels safe.

Being caught by the police was for some associated with both negative consequences and shame. Lennart said: 'If I'm looking for a job, and the question comes "well, do you have a criminal record?" Then it's not fun to say that "yes, I have a criminal record for buying sex", that's no fun.'

At the same time, some participants expressed that the Swedish sex purchase act did not affect them and that it was both a problematic, illogical and ineffective law. Isak had bought sex for two years in Sweden and abroad. He was legally trained, with a political and professional interest in the question, and expressed his view as follows:

When it comes to law and morality, I think, and I will use Latin because you sound smarter than you really are when you speak Latin. There is a concept pair called *malum in se* and *malum prohibitum*, that is, what's wrong because it's wrong and what's wrong because it's forbidden. And in my opinion, the sex purchase act is clearly in the latter category. Similar to the sauna club law and the drug policy in Sweden. It's wrong because it's forbidden, it's not wrong because it's wrong, like the core criminal law. ... But you can also have the discussion on another level: that the law is completely insubstantial and is creating negative side effects for the people it is actually meant to help.

Even if the criminalization of the purchase of sex affected some participants, for most participants, the potential punishments for committing a crime were of minor significance in relation to their purchase of sex. The concerns and deterrents regarding the purchase of sex were primarily associated with social factors (Williams and Hawkins 1986; Sanders *et al.* 2020). One recurrent element in the participants' stories was the fear of being stigmatized and labelled as a sex buyer, and few had told anyone that they purchased sex. Martin, who had bought sex for 15 years in Sweden and Norway, expressed it as follows: 'It's such a big stigma so no one talks about it'. For some, the perceived stigmatization was associated with the purchase of sex being illegal in Sweden, as Fredrik who only purchased sex in Sweden, experienced it:

That it's illegal for people to buy, it makes it so incredible, it becomes stigmatized, it becomes so secret in a way. It gets really problematic that way. There's so much in it, you know what I mean? If you are a sex buyer then you are a sex buyer with a capital S.

The fear of being exposed as a sex buyer and as someone engaged in something illegal led to some of the participants being cautious about talking of their experiences. Gustaf, who had bought sex for 20 years in Sweden, said:

Sometimes I think it would be better to not criminalize it, and instead encourage people to talk about it. Of course, I'm not talking to anyone about this, because it's way too big ... I don't tell anyone if I don't know that it's anonymous and that I won't be reported.

The stigma associated with purchasing sex silenced the participants and made them careful in the way they handled their experiences (confer, Hammond 2015). For some, this was associated with commercial sex being a stigmatized phenomenon, and the fact that the debate in Sweden was perceived as being polarized. Robert, who only bought sex abroad, expressed it as follows:

Of course, you are very anonymous and careful in Sweden, because people don't think there is any difference between me paying for a massage with an erotic touch, compared to someone who is willing to really force themselves on someone with violence. I think there is a difference, as I said. So that's a bit of the background to why I don't do it, and never think I will do either, in Sweden.

In a way similar to that in which the political and media discourse in Sweden tends to rely on dichotomized expressions, the participants tried to conceptualize and understand their experi-

ences within the same polarized frame (confer, [Pettinger 2015](#)). Even if the participants were affected by media perspectives in Sweden that depict commercial sex as exploitation, their experiences also involved other aspects. Allan, who had bought sex abroad for 40 years, said:

I don't think that the media image, for example, is completely accurate about who sells sex and how their situation is. It's quite obvious that the vast majority feel bad and have a hard time and do it more or less through some form of coercion. But that doesn't apply to everyone.

Several of the participants were engaged in the debate on commercial sex in Sweden and had reflected upon it. While some thought the stigma was associated with Christian values, as was the case with Carl: 'Well, it is very taboo. We have always been a deeply Christian society until recently, so it's not that strange', others perceived it as being more related to feminism, as with Erik: 'If you were to mention anything, you would directly be seen as an antifeminist and misogynist, if you were to say something in the wrong direction. So, it's best to keep quiet'. A few of the participants were active in discussion forums on the internet, but quite a few had stopped doing this. This was due both to inactivity in the forums and that the online communication climate had changed. Per described this in the following way:

It's quite the same, the legislation in Sweden leads to a prostitution of misery, which also leads to a debate about the misery associated with the whole thing. So, I don't write anything there anymore, I did it a bit before. But then again, when you try to have a sensible debate it's like casting pearls before swine.

When navigating in relation to normative discourses on commercial sex, the participants referred both to feminism and religion, where the (radical) feminist debate in Sweden had made them cautious about speaking of their experiences (confer, [Weitzer 2018](#)). Digitalization had to some extent helped them to talk about their experiences, but it also made it more difficult as a result of the atmosphere online (confer, [Scaramuzzino 2014](#); [Pettinger 2015](#)).

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Risk was something all participants in this study related to in different ways. The participants expressed that risk management was something that was learnt and developed from experience (confer, [Lever and Dolnick 2010](#); Horswill and [Weitzer 2018](#); [Olsson 2020](#)). This was evident in relation to getting caught by the police, becoming victims of crimes and detecting exploited sellers and organized crime (confer, [Sanders et al. 2020](#)). What becomes visible in the participants' stories is how they based their risk management and navigation both on their own experiences and knowledge and on information gathered from elsewhere, primarily from reading the news and form various online forums. In addition to basing their knowledge of risk and their risk assessments on their own experiences and on input from the Swedish media discourse, the participants also framed their own experiences on the basis of these different sources of information. This may be viewed in relation to previous research on risk when purchasing sex (for example, Horswill and [Weitzer 2018](#); [Sanders et al. 2020](#)) and studies conceptualizing the risk assessments made by sex purchasers as being based on hybrid risk knowledge production ([Sterling and van der Meulen 2018](#)).

The Swedish juridical context has had a varying impact on the participants' engagement in commercial sex. While some have adjusted their behaviour as a result of the criminalization, others described not feeling affected at all. Despite this, the Swedish context, in terms of the political and normative approach to the purchase of sex, affected them all the more – not in a dir-

ectly punitive way, but by governing them in a normalizing and disciplinary manner (Foucault 1978; Scoular 2015). This is expressed in the way the participants organized their purchases, in their contacts with sellers, and in their anxiety and reluctance to be exploiters and perpetrators. In their encounters with sellers, and when talking to the interviewer about these, they resisted and distanced themselves from the view of themselves as oppressors or exploiters, navigating between the normative discourse on commercial sex and their individual and relational experiences (confer, Hammond 2015; Weitzer 2018). In being defined as ‘sex buyers’ and as such as representatives of structural violence, they have internalized the view of themselves as oppressors, and they were constantly negotiating and navigating in relation to this self-view. This is visible in the way they talked about the sellers’ vulnerability, in how they described trying to avoid exploiting or hurting anyone and in how they distanced themselves from the forms of commercial sex they perceived as dangerous and risky. This can be understood as the participants being governed and disciplined in the sense that they mirrored their experiences in relation to the normative view of the ‘sex buyer’. But this involved a struggle or a constant negotiation, since they continued to purchase sex and were in this sense resisting (or negotiating) the governance and discipline (Foucault 1978; Scoular 2015). For the men in this study, the political ambition to govern and discipline to change their attitudes and behaviour did not make them stop purchasing sex. However, their stories and reflections show how this disciplinary power works through their lives as it structures their fields of action (confer, Foucault 1978), and also how it works through specific embodied, spatial and communicative practices (Hayes *et al.* 2020) as it affects their behaviours when purchasing sex.

The effort and time the participants spent talking about the different themes during the interviews shows what preoccupied their thoughts when they reflected on the purchase of sex. While their own exposure to crime and danger was dealt with quickly, most of the participants talked extensively about the sellers’ situation in a concerned and detailed way. In presenting their stories to the interviewer, the participants worked consciously on their self-presentation. The impression management that they engaged in to affect the way they were perceived by others was linked to impression control, which shows an ambiguity in (and a struggle against) the governance of sex buyers in Sweden. The participants were preoccupied with not being identified, defined and stigmatized as the ‘sex buyer with a capital S’ and also with expressing resistance against being disciplined in line with the ‘Swedish model’. In being governed through responsabilization, they did not stop purchasing sex, but they tried to purchase sex in ‘good’ ways (confer, Scoular and O’Neill 2007).

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