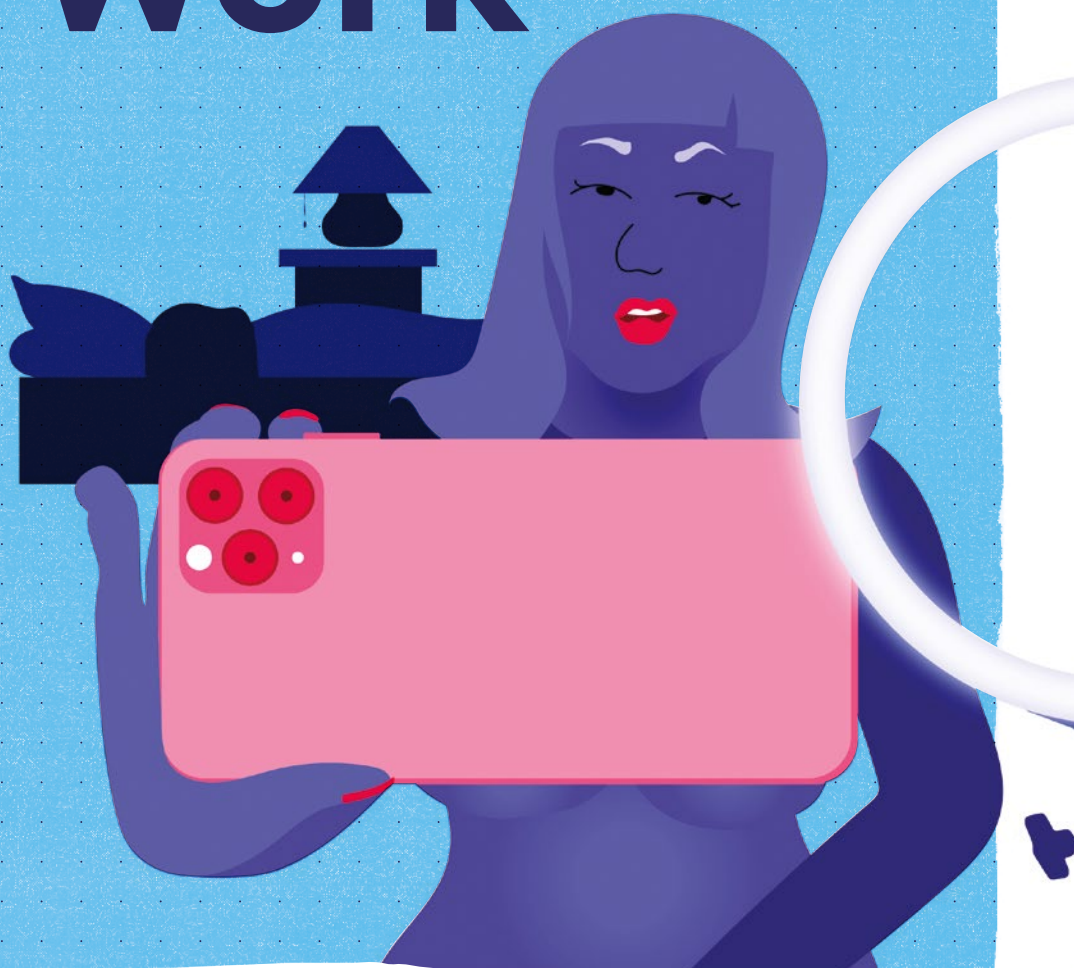


Fairwork

**WORKING CONDITIONS IN THE
ONLINE SEX WORK INDUSTRY**

Platform Sex Work



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Online sex work platforms like OnlyFans have now entered popular culture, yet there has been remarkably little public conversation surrounding the working conditions experienced by those who use them to earn a living.

Whilst academic and journalistic pieces have helped to facilitate a conversation surrounding working conditions in the gig economy more broadly, and the role platforms play in creating these conditions, to date this conversation has largely excluded sex workers who work via online platforms. Online sex work platforms are digital intermediaries that enable interactions between sex workers and their clients. Platforms shape and condition workers’ activities in powerful ways based on the decisions made by the companies that run them.

This report presents research from a year-long project, undertaken in 2023 and 2024 into working conditions experienced by sex workers using four different digital platforms: OnlyFans, AdultWork, Streamate and Chaturbate. Drawing on 79 survey responses and 34 interviews with workers currently active on a least one of the four platforms, it presents findings concerning the issues workers encounter and the role that platforms play in shaping their experiences of work. Covering five key areas; pay, conditions, contracts, management and representation, this research documented the following:

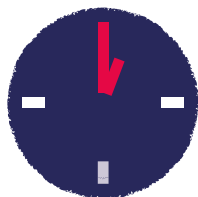


Shannon Vandenheuvel / Unsplash



PAY

- Workers frequently experience issues surrounding pay variability.
- Workers on camming platforms often experience long waiting times with large amounts of working time that is unpaid.
- Costs associated with online sex work can be high, averaging at 25% of total earnings.
- Clients may initiate refunds and chargebacks which result in lost income, with workers having minimal avenues to contest these.
- Platform commissions, whilst variable, often comprise a significant proportion of workers' income. The highest reported commission was 70% of all earnings.



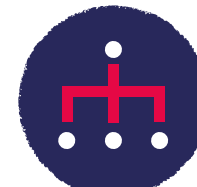
CONDITIONS

- Abuse and harassment is a prevalent issue for workers, including threats of both physical and sexual violence.
- Abuse often takes place based on protected characteristics including race, gender and sexuality.
- Doxing, in which someone's identity and personal details are maliciously revealed online, was experienced by a third of the workers we surveyed.
- A quarter of our sample had experienced stalking from clients.
- Workers can experience attempts to scam them into revealing their details or trick them into thinking they've been paid.



CONTRACTS

- Working contracts on all four platforms lacked clarity in what types of content is allowed on the platforms. This means that workers often experience disciplinary actions when they attempt to navigate rules that they struggle to understand.
- Changes to terms of service had, in some cases, resulted in the retroactive flagging of content and fears of disciplinary actions.
- Workers have their content stolen and reposted on third party sites, with platforms providing limited resources to have this removed.
- Workers lack clarity in how their personal data is stored and who has access to this data.



MANAGEMENT

- Whilst channels of communication for support between workers and platform management exist, workers in our sample found these channels to be inadequate.
- Many workers experience disciplinary actions including deactivations and suspensions.
- Workers are often unaware of appeals processes, or find these processes unclear and difficult to navigate.



REPRESENTATION

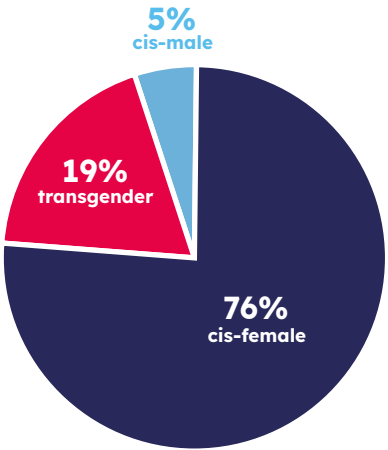
- Many workers recognise the importance and benefit of trade union representation and have expressed willingness to join an organisation which campaigns for their rights at work.
- No union currently has entered into formal negotiations with any of the four platforms in this study, meaning workers lack opportunities for collective representation and bargaining.



Key Statistics

Of our survey sample:

- 76% identified as cis-female, 19% as transgender, 5% as cis-male.
- 20% were migrants in the country they currently lived.
- 32% said they are always worried about not making enough to cover their living expenses.
- 69% experienced online abuse and harassment as result of their work.
- 50% said they had experienced a disciplinary action taken against them by the platform on which they worked.
- 77% said that they would be interested in joining an organisation, such as a union or workers association.



Platform Sex Work Principles

We present 10 principles, grounded in our empirical research, which set out basic minimum standard for what constitutes fair platform sex work.*

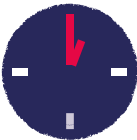
These are a guideline for platforms, workers, policy makers, and the public at large to help reimagine in practical terms what changes could be implemented to help improve the working conditions for online sex workers.

These principles are:



Pay

- 1.1 - Workers are paid on time and for all completed work
- 1.2 - Chargebacks and banking discrimination are mitigated



Condition

- 2.1 - Health and safety risks are mitigated
- 2.2 - Ensures safe working conditions



Contracts

- 3.1 - Clear terms and conditions are available
- 3.2 - Workers are supported when clients break contractual rules.



Management

- 4.1 There is due process for decisions affecting workers
- 4.2 There is equity in the management process



Representation

- 5.1 - Workers have access to representation, and freedom of association
- 5.2 - There is collective governance or bargaining

*The complete set of principles, along with their corresponding thresholds, is available on page 51.

INTRODUCTION

Platform Sex Work: Working Conditions Within the Online Sex Work Industry

In 2020, the American rapper Megan Thee Stallion released a new remix of her song ‘Savage’. The track features the artist Beyoncé, one of the most famous people in the world, who in the second verse delivers the line:

“Hips TikTok when I dance, On that Demon Time, she might start an OnlyFans.”

Beyoncé’s casual reference to OnlyFans, an online platform known for hosting explicit sexual content, might represent the moment at which online sex work cemented its home within mainstream culture, but the history of online sex work is much longer.

The first webcamming platforms emerged in the mid-nineties as more and more people connected to the internet for the first time. The sites Cams and Flirt4Free started in 1996 with Streamate following in 1999 (Jones, 2020). Estimates suggest that AdultWork, the UK’s largest and most popular escorting site, has been in existence since at least 2003,¹ with sex workers also advertising on sites like Craigslist since the nineties (Singel, 2010). These digital platforms often outdate those that we typically understand as comprising the gig economy, such as Uber, launched in 2010 (Knight, 2016), or Amazon Mechanical Turk, launched in 2005 (Amazon Mechanical Turk, 2016), complicating the accepted historical narratives of the platform economy. As porn scholar Heather Berg argues, “The ‘new economy’ is not new - porn workers have been living in it

for decades. They have found ways to hack and reshape its conditions for as long” (Berg, 2021, p. 2).

IN DISCUSSIONS OF ONLINE SEX WORK, THE MEDIA NARRATIVE IS STUCK IN A STATE OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE, SWINGING WILDLY BETWEEN ESPOUSING THE HUGE LEVELS EARNED BY TOP STARS AND STORIES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND RAPE.

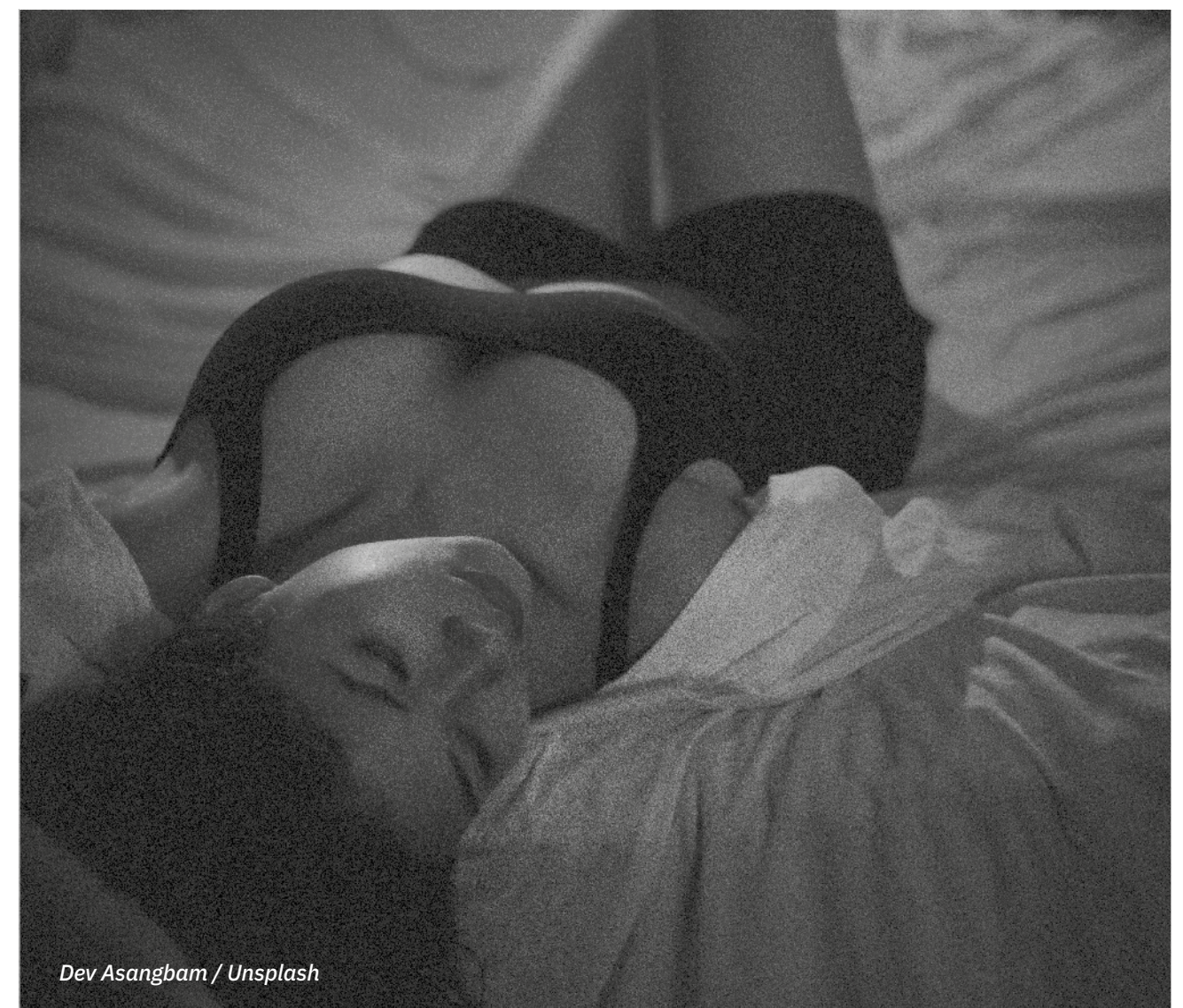
Whilst online sex work is becoming an accepted part of mainstream culture, we know remarkably little about how many people do this type of work. These numbers are difficult to estimate in part due to the number of different platforms in operation, but also because of the lack of transparency that pervades the industry as a whole and the reticence of companies to release information into the public realm.

What information we do have suggests that the numbers are significant. Over an 11-week period, Jokubauskaitė et al. (2023) recorded that on the webcamming platform Chaturbate, 190,000 different workers used the platform

to cam. The sites BongaCams, LiveJasmin and Streamate all had over 30,000 workers who streamed during the same period (Jokubauskaitė et al., 2023). OnlyFans had 4.12 million registered creators in 2023 (Turner, 2024), up from 3.18 million in 2022 (Fenix International Limited, 2022), and its majority shareholder recently entered into the Forbes list of the top 400 richest people in America (XBIZ, 2024).

Likewise, we know little about working conditions and the experiences of workers who use these platforms. Over the past 10 years there has been an increasing number of academic and journalistic pieces which have examined the experiences of gig workers, helping to facilitate a public discourse surrounding wages

(Mellino et al., 2021), legal classification (Ferguson, 2021) and algorithmic management (O’Connor, 2016) within work mediated by online platforms. Yet in discussions of online sex work, the media narrative is stuck in a state of cognitive dissonance, swinging wildly between espousing the huge levels earned by top stars (Dosani, 2024) and stories of sexual violence and rape (Reuters, 2024). Questions surrounding what workplaces issues workers experience – such as their access to human managers, adequate wages, protection from clients and personal data breaches, and access to insurance and sick pay – remain unknown.



Dev Asangbam / Unsplash

BACKGROUND

The Fairwork Project

Fairwork is an international action research project which examines the working conditions of people who work via digital platforms, aiming to implement changes which benefit workers.

It operates in 38 countries and conducts independent research into the ways that digital technologies are shaping working conditions around the world. Fairwork looks at a range of different types of work, including in-person gig work such as couriering, ride-hail or domestic work, undertaken on platforms like Uber, Lyft and Deliveroo. It also looks at remote freelancing platforms, undertaken on platforms like Upwork and Fiverr. The research Fairwork does aims to quantify working conditions, giving each platform a score based on the conditions workers encounter, so that different platforms can be compared and contrasted. Fairwork has, to date, not conducted any research into platforms which mediate sex work, which risks further marginalising and exceptionalising sex work from discussions surrounding the digitisation of our economy. Sex work is work, and it's time that we hold the platforms that mediate it to account.

Fairwork's methodology starts with developing a set of principles of fair work. These are benchmarks, minimum basic standards to which all platforms should adhere. These principles cover five areas: pay, conditions, contracts, management, and representation. Each principle contains actions that platforms can, and should, do to improve working conditions. Fairwork then conducts independent research into different platforms, using these principles to see where platforms are succeeding or failing in their responsibility to their workers, and creates an accessible league table of how different platforms compare (Figure 1).

Fairwork Example Scores

| | | |
|-----------------|-------|--------------|
| ComeUp | 5 /10 | ●●●●●○○○○○ |
| Prolific | 5 /10 | ●●●●●○○○○○ |
| Terawork | 5 /10 | ●●●●●○○○○○ |
| Appen | 3 /10 | ●●●○○○○○○○ |
| SoyFreelancer | 2 /10 | ●●○○○○○○○○○ |
| Upwork | 2 /10 | ●●○○○○○○○○○ |
| Clickworker | 1 /10 | ●○○○○○○○○○○○ |
| Elharefa | 1 /10 | ●○○○○○○○○○○○ |
| Fiverr | 1 /10 | ●○○○○○○○○○○○ |
| PeoplePerHour | 1 /10 | ●○○○○○○○○○○○ |
| Scale/Remotasks | 1 /10 | ●○○○○○○○○○○○ |
| Amazon MTurk | - | ○○○○○○○○○○○ |
| Freelancer | - | ○○○○○○○○○○○ |
| Microworkers | - | ○○○○○○○○○○○ |
| Workana | - | ○○○○○○○○○○○ |

Figure 1, Fairwork uses its research to create an easy-to-understand league table so different platforms can be compared and contrasted.

Overview

This report presents research from a year-long project funded by Oxford University's John Fell Fund, which ran from 2023 to 2024, into working conditions experienced by sex workers using four different digital platforms: OnlyFans, AdultWork, Streamate, and Chaturbate.

It presents findings that look at the issues workers encounter and the role that platforms play in shaping their experiences of work. We discuss the dominant and most pressing issues that workers face, and draw parallels across platforms, which often differ significantly in how they function and the types of labour they mediate. The report thus attempts to characterise the industry as a whole, looking at where interventions are most needed to improve working conditions.

Following on from this we present a set of principles, grounded in our empirical research, which set out basic minimum standards for what should constitutes fair platform sex work. These are a guideline for platforms, workers, policy makers, and the public at large to help reimagine in practical terms what changes could be implemented to help improve working conditions for online sex workers. They are a road map, which if

implemented, could help radically improve the lives of sex workers using digital platforms.

The report proceeds as follows. Firstly, the broader research context is outlined and key terms are defined. Next, the four platforms included in the study are introduced and explored in depth, looking at how they function and categorising them in a broader typology of platforms. The report then looks at the companies that run these platforms and how they utilise various means to disguise their operations from public scrutiny. Data from the empirical research into working conditions on the four platforms, across the themes of pay, conditions, contracts, management and representation is then put forward. Finally, the Fairwork Platform Sex Work Principles are presented.



Research Context

The past 10 years have seen an increased focus by researchers, policy makers and journalists on work mediated via digital platforms, with terms such as ‘the gig economy’, ‘the platform economy’ and ‘the sharing economy’ entering into popular use.

But this focus has largely been preoccupied with a fixed imaginary of what the typical worker looks like; the male courier delivering your dinner, driving your taxi, or fixing your plumbing (Huws, 2016). This gendered lens has often meant a focus on male-dominated sectors, at the expense of analysis looking at how digital technologies are transforming feminised sectors of our economy (Blunt and Stardust, 2021; Rand, 2019). The recent work of academics and researchers has been actively engaging with this gap in the literature, exploring the different ways in which sex workers use digital platforms, helping to correct their malignment from academic literature on the platform economy (Berg, 2016; Easterbrook-Smith, 2022; Jokubauskaitė et al., 2023; Jones, 2020; Pezzutto, 2019; Sanders et al., 2016; Stegeman, 2021; Stegeman et al., 2023; van Doorn and Velthuis, 2018). This work has started to question the commonplace assumptions surrounding what gig work is and who gets included within discussions surrounding working conditions and the future of work (Berg, 2021; Hardy and Barbagallo, 2021).

Sex work is arguably one of the most stigmatised areas of work (Vanwesenbeeck, 2001). Few other professions expose workers to such chronic levels of violence, both at the hands of clients and the police (Grant, 2014). The denial of basic provisions and services like access to banking (Quinio, 2024), as well as social stigma, mean that workers must sometimes hide how they earn a living from those closest to them (Koken et al., 2004).

Helen Rand (2019) has argued that the exclusion of online sex work from broader platform labour discourse is a direct result of the structurally embedded stigma that surrounds sex work, a stigma which works to frame sexual labour as illegitimate and therefore not comparable with other forms of work. Yet this marginalisation only seeks to further perpetuate the discrimination experienced by sex workers, as they are left out of policy interventions and discussions surrounding worker rights in the new economy. For example, the recent EU Platform Directive, signed into law in March 2024, which seeks to redress the misclassification of gig workers across the EU, does not mention sex workers using digital platforms. In their breakdown of the different sectors that platform workers operate in, the authors include taxi, delivery, home services, professional services, freelance, domestic work and micro tasks, failing to recognise either location-based or online platform sex work (European Union, 2024).

This narrative, in which platform sex work ceases to be work at all, benefits platform companies, creating a conceptual and legislative gap that allows them to dis-embed themselves from the local context in which workers reside, sidestepping local-level accountability in the process (Graham, 2020). Platforms can therefore obscure the fundamental role they play in shaping the working conditions people experience and their role within the enacting of the labour process (Gandini, 2019), presenting instead a mirage, an idealised vision of themselves as simply tech companies; neutral arbiters of a digital platform (Irani, 2015).

Building on the work of others, we argue that platform-based sex work needs to be brought into broader conversation surrounding how digital technologies are shaping work and working conditions. We need to investigate the companies that are running these platforms, to look at the powerful role they play in determining the environments that sex workers labour in, and investigate how the decisions made by these companies impact the lives of the thousands of people who use these platforms to earn a living.

Anti-sex worker sentiment

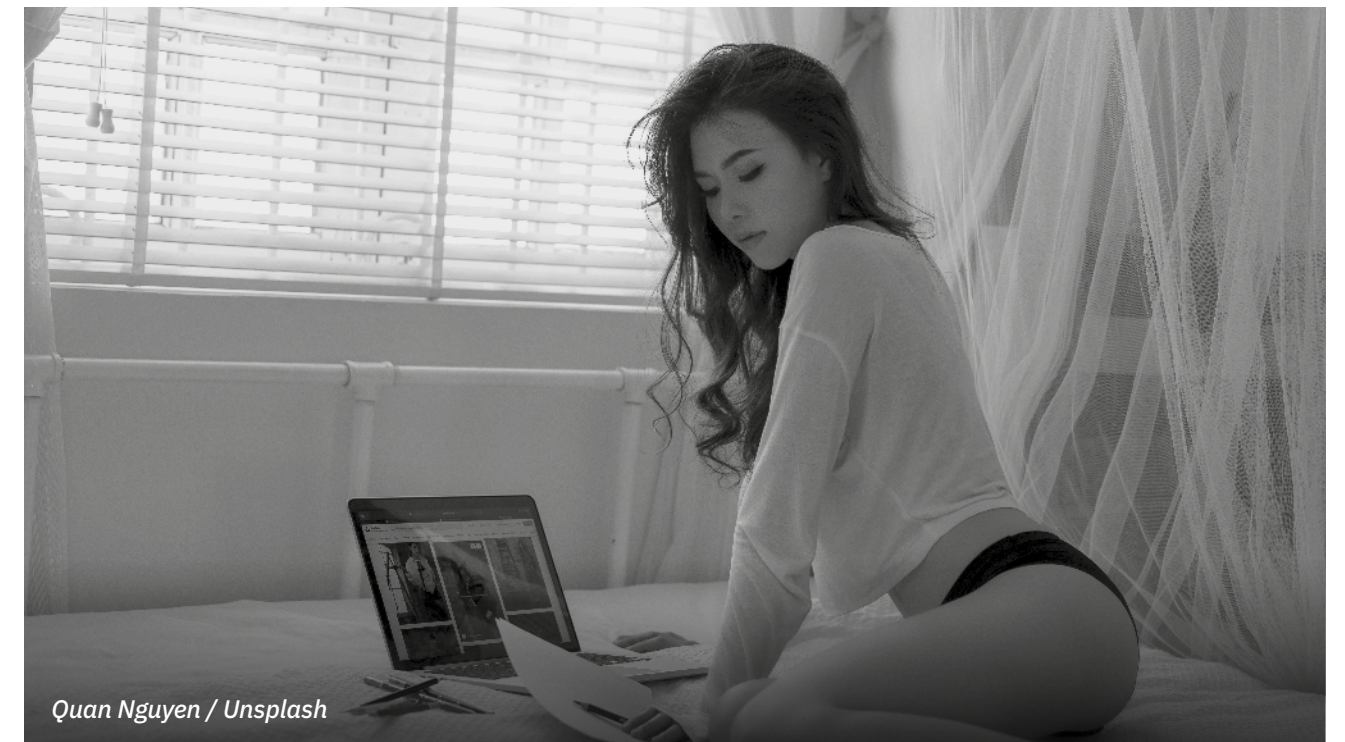
This report presents research findings on the issues that sex workers experience whilst using digital platforms, to identify key points where platforms can introduce changes which benefit workers. Thus, the emphasis is on the negative elements of platform sex work, rather than the positive. Throughout our research, the workers we surveyed and interviewed recounted many positive experiences and sentiments towards their work. They actively and independently chose to work on these platforms as they offered a better alternative to the other forms of work available to them. Positive elements of working via platforms included increased autonomy and the ability to define your own schedule, creative freedom, sexual expression, financial autonomy, skill development, and increased levels of self-respect and self-worth.

For instance, Tracey who provided full-service sex work via AdultWork described the positive experiences of providing a service that she felt improved the wellbeing of her clients.

“It’s fantastic. It suits how I have to live my life to be comfortable [with] a job, and it feels like a vocation. It feels like how teachers feel when they want to go and teach. It’s that thing of I’m providing something to people and people are leaving here happy after being stressed. And it’s brilliant.”

Tracey,² UK – AdultWork

Anti-sex work sentiment and political campaigning means that to discuss negative experiences and poor conditions within sex work can often be seen as arguing for its abolition (Smith and Mac, 2018). We reject this framing. Our interest is in the work of sex work and attempts to improve the material conditions of those who work via digital platforms. Sex work cannot be characterised in totalising categories of either exploitative or empowering, rather it exists in “a constellation of occupational arrangements, power relations, and worker experiences (Weitzer, 2009, p. 6).” The aim of this research is to highlight the experiences of workers and how platforms shape and condition their experiences of work.



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Defining Platform Sex Work

Sex workers use a range of different communication technologies within their work, including social media platforms, personalised websites, WhatsApp chats and dating apps (Cunningham et al., 2018). In addition to these mainstream technologies, many workers also make use of bespoke platforms which exist primarily for use by sex workers and clients, which we term ‘online sex work platforms’. This research is concerned with the role played by a number of these platforms. In this section, we outline key concepts and terms used in the report.

Sex Work

We define sex work as the consensual exchange of sexual services, for material remuneration – which can be both monetary and in-kind. Importantly, sex work can include a range of activities including direct physical contact between the different parties, and indirect sexual stimulation (Open Society Foundation, 2019; Orchard, 2019; Weitzer, 2018). In these ways sex work is a broader term than prostitution as it refers to a variety of types of labour including, but not limited to, full-service sex work,³ webcamming, content creation, stripping, pole dancing, dominatrix work, phone sex, and sexting (Smith and Mac, 2018).

In this report we propose three key terms for defining platform sex work more precisely:

Online Sex Work Platform

We define online sex work platforms as digital intermediaries that enable interactions between sex workers and their clients. These platforms allow workers to send content, stream live video, advertise, and communicate with clients. They also enable clients to

receive content and send payments to workers. They therefore facilitate the production and consumption of sexual and emotional labour⁴ via their digital infrastructure (Jones, 2020; Rand, 2019). We argue that these digital infrastructures are not neutral, but are rather powerful tools which manage and oversee the processes by which work is undertaken. Platforms are infrastructures that shape and condition workers’ activities in powerful ways based on the decisions made by the companies that run them (Vallas and Schor, 2020).

In this report, we differentiate platform sex work into two distinct categories: (1) work that is delivered proximately, with worker and client being in the same place at the same time; and (2) work which is delivered remotely and non-proximately. Whilst online platforms mediate both these types of work, maintaining this distinction is important due to the different risks that workers face (Hardy and Barbagallo, 2021).

Location-Based Platform Sex Work

Location-based sex work involves workers and clients being co-present in the same space at the same time, such as a hotel room, a rented flat or a home. It comprises a form of ‘body work’ where the worker attends to the needs and pleasures of the clients (Wolkowitz, 2002). Typically, it involves physical touch between worker and client, including the performance of sex acts, such as oral or penetrative sex, but can also involve work such as being a dominatrix and stripping.

PLATFORMS REDUCE WORKERS’ RELIANCE ON TRADITIONAL INTERMEDIARIES, SUCH AS BROTHELS AND AGENCIES, WHILE CREATING NEW FORMS OF POWER AND CONTROL THROUGH GATEKEEPING NEW MARKETS WITHIN THE SEX INDUSTRY

The role the platform plays is to intermediate between workers and clients, operating as a marketplace which brings clients and workers together within a shared digital space, allowing workers to advertise their services to clients, and workers and clients to communicate and negotiate the terms of the work. They are digital tools which facilitate in person meetings between clients and workers.

Whilst workers on location-based platforms access clients in their local areas, or within the limits of their capacity to travel, platforms themselves operate over much larger geographic scales. The escorting platform Tryst, for example operates in Asia, Europe, North America and Australasia (Tryst, n.d.). This expansion of scale is based on the development of new technologies of control and management, including the use of feedback and

customer ratings, automated monitoring, and algorithmic management to manage a distributed workforce which is scalable dependent on the balance of supply and demand at any point in time (Woodcock and Graham, 2020). In this regard platforms reduce workers’ reliance on traditional intermediaries, such as brothels and agencies, while creating new forms of power and control through gatekeeping new markets within the sex industry (Hardy and Barbagallo, 2021).

Remote Platform Sex Work

Remote sex work is work which is delivered without the worker and client being in the same physical location, and which therefore cannot involve direct physical contact. This can be delivered either synchronously, such as webcamming, sexting, or phone sex, or asynchronously, such as through the sale of explicit content. Workers perform their labour in spaces such as professional cam studios and their homes, broadcasting out to clients via digital platforms. The geographic separation of worker and client and the lack of physical touch means that remote sex work is perceived as being safer than in-person work, by minimising the risks of physical violence and aggression (Jones, 2016). However, remote sex work is accompanied by new risks and dangers, including online abuse, harassment, doxing and the illegal redistribution of content (Jones, 2016; Sanders et al., 2023).

Remote sex work is relational in nature, involving communication between workers and clients, facilitated by chat functions embedded within the platform. Workers strive to create connections with clients, asking questions about their lives and showing an interest in their desires (Jones, 2020). The reason why people choose to pay online sex workers despite the abundance of free porn on sites like Pornhub, is due to the emotional labour workers undertake, working to create a sexual encounter which is both authentic and intimate (Jones, 2020).

Introducing the Platforms

There are a great number of different types of online sex work platform which cater to workers across a variety of different types of sex work (Cunningham et al., 2018). Within this research we looked at four different platforms: **Streamate, Chaturbate, OnlyFans, and AdultWork.**

| Name of Platform | Model (as per Cunningham et al., 2018) | Description |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Streamate | Webcamming platform | Webcamming platform which operates a payment structure based on predefined payment per time period, known as the 'premium model' (Jokubauskaitė et al., 2023). |
| Chaturbate | Webcamming platform | Webcamming platform operating a tip-based model of payment, known as the 'freemium model' (Jokubauskaitė et al., 2023). |
| OnlyFans | Content Delivery Platform | Workers earn money primarily through a subscription model in which clients pay on a rolling basis for access to a page which hosts an individual's content including pictures and videos. |
| AdultWork | Multi-service Adult Entertainment Platform | This model of platform brings together a range of different types of sex work within the infrastructure on a single platform. Within the context of AdultWork this includes live camming, selling of explicit video and images, phone sex and sexting sessions and in-person escorting. AdultWork differs from the other platforms in that it caters largely for a UK-based audience, even within forms of remote sex work. |

Each of these platforms contains within it a broad and heterogeneous workforce. The types of work done on different platforms, and even within the same platform, varies considerably. For instance, OnlyFans, whilst being widely known for explicit content, hosts creators who produce both explicit and non-explicit content (van der Nagel, 2021). AdultWork hosts workers who perform phone sex, camming, sell explicit content, and offer full-service work. Camming on Streamate and

Chaturbate can involve sex acts like fisting, sex with multiple partners, or watching films and putting on makeup (Jones, 2020). The rationale for focusing the analysis on platforms, rather than on specific regions or type of content, is based on the understanding that the platform acts as the central point in which value is extracted from workers, enabling companies to create profit (Marton and Ekbja, 2019). The platform is the place in which the social relationships between

the model, client and the company that runs the platform, are fenced off and transformed into economic relationships of work (Gandini, 2019). Just like clocking into a factory, logging into a platform means you are under the power of managers and subject to forms of power. You must abide by certain rules, and may be removed through having your access revoked and your account deactivated (Gebrial, 2022). Just like physical workplaces, platforms offer the ability for workers to earn wages, and are thus hugely important economically for many thousands of people. But the choices made by platforms about how much support they offer workers, the terms of their contracts, their access to human managers, and their access to wages, all play a hugely important role in shaping the conditions in which workers are able to earn (Graham et al., 2020). The four platforms considered in this study thus condition the experiences of workers in powerful ways, which we aim to compare in this report.

JUST LIKE CLOCKING INTO A FACTORY, LOGGING INTO A PLATFORM MEANS YOU ARE UNDER THE POWER OF MANAGERS AND SUBJECT TO FORMS OF POWER. YOU MUST ABIDE BY CERTAIN RULES, AND MAY BE REMOVED THROUGH HAVING YOUR ACCESS REVOKED AND YOUR ACCOUNT DEACTIVATED.

Whilst these platforms represent a range of different modalities of sex work, the rationale for analysing them

together is that this enables us to develop a common framework for how to assess and analyse working conditions for those using digital platforms. As many sex workers use a range of different platforms, often concurrently, we aim to develop a means to assess the totality of ways that different platform companies shape workers' experiences. Furthermore, different types of sex work experience different levels of stigma, commonly associated with the level of physical touch between worker and client. Remote work, or in-person sex work like being a dominatrix is often less stigmatised than, for instance, full service work (Witt-Eden, 2020). By analysing these different categories of work within a common analytical framework, our aim is to complicate neat distinctions between them.

These four platforms were selected as representing the most common models of organisation within platform sex work, as well as being market leaders within their specific niches. OnlyFans is probably the best-known sex work platform at a global level; Chaturbate is, by number of users, the world's most popular webcamming platform; Streamate is a globally operating webcamming platform that has been in existence since the 1990s; Adultwork is the market-leading escort platform in the UK. Analysing these four platforms has thus enabled us to examine some of the platforms most used by sex workers. Our research suffers from the omission of a platform that solely mediates in-person sex work, and platforms that operate primarily or solely for workers and clients outside of the Global North. This omission was due to practical limits on research capacity and funding, and future research is required to address this gap.



Typology of Platforms

This section outlines how the four different platforms function, and characterises them within a broader typology of sex work platforms developed by Sanders et al., (2017). It examines each of them in turn, analysing their different operations and how they enable workers to earn. Many workers use a number of different platforms at the same time, and each has a specific role and function within their work. Each of these platforms has its own benefits and its own risks and understanding the distinction between different types of platforms is important for analysing what platforms can do to support workers and improve living conditions.

Content Delivery Platforms (OnlyFans)

Content Delivery Platforms are platforms which allow workers to sell access to content and communication. The best-known content delivery platforms include OnlyFans and Fansly, which operate a business model whereby the platform takes a flat commission on all payments made through it. For example, on OnlyFans this commission is 20%. In this way companies provide the digital infrastructure to host content and communicate with clients, as well as the means by which to collect payment. In return they charge rent from workers for use of this infrastructure.

Workers earn money primarily through a subscription model in which clients pay on a rolling basis for access to a page which hosts an individual's content, including pictures and videos. The client can then pay fees for additional services, which might include access to content not included within the subscription fee (known as Pay

Per View), sexting sessions, video calls, or custom content (such as a video performing a scene based on specific instructions issued by the client). In this way, the labour on platforms like OnlyFans comprises a mix of both synchronous and asynchronous work, based on the specific niche that a worker occupies.

A typical feature of content delivery platforms is that they usually have limited search capacity within the platforms themselves, as such platforms don't typically operate as open marketplaces by which clients find workers. Rather the expectation is that workers themselves will drive traffic to the site, typically from social media sites. Content delivery platforms must therefore be understood to operate in relation to social media platforms, and those who use them typically have to spend large amounts of their time promoting their pages on social media sites (van der Nagel, 2021).

Webcamming Platforms (Chaturbate and Streamate)

Webcamming platforms provide a means for real-time streaming and interaction between workers and clients. They serve as a platform for live performances in which the worker responds to specific requests made by viewers, with the platform allowing workers to live stream whilst communicating with an audience via a chat box (Jones, 2020). On some platforms clients also have the ability to stream live video back to workers.

Webcamming platforms operate different structures of payment, with generally a tipping or pay per minute fee structure, although there is overlap between the two models. Chaturbate primarily operates a tip-based model and clients are free to enter workers' streams without payment. Workers generally have a tip menu which outlines what acts they will do, for what fees, with performances unfolding in relation to what payments are made at specific times. On pay per minute platforms workers typically begin their stream in free rooms which clients can enter without payment. These spaces offer the ability to communicate with workers, but are generally free from nudity or explicit content, with specific rules depending on the platform. A client can then move into a private room where workers perform shows either for smaller groups, or for individual clients who pay a predefined amount.

- Notice: 🌸 doggy (111)
- Notice: 🌸 choose song (115)
- Notice: 🌸 gymnastics pose (121)
- Notice: 🌸 show feet (144)
- Notice: 🌸 show legs (145)
- Notice: 🌸 slap pussy 4x 0_0 (199)
- Notice: 🌸 split *-* (202)
- Notice: 🌸 pinch nipples (222)
- Notice: 🌸 change hair style (255)
- Notice: 🌸 flash boobss *-* (313)
- Notice: 🌸 cameltoe (333)
- Notice: 🌸 put your feet behind your head (400)
- Notice: 🌸 stand on hands (401)
- Notice: 🌸 put on heels (444)

Figure 2, Screenshot of tip menu on Chaturbate.

In contrast to content delivery platforms, like OnlyFans, camming platforms largely operate as open marketplaces in which different workers are displayed alongside each other, with the platforms exhibiting and ranking workers' streams in lists. Workers are displayed in a thumbnail image which generally includes information about their nationality, username, and age, and clients can choose between them (Figure 3).

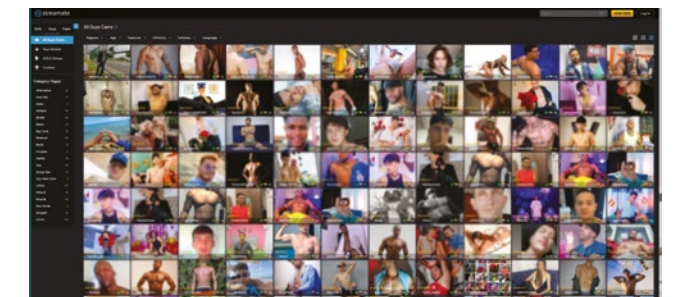


Figure 3, Screenshot from homepage of Streamate.

Multi-service Adult Entertainment Platforms (AdultWork)

The final category of platform analysed in the research is multi-service adult entertainment platforms, which bring together a range of different types of sex work within the infrastructure of a single platform. AdultWork, for example, includes live camming, selling of explicit video and images, phone sex, sexting sessions, as well as in-person work, such as full-service sex work and dominatrix work. AdultWork operates different revenue streams for these two different types of labour. For remote work, the platform collects commission on all earnings made via the platform. For in-person work, the platform offers paid-for features which boost workers income, such as being featured at the top of the platform's search rankings and as 'available today'. Unlike the other platforms included in this report, AdultWork mediates both remote sex work and in-person body work, setting it apart from the others considerably in terms of how elements of the labour process are enacted.

In-person work exposes workers to a specific set of risks, and is regulated by different laws and legal frameworks. For example, in the UK where the vast majority of AdultWork's users are based, camming, phone sex, sexting and the sale of explicit content is legal, however, full-service sex work is partially criminalised. Whilst the exchange of sexual services for money is legal in the UK (though not

in Northern Ireland) (Metropolitan Police, n.d.), almost everything else relating to the sale of these services is illegal, including soliciting, working indoors with friends, or facilitating sex work (Smith and Mac, 2018).

Forms of in-person working, such as full-service sex work, are accompanied by an increased risk of violence given the physical proximity of workers and clients in shared isolated spaces. The highly stigmatised status of full-service sex work, alongside its direct criminalisation, thus puts sex workers in a position of vulnerability with respect to both clients and the police (Benoit et al., 2018; Weitzer, 2018).

It is important not to conflate remote and location-based sex work, marked as they are by unique sets of different risks. By drawing on 34 research interviews and 79 surveys with workers undertaking a variety of different types of sex work, the aim of this report is to develop a common framework by which to assess and rate the provisions platforms are putting in place to protect workers who undertake both location-based and remote sex work. We have utilised the experiences and insights of workers undertaking both these types of work, identifying the most salient issues they faced, to develop the Fairwork Sex Work Principles.



Charles Deluvio / Unsplash

The Industry

When studying digital platforms, it is important to remember that the digital infrastructure is rooted within legal, social, regulatory, cultural and economic environments. Whilst platforms might appear to be ephemeral digital spaces that exist in ‘the cloud’, they are shaped by these environments in important ways (Graham and Ferrari, 2022). Understanding these contexts helps us to understand why these platforms operate in the ways they do.

Whilst the buying and selling of sexual services is legal in many countries, sex work of all forms is highly stigmatised across the globe (Weitzer, 2018). This is evident in many aspects of sex workers’ lives, for example, in which online platforms and payment systems they can use, and how they can use them. Sex workers regularly risk being removed from social media platforms, having bank accounts closed, and face discrimination from other service providers, including website designers (Blunt et al., 2021).

The difficulties experienced by sex workers in accessing online spaces and tools stems partly from anti-sex work legislation. The most infamous example is the twin US laws FOSTA and SESTA, introduced by the Trump administration in 2018. These laws work to make companies legally culpable for any content held on their sites which could be aiding and abetting illegal sexual commerce (Bronstein, 2021). The impact of this legislation was disastrous for workers well beyond US borders, with the closure of a range of tools used by workers to screen clients and reduce risks. Other impacts included the removal of workers’ social media pages, the closure of the site Backpage (a classified ads page popular with sex workers), and the removal of web pages, forums and social media groups in which workers could share the details of dangerous clients (Blunt and Wolf, 2020; Bronstein, 2021).

The result of the ongoing policing of sex workers’ use of online spaces is that sex workers of all stripes, including those who do both remote and in-person work, are

funnelled into bespoke platforms that mediate sex work, given these are some of that last online spaces in which workers can advertise and receive payments. It is therefore often very hard for sex workers to do their job without using platforms such as the four studied here. Online sex work platforms therefore sit in a position of significant power due to the limited alternative options available to sex workers.

Platforms are run and maintained by for-profit firms, and their functioning reflects the specific decisions made by their managements. Identifying points of leverage, that is, who controls the functioning of different platforms and how, is therefore important for understanding accountability. The online sex industry works in ways that are different from other businesses within the platform economy, and they are often far less transparent in how they operate. Whilst a company like Uber is publicly traded and releases annual reports on its operations, all four companies included in this study are privately owned and operate via holding companies, meaning public records are largely unavailable.⁵ This poses significant challenges for their accountability as companies, given they can hide from public scrutiny, which makes it harder to hold individuals to account for any issues that arise within the platforms that they run. With the exception of OnlyFans (Criddle, 2024), CEOs rarely appear in public and do not give interviews in which they engage with their role. In some cases, platforms locate their businesses within secrecy jurisdictions⁶ enabling them to evade public scrutiny. Accordingly, the following section briefly introduces the structure of the companies behind each of the four

platforms, and presents information only available within the public realm.

OnlyFans

OnlyFans is run by its parent company Fenix International Limited, which is based in London. The company directors are Lee Taylor and Leonoid Radvisnky (Fenix International Limited, 2022), who also started the transnational camming platform MyFreeCams (Prakash, 2023). OnlyFans' post-tax profits for the years 2021 and 2022 were \$324.68 million and \$403.73 million, respectively (Fenix International Limited, 2022), increasing to \$485.48 million in 2023 (Fenix International Limited, 2024). Based on revenues, the largest market for OnlyFans is the US, which accounts for 67% of all revenue – however within released documents it is unclear whether this relates to the location of creators or clients (Fenix International Limited, 2024, 2022). Following this, 15% comes from the UK and Europe, and the remaining 18% from the rest of the world (Fenix International Limited, 2022).

In 2022, the company had 46 members of staff (Fenix International Limited, 2022). The current CEO is Keily Blair (Criddle, 2024). The company has five subsidiaries, three based in the US, one in the UK, and one in Poland (Fenix International Limited, 2024). Since 2021, \$1.252 billion has been paid to company director Leonoid Radvisnky, demonstrating the centralised levels of wealth concentration as the platform leverages its position as the market leader to extract huge profits for its primary shareholder.

Chaturbate

The camming platform Chaturbate is run by the US-based firm Multi-media LLC. It is located in California, and was founded in 2011 (MultiMedia LLC, n.d.). The company's website doesn't list any details about members of staff, nor organisational structure. No information could be found about the total number of registered workers or clients on the platform. The company does not release any financial documentation and so information about its revenue and profits is not available.

Streamate

Streamate is owned by ICF technology, which has its headquarters in Seattle. According to the ICF website, they started operations in 1997 and now have operations in the Netherlands, Romania, Hungary and Luxembourg, and over 300 employees (ICF Technology, n.d.). Whilst no information is available on the company website about the size of

operations in each country, or the role of these different offices within the company's operations, it is noteworthy that both the US and Luxembourg appear in the top five of the Tax Justice Network's 'Financial Secrecy Index', at positions 1 and 5, respectively (Tax Justice Network, 2022). The ICF website lists the following individuals under the heading 'our leaders': Adam Tóth, Levente Orbán, and László Czéró. In a blog post on the website, Adam Tóth is named as the company's European CTO, but no additional information is listed about the others or their roles (ICF Technology, 2022). According to LinkedIn, Levente Orbán is the company's COO,⁷ and Laszlo Czero is ICF Technology's Managing Director.⁸ No information could be found about the total number of registered workers or clients on the platform, nor financial documentation about the company's profits or revenue streams.

AdultWork

AdultWork is run by its parent company Woodlaine Digital Solutions, which, whilst catering for a user base almost entirely based in the UK, is based in the secrecy jurisdiction of Cyprus (Woodlaine Digital Solutions Ltd, n.d.). The company's website does not list any named members of staff, the management team or company structure. No information could be found about the total number of registered workers or clients on the platform, nor financial documentation about the company's profits or revenue streams.

In an attempt to gain more information about AdultWork and its operations, a UK-based trade union requested corporate research support from the Amsterdam-based corporate research unit 'The Counter'⁹ regarding AdultWork and Woodlaine Digital Solutions. Attempts by The Counter to conduct research into Adultwork were hampered however by a lack of transparency, since many of the companies in its corporate group are registered in the secrecy jurisdictions of Cyprus and Jersey. Whilst some parts of the AdultWork group are registered in the UK, these entities provide very limited information, and not enough to fully assess AdultWork's corporate structure, executives, or finances.

The opacity of these companies has had a significant impact on the research undertaken in this study. Despite reaching out to all four companies we were not able to speak to representatives from any of them. Our requests to OnlyFans and AdultWork were acknowledged but declined. Streamate and Chaturbate both failed to respond to our requests.

Box 1 – Social Media

Social Media platforms have an intricate and embedded relationship with online sex work platforms. Using social media specifically for work purposes was very common within the sample population, with 87% of our survey respondents using social media specifically for work purposes. Social media offers a means to create and cultivate a unique brand identity as a sex worker, and is a tool to drive traffic towards paid content, streams, or an escorting profile.

OF THE SURVEY PARTICIPANTS WHO USED SOCIAL MEDIA FOR WORK PURPOSES, 91% HAD FACED ISSUES INCLUDING HAVING THEIR ACCOUNT DELETED, BEING SHADOW BANNED, HARASSMENT, DOXING AND STALKING.

Nowhere is this more apparent than on OnlyFans. On Streamate, Chaturbate and AdultWork you may browse worker profiles, with platforms operating internal galleries which allow clients to search and filter workers depending on their specific desires. However, OnlyFans has very limited internal search functions. This means that workers are required to advertise and drive traffic from elsewhere on the web, thereby functioning "not as a stand-alone platform, but as one deeply conscious of a social media ecosystem in which people have accounts on multiple platforms" (van der Nagel, 2021, p. 398). It

is therefore no surprise that within our sample, 96% of workers on OnlyFans used social media specifically for work purposes, with the four most commonly used platforms being Twitter, Instagram, Reddit and TikTok.

Social Media platforms offer not just a means to increase traffic, but also a means to connect with other sex workers and build a community that offers spaces for support and solidarity. They also facilitate learning and skill sharing as workers share tips and strategies for navigating issues that arise during their work. Given the lack of physical spaces for workers to meet, and the lack of digital spaces for inter-worker communication within the platforms themselves, workers use social media platforms as the primary means to connect with other workers on a platform.

That said, social media sites are hostile to sexualised content and sex workers (Are, 2022, 2020) and using social media to promote your sex work leads to a heightened risk that you may have your account either restricted, such as through shadow banning, or deleted (Davisson and Alati, 2024). Given the importance of social media sites to workers, the rules and regulations enacted by social media platforms play a large role in shaping the experiences of workers. Of the survey participants who used social media for work purposes, 91% had faced issues including having their account deleted, being shadow banned, harassment, doxing and stalking. Discussing the breadth of issues that workers face on social media is beyond the scope of this study, and further work is required to fully understand the role that social media platforms have on shaping working conditions for online sex workers.

Methodology

The methodology for this report consisted of desk-based research and fieldwork. Desk-based research involved analysing publicly available documents and articles, such as annual reports, media articles and legal documents; analysis of the platforms' terms of service, model agreements and other contracts provided by the platforms; and analysis of the platforms' web infrastructure.

Our fieldwork consisted of in-depth interviews and surveys with individuals currently working on at least one of the four platforms. Surveys allowed for a high number of responses and broad sample, with interviews allowing for further investigation into key themes and more in-depth exploratory data gathering.

In total, our sample consisted of 79 completed surveys and 34 interviews undertaken between September 2023 and January 2024. The distribution of surveys and interviews is not even across the four platforms and breaks down as follows.

| Platform | Number of Interviews | Number of survey respondents |
|------------|----------------------|------------------------------|
| Streamate | 4 | 10 |
| Chaturbate | 6 | 15 |
| OnlyFans | 11 | 27 |
| AdultWork | 13 | 27 |

We analysed this data to extract common themes and issues, using these to draft a set of principles which were then presented to a roundtable of sex workers, third sector organisations and academics currently engaged in the field of sex worker rights in the UK and Europe. The roundtable was organised and undertaken by the research team in June 2024. The feedback and

outputs from this session were then incorporated into the principles presented within this report.

Recruitment and Sampling

Given the lack of physical workplaces, the inability to advertise or post tasks on the platforms themselves, and the lack of worker organisations such as trade unions, our approach for reaching workers involved using forums and social media.

Due to the isolated nature of the work and the lack of support and training provided by the platforms, workers often make use of specific forums to create communities of support and solidarity. This includes using Reddit Subs, Discord servers and online forums. Most Reddit Subs ban the posting of research calls, so we opted to contact worker accounts directly; however this proved largely ineffective as a recruitment strategy – many sex workers posting on Reddit are inundated with messages, many from scammers or bots and so our messages went largely unanswered. Web forums proved a more fruitful way of contacting workers, as the largest forum for cam models allows space for posting research calls and this allowed participants to comment that they had had successful interviews and received prompt payment for their time. However, responses by this means remained limited.

The most effective means of reaching participants was via social media and private communication channels. Initially we posted our research call through the Fairwork Project's Twitter and Instagram posts, using an easy to share

graphic with a QR code that directed people towards our pre-survey (Figure 4). This post was then shared by trusted accounts within the sex worker rights movement, including prominent activists and worker advocacy groups, both publicly and in private digital spaces.



Figure 4, Graphic and Tweet used to promote research

Geographic Skew

Our participant sample was skewed heavily towards the UK. For AdultWork this was expected, due to the bounded nature of the work and the audience being predominantly UK based. Out of the 79 survey responses, 50 were by workers based in the UK. Out of 34 interviews, 21 were with workers based in the UK. Discounting Adultwork from these figures, we see that out of a total of 52 survey responses, 23 were submitted by UK-based workers, and out of 23 interviews, 10 were undertaken with UK workers.

Whilst there is currently no available data for the location of workers on the four platforms, we hypothesize that this geographic skew towards the UK is not representative of the workforce on online sex work platforms, and instead is due to how the research call was disseminated and the base of the research team within the UK. Our research call was distributed on social media and to increase trust amongst participants about the aims and validity of our research, our participant call was shared by social media accounts linked to sex worker rights activists and organisations in the UK. This was achieved by using personal contacts within the research team but resulted

in the research call reaching an audience predominantly in the UK. This dissemination strategy led to a sample skewed towards UK-based participants.

The result of this is that our research findings are potentially biased towards the experiences of workers based in the UK, privileging the perspectives of workers based in the Global North at the expense of workers in the Global South.

Surveys

Surveys were designed to give us access to a large data sample. They were designed to be easy and straightforward to fill out, allowing for an accessible form for participation in the research for those who might not have the time or capacity to take part in an interview. Questions were developed based on the background research and a literature review of existing research on working conditions for online sex work, in-person sex work, and platform work.

Surveys were distributed via Qualtrics and completed by participants online. In order to access the survey, participants were required to fill in a pre-survey questionnaire, which asked some basic questions about the platform they worked on. This was designed to ensure that all participants were indeed sex workers. When the pre-survey questionnaire had been satisfactorily filled in, participants were emailed a link to the survey. Once that had been completed, all respondents were paid £15 for their time.

Interviews

Interview questions were developed in conjunction with surveys, but as we started to receive data from the surveys and identify themes, interview guides were modified to ensure that we were asking questions in the interviews which further interrogated key points of interest. Interview guides centred around the five Fairwork principles, with questions designed to investigate workers' experience of using digital platforms, the challenges they faced, and the role that digital platforms play in conditioning their work. Two additional interview sections explored workers' motivations for undertaking platform sex work and how long they intended to continue in this line of work.

Interview participants were recruited primarily from those who had completed surveys. Survey participants were asked whether they'd be interested in being interviewed,

and we followed up with all those who answered ‘yes’ to this question.

Interviews were all undertaken via Microsoft Teams and recorded, with participant consent for transcription. The decision to undertake all interviews remotely allowed us to include workers regardless of their geographic location, reaching a far greater range of countries than if we had only done in-person interviews. The risk that workers would lack the technological literacy to undertake video call interviews was felt to be limited due to the digital nature of the work and the need for high quality internet, audio and video capabilities for undertaking online sex work.

Remote interviews also had the added benefit of providing a level of separation and anonymity for workers. Workers were not required to travel to a specific location, nor were they required to reveal any details about their whereabouts, or even show their face. Given the risk of violence and stalking that accompany being a sex worker, it was felt that this would provide a level of anonymity and create space for workers to speak freely without fear that their anonymity would be compromised. It was felt that asking to meet workers in person could prevent some workers from taking part in the study, or reduce their comfort in talking about sensitive subjects, such as escorting, which exists in a criminalised or quasi-criminalised status in many of the countries in which participants were based.

Once interviews were completed, participants were paid £25 for their time. Interviews were conducted in English by Robbie Warin or Polly Blake. Occasionally interviews were conducted together, with one researcher leading. One interview was conducted by Dr Alessio Bertolini due to the worker requesting an interview in Spanish. All interviews were transcribed.

No interviews with platform managers were conducted due to lack of responses to interview requests.

Ethics

Ethical approval for the research was granted by both the University of Oxford’s Social Sciences and Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee (ethics reference number: R85754/RE001) and Royal Holloway University of London (ethics reference number: 3800).

The ethical issues faced by researchers working with sex workers are often seen as particularly challenging, because sex work is seen as sensitive research based on

the increased potential for harm should they be identified. Whilst there are undoubtedly specific issues, particularly around anonymity, to be aware of, it is also important not to overstate the ‘sensitive’ nature of the research, and in doing so further exceptionalise sex work as uniquely harmful compared with other forms of labour. In this project, we tried to keep in mind the specific ethical issues we had identified, whilst also approaching the topic through a framework of labour rights.

The three key issues considered throughout the project were questions of trust during the recruitment process; anonymity in both participant recruitment and fieldwork; and sensitivity during the data collection phase.

Trust

Sex work is a heavily researched area of work, despite sex workers themselves being largely absent from mainstream academia (Parmanand, 2022). Research done on sex work is often extractive, unethical and at worst, harmful. Therefore, many individual sex workers, and sex worker rights groups, are cautious about engaging with academic research projects, especially when the project team has no personal connections to the sex work community (Jeffreys, 2010).

With this in mind, we knew that we had to approach the recruitment process carefully, to ensure that we gained the trust of our participants. The decision was made to recruit a Research Assistant who had experience of working and organising closely with sex worker-led groups. Doing this had several benefits for the project. Firstly, including a researcher with lived experience of both sex work and sex worker organising brought a valuable perspective and experience to the work. It also allowed us to share the call for participants in spaces which might not have otherwise been open to us. In working with someone who has a long history with the sex worker movement, we gained a degree of credibility, which contributed to our participants feeling confident in engaging with the research.

Best practice in sex work research often operates on the principle of ‘nothing about us without us’ and therefore it was a vital part of the ethical consideration for this project to include sex worker and sex work organisations in as much of the process as possible.

Anonymity

Sex work is one of the most stigmatised jobs in the world, and many sex workers do not feel able to be open about their work to friends, family or other employers, for good reason. Sex workers who are ‘outed’ can face significant negative consequences, including dismissal from other employment or higher education; alienation and abandonment by family members; removal of children; or deportation (Grant, 2014; Smith and Mac, 2018). A lack of attention to anonymity also puts workers at higher risk of violence from clients, who may use personal information to stalk and harass workers.

Therefore, ensuring the anonymity of our research participants was crucial, and this was something we paid close attention to throughout the project. We allowed people to participate in surveys or interviews using any name they chose, and did not require them to share their legal name at any stage of the project. All participants quoted in this report have been assigned pseudonyms, and any raw data containing sensitive information was only accessed by the core project team. This was also emphasised to participants at the start of the interview process.

Sensitivity

Whilst this research focused primarily on the labour conditions for online sex workers, the interviews had the potential to touch on difficult or sensitive subjects. The interview guide included questions on specific risks of online sex work, including stalking, abuse and harassment, and at times the interviews touched on issues of violence. In interviews, researchers emphasised to participants that they could choose not to answer any question without giving a reason, and we flagged in advance when we felt the questions were likely to touch on more difficult or sensitive subjects. The researchers regularly checked with participants if they needed to take a short break. Whilst in general we found participants seemed comfortable speaking about their experiences, we wanted to continuously reinforce that they could stop the interview at any point, if they needed to.

Coding

Using a set of starting codes developed from our literature review, interview and survey data was coded using the software NVivo 14. Based on the flexible coding model (Deterding and Waters, 2021), an iterative process to coding was employed in which codes were continually added and refined as themes emerged within the data.



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RESEARCH SECTION

Research Findings

This section presents research findings on the issues that sex workers experience whilst using digital platforms, to identify key points where platforms can introduce changes which benefit workers.

This research shows the significant risks that workers encounter, ranging from variability in wages and a lack of financial security; abuse, harassment, stalking and doxing; challenges related to navigating platforms rules and protocols which can often leave workers at risk of deactivation; lack of support and difficulty accessing platform management; and a lack of collective bargaining and formal trade union representation. These findings point to the specific challenges sex workers face using digital platforms and the need for proactive measures to improve working conditions.

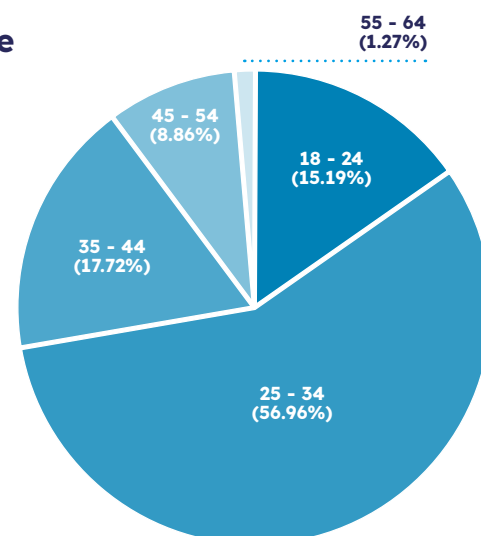
This section starts by outlining the sample demographics. Then, utilising the Fairwork framework, the research is presented in five sections looking in detail at workers' experiences of pay, working conditions, contracts, engagement with management, and representation.

Demographics

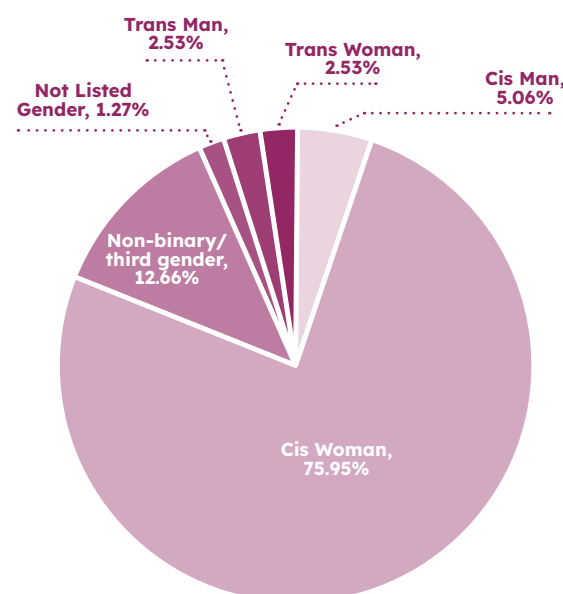
In this section we outline demographic data from the 79 participants who completed our survey. These results show our sample is predominately young, with 71% of respondents being under 34, and only 10% aged over 45. It's also overwhelmingly female, with 76% of respondents identifying as a cis-gender woman and just 5% as a cis-gender man. Individuals identifying as transgender make up just under 20% of our sample, suggesting an overrepresentation of transgender people within our sample relative to the general public at large.¹⁰ Typically, respondents had worked on the platform for several years, and 65% of respondents had been on the platform for more than three years, with 90% of respondents having worked on the platform for more than one year. Respondents came from 14 different countries across 4 continents – Europe, South America, North America and

Australasia. All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of participants.

Age

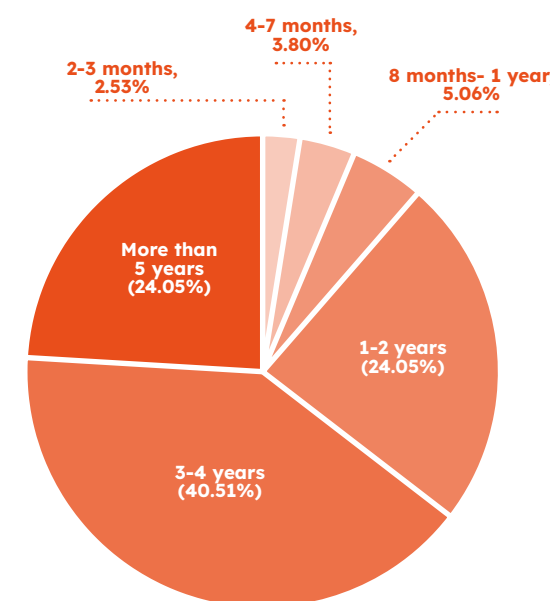


Gender



Time Worked on the Platform

(Note, we excluded participants who had worked less than 2 months from our survey)



Of the survey sample 20% were migrants¹¹ to the country in which they currently lived. However, the proportion of workers who were migrants varied by platform. On AdultWork 96% of respondents were natives in the country in which they currently lived. On the remaining three platforms, the proportion of respondents having migrant status remained consistent, averaging at 28.85%. Migrant sex workers face unique vulnerabilities given their status as both sex workers and migrants in the country that they currently reside. A report by the Global Network of Sex Worker Projects (NSWP) found that migrant sex workers commonly leave their homes in search of higher standards of living, to escape punitive laws, discrimination and stigmatisation. However, even in countries where sex work is legal, they face barriers to accessing support from authorities given the threat of deportation and increased levels of police violence against migrant sex workers (NSWP, 2018). A full discussion surrounding the use of platforms by migrant sex workers and the specific issues they encounter is beyond the scope of this report, however we posit that by implementing measures to protect all workers, platforms will improve the working conditions of migrant workers.

Principle 1: Pay

'Fair pay' is the first of the five Fairwork principles. This section focuses on issues of average earnings, expenses, issues with being paid by platforms, issues around banking, refunds and chargebacks, and rates of commission. It explores whether workers feel confident that they will be paid for the work they complete on the different platforms, and examines workers' feelings concerning financial security and stability.

Variation in income

Within the research sample, the levels of income earned by participants varied greatly. At the upper end, OnlyFans creator Ina was able to earn around \$80-90,000 a year from her page, working around 20 hours a week, having established a strong client base after three years on the platform. At the other end of the spectrum, some workers reported low earnings, meaning they struggled to meet payments such as rent and utility bills. Charlie, a cam model working via Chaturbate and based in the US, told us that an average shift earned them between \$5-\$10 per hour broadcasting, below the minimum

wage. Similarly, Sandra had been working via Streamate for 13 years and had seen her income fall by 80% over that period, forcing her to start collecting social security retirement payments and sign up for food stamps, whilst still working on the platform.

None of the four platforms provide sick pay, holiday pay, a guaranteed hourly wage, or guaranteed payment for time spent working on the platform. Wages are dependent on the worker's ability to attract and illicit payment from clients. 32% of survey participants said they are always worried about not making enough to cover their living expenses, whilst a further 15% said they were worried most of the time. Just 9% said they never worried about this, and 55% said they did not think they were paid fairly for their work.

A key issue facing workers is large fluctuations in their income. Regardless of total income level, workers frequently reported that the income they received from platform-based sex work could fluctuate month to

month, week to week and day to day, which often led to feelings of instability and a pressure to overwork.

Cam model Sadie, who works on AdultWork, stated that her income varies by as much as 600% week to week. Other interviewees documented fluctuations of between 100% and 300%. The fluctuation in income led to negative impacts on some of our interviewees' mental health as they contended with not knowing what their income would be for that week or month, leading to feelings of anxiety, stress and worry related to their financial stability and whether they were going to be able to make enough to cover their living expenses.

"The bills are always there. You're gonna have your mortgage. You're gonna have your healthcare. You're gonna have to eat. You're gonna have bills for your kids. You know, all that's still gonna be there and you just have to hope that someone's gonna come online and give you money."

Heidi, US – Streamate and Chaturbate

Fluctuation in earnings also meant that the workers in our sample had to search for a diversity of income streams. This included holding down non-sex work jobs, but also meant utilising multiple different platforms to insure against fluctuations in income that might occur on any one specific platform.

Fluctuations in income also created a pressure to overwork. This was prevalent on OnlyFans where workers told us they could numerically see their subscriber levels change in real time if they were absent from the platform. Taking breaks from the platform was felt to lead to a decline in income and put pressure on workers to avoid time away.

"Taking a break, even a few days, results in mass fans unsubscribing. [Not] Posting daily on Social media is the biggest detriment to income though. Days/weeks I am not creating social media content to engage with on those platforms, I see my OnlyFans numbers plummet."

Survey Response – OnlyFans

Fluctuation in income was shaped and conditioned by a numerous factors, including time of day and time of the year, but platforms also play a significant role in determining wages. For workers on Streamate, Chaturbate and AdultWork, a commonly referenced impact on wages was how you were displayed and presented within the platform's algorithmically curated displays. Appearing higher up within a platform's rankings was associated with greater traffic and therefore higher wages (Jokubauskaitė et al., 2023).

Whilst OnlyFans does not use algorithmically curated rankings, wages are instead shaped by the functioning of social media algorithms and how your content is shared, or its ability to go viral.¹² In both cases, wages are shaped by black box systems¹³ which workers are not able to understand or influence (Gillespie, 2014).

The amount of fluctuation in income was not static between different platforms. Variability was most pronounced on the two camming platforms, Streamate and Chaturbate, with 64% of the workers we surveyed from these platforms saying that there was either 'a lot' or 'a great deal' of variability in their earnings. In contrast, 77% of the workers we surveyed from OnlyFans said there was either 'a little', or 'a moderate amount' of variability. We therefore hypothesise that the subscription model OnlyFans operates, where workers receive repeat payments from clients, partly shelters workers from the inconsistency of earnings that cam models experience. On camming platforms wages can vary from day to day, or even hour to hour, as they are based on live performances and synchronous interactions. On OnlyFans workers reported that clients unsubscribing was a recurrent anxiety; however, this takes place over longer time scales, which results in greater consistency in earnings.

Unpaid Time and Labour

Across all four platforms participants reported significant amounts of unpaid time, with none of the platforms providing any guaranteed income for time spent on the platform. Workers had to invest considerable time and effort into building their OnlyFans pages, camming profiles, and social media followings, without knowing whether this time would be financially compensated.

"I would say the majority of the job that I do is not directly paid. So that would be all of the admin work, updating my profile, taking pictures, uploading the pictures, taking videos, uploading them, answering emails. All of that is not paid. If anything, I would say maybe 80% of the work is not paid, and 20%, which is the fun part, is paid."

Sasha, UK – AdultWork

In addition to this unpaid work, cam models on Streamate, AdultWork and Chaturbate often experienced significant levels of unpaid waiting time whilst live streaming, as they wait for clients to join their streams. Webcamming works through synchronous interaction between workers and clients and workers need to be online, ready and waiting, as a client may enter their room at any moment (Jones, 2020). Some workers documented waiting times that encompassed a significant amount of their total time online. One worker on Streamate outlined, using statistics provided by the platform, how in the previous week she had spent 1133 minutes online, only 69 of which were paid, amounting to 94% of her time online being unpaid.

This waiting time was also felt to be active time in which workers had to interact with clients and sell themselves. This was often not down time, but active periods in which they had to remain 'on'.

"The crazy part is even when you're waiting, you're still working, cause dead air is like your enemy. So, if you sit there looking bored and not talking, people don't talk to you. The whole stream feels, from the moment that my camera is on till it's off. I'm on. I'm in the stream that's like solid work time because even if nobody's in there, I'm like figuring out... I have tabs open trying to figure out which hashtags to use to bump me up, you know? So, it's like even when you're waiting, even your unpaid waiting time. You're on. You're doing a performance."

Ayesha, Belgium – Chaturbate

These findings point to the impacts that the types of work being conducted, and how the platform functions,

shape pay instability and unpaid waiting time. They point to the need for tailored responses to the specific issues encountered by workers using the platform to limit the negative impacts of pay variability and unpaid labour

Costs

The workers in our sample commonly outlined very high initial start-up costs associated with their work, including investment in computers, video equipment, lighting, microphones and costumes. This often amounted to thousands of pounds worth of equipment. These one-off payments were supplemented by ongoing costs, which included heating, electricity, rent, high speed internet, new costumes, make-up, phone contracts, professional photo shoots. Other workers invested significant amounts into ongoing beauty treatments which they felt were essential to their work. In-person sex work was accompanied by a number of additional costs, including condoms, sexual health checks, sanitisers, lubricants, travel, petrol and hotels. Estimates by interview participants of their total work-related costs varied from 5% to 60% of their total income. Among the survey respondents, the mean average estimate of work-related costs was 25% of all earnings, with a range of 0% to 80% and a median average of 20%.

Refunds and Chargebacks

Refunds and chargebacks are two distinct processes which affect workers, but they both end in the same result – clients having their money returned to them, resulting in lost income. Refunds are issued at the level of the platform; a client contacts the platform and asks for their money back, which the platform can either grant or deny. A chargeback, however, is issued at the level of the card issuer and the platform has minimal say in whether or not this money is returned (MasterCard, n.d.).

None of our participants were aware of a documented process available to workers, outlining the arbitration process for how decisions about a client being refunded are decided. Some interviewees documented cases where refunds were given, in their view, unfairly, without the ability for them to provide evidence or contest decisions. In some cases, workers were not provided with any reason why clients were refunded, nor provided an opportunity to redo the work – such as in the case of payments for custom content. In other cases, the reasons refunds were given were themselves unsatisfactory:

“Someone got a refund because they said that I was fatter than what he thought.”

Survey Response – OnlyFans

Chargebacks, on the other hand, were an issue experienced, within our sample, exclusively by workers on OnlyFans. On OnlyFans, chargebacks were felt by many of the study participants to be a significant issue impacting workers and often involved large sums of money being returned to the client without any reason provided. This included clients purchasing and receiving content and then initiating a chargeback from their card issuer, continuing to have access to the content even once the money was returned. Many workers described the negative impacts these chargebacks had on them, and participants spoke about their feelings of being taken advantage of and feeling powerless in the face of clients initiating chargebacks.

“Every single chargeback... I have encountered has been non justified. All have been for either content that was delivered and viewed or downloaded by the customer or the subscription cost, which has no recourse for being justifiably claimed back. This is not a system we have power over, it is not done by ‘unhappy’ customers who come to us to explain why, they simply contact their bank and have the charges reversed with no actual accountability as to whether the request was legitimate. I could categorically prove that every chargeback I was deducted was illegitimate but we aren’t given the opportunity to do so.”

Survey Response – OnlyFans

“Chargebacks from fans feels like a form of sexual violence. It’s infuriating, and humiliating to be taken advantage of in this intimate way.”

Survey Response – OnlyFans

It’s not clear why chargebacks are experienced solely by workers using OnlyFans and not the other platforms.

The failure of the platforms to engage with the research team means that we were not able to ask questions surrounding their protocols and processes surrounding chargeback protection.

Commission

The rates of commission that the four platforms take vary considerably. Of the four platforms, OnlyFans operates the simplest commission, taking a flat 20% for all payments processed via the platform. This includes rolling subscription fees, as well as one-off payments for things like custom content and sexting sessions.

For workers using AdultWork’s camming features, AdultWork takes a flat rate of 30% on all earnings that models make through their live streams. For those using AdultWork for in-person sex work and to organise in-person meet-ups, AdultWork does not process any payments related to the transaction of these services – as this would likely fall foul of UK laws. AdultWork is therefore unable to charge a commission for in-person

sex work. However, AdultWork does charge fees to workers for specific features on the platform. Workers can pay a daily rate of £5 to appear as available on the site, and workers can bid to appear as ‘Escort of the Day’ with their profile featured at the top of the site’s listings. Cam workers can also pay to boost where their profile is positioned.

Chaturbate takes a fee of 50% on all earnings made via the site.¹⁴ According to the interview and survey responses we collected, workers on Streamate are charged one of three rates of commission: 35%, 65% or 70%. The factors which determine the variation in rate remain unclear. Among our respondents, all European workers were charged a 70% commission fee, whilst some US workers were charged 35% and others 70%.

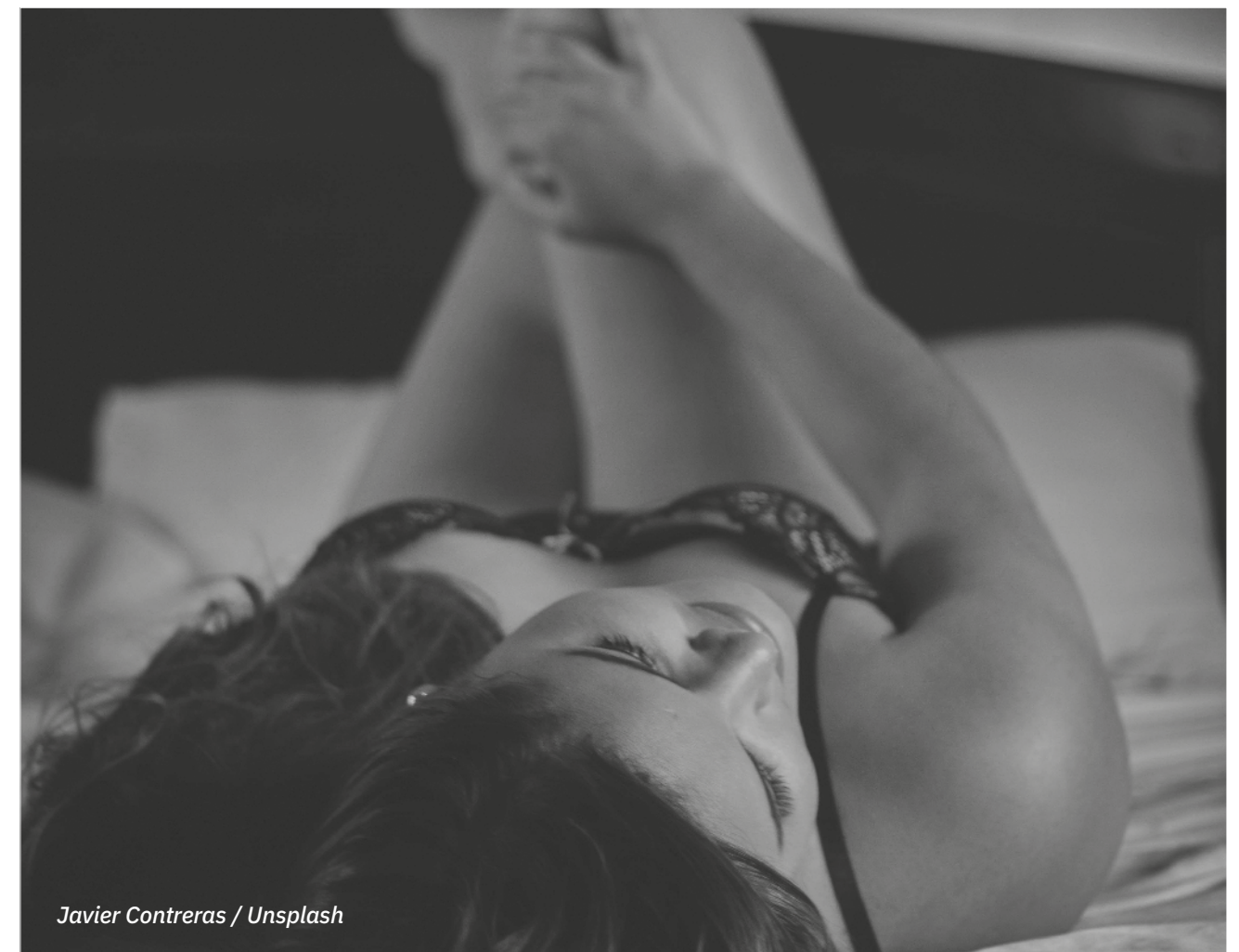
High rates of commission were a significant issue for workers, affecting their ability to earn enough to cover living expenses from the time spent on the platform. Workers with lower average wages are still charged these high rates, contributing towards financial insecurity. In addition, many workers felt that these rates were not justified given the poor protections and limited access to management and support staff available.

Conclusion

Workers experience significant stress around pay, focused around high variability in income, high platform fees, and many hours of unpaid labour. These issues are often linked to or exacerbated by the structure and actions of the platforms. We can illustrate this point using the example of Streamate. The platform does not provide any guaranteed income for time spent on the platform, and wages are heavily shaped by where workers appear within algorithmically curated galleries which workers struggle to understand. Workers must be online, ready and waiting to receive clients, resulting in a significant proportion of their working time spent waiting

for clients. Furthermore, the platform charges some workers 70% of all income made via the platform.

Workers often perceived their relationship with the platform(s) on which they worked as antagonistic. This was evident in interviews, where, within discussions around chargebacks and refunds, workers felt that platforms do little to advocate for their rights around issues of non-payment or fraudulent chargebacks, and that platforms are not ‘on their side’.



Javier Contreras / Unsplash

Principle 2: Conditions

The principle of ‘fair conditions’ focuses on workers’ ability to do their job safely, with no adverse impacts on their mental or physical health. Platforms have a responsibility to attend to the safety of the people working on them, and the interview and survey questions reported in this section focus not only on the material conditions of workers on the platforms, but also what platforms are doing to combat abuse and harassment in all its forms.

Abuse and Harassment

Across all four platforms, participants documented extensive experiences of abuse and harassment whilst working. The issue was extremely widespread, with 69% of survey participants reporting having experienced online abuse and harassment as a result of their work. Abuse and harassment were seen as so commonplace for the interview participants that many had come to accept this as just another factor of the job; an inevitable outcome of being a sex worker online.

Abuse came in many forms, including harmful comments and attacks directed at workers in messages, and in comments on sex work platforms and on social media. Abuse sometimes involved clients describing disturbing and graphic fantasies in which they outlined forms of sexual violence that they wanted to commit against workers. Several participants we interviewed recounted how they had received rape and death threats.

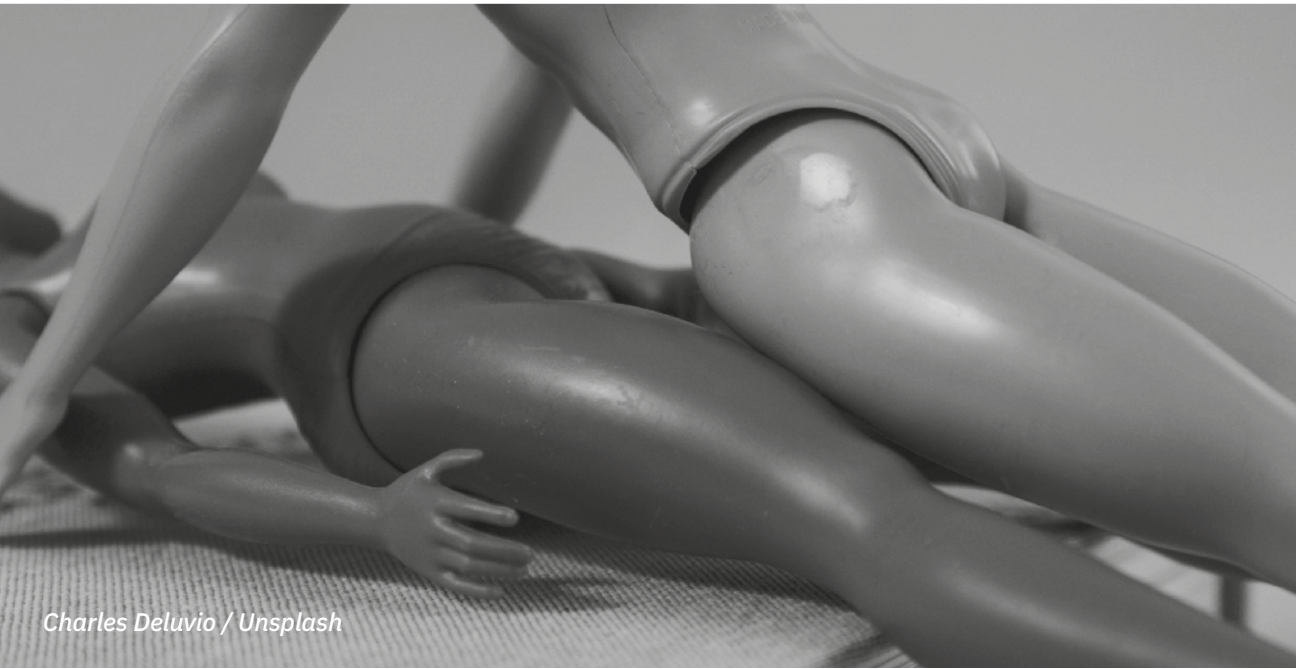
The nature of the abuse itself varied in its severity and form depending on the identity characteristics of the worker, but within our sample several key themes emerged. The first of these was body shaming, with clients attacking how workers look. Cheri, a cam model on AdultWork spoke of how this felt like a constant barrage of abuse whilst online, which contributed her declining mental health and body image.

“They would attack my body shape the way I looked and everything like that, and it was like the constant and it didn’t matter how many of them I blocked, it just seemed like they just kept coming and coming and coming and coming.”

Cheri, UK – AdultWork

“Literally every single day I receive explicit messages from men, including non-consensual threats of violence and comments on my anatomy, appearance, etc.”

OnlyFans – Survey Respondent



Charles Deluvio / Unsplash

Abuse based on protected characteristics was also widespread, including misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia, transphobia and racism. Many black, indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) models reported extraordinarily high levels of abuse. One survey respondent on Chaturbate said:

“I’m a Black femme that does sex work. I have to deal with misogynoir,¹⁵ sexism, racism, anti-Blackness,¹⁶ whorephobia¹⁷ and more every time I get on cam.”

Chaturbate – Survey Respondent

Another model of Asian descent recounted the high amount of racist abuse they receive:

*“[I am] degraded for my race + gender presentation (eg being called “tr*nny kim jong il”), being degraded for my body size/facial features not aligning with stereotypical expectations for asian women, users making accounts on twitter with my face and the display name is “gook bitch” - basically every single client who seeks out asian women dehumanizes us. Fetishization and dehumanization are two sides of the same coin. [I] have also had users make accounts with trump/maga¹⁸ type usernames to intimidate me in the chat saying that i would be “sent back to where I’m from” even though I’m not even based in the US and have never lived there. Users making comments about me “eating dogs.”*

Chaturbate – Survey Respondent

In combination, clients regularly degraded participants for being sex workers, subjecting them to abuse that focused on the stigmatised nature of their work. Participants described how this abuse led to a number of negative impacts including forcing workers to stop working for periods, resulting in lost income, and worsening mental health. Participants reported being exposed to disturbing and challenging content through their work. The most common of these was clients sending unsolicited nudes. Other forms of disturbing content included people describing paedophilic and

incestual fantasies. Participants also documented receiving images and videos depicting zoophilia, hard drug use, and extreme violent and sexualised content.

All four platforms offer workers tools for blocking clients and restricting access to their content, streams and accounts without any negative implications for workers. The platforms offer different options to workers about client restrictions, including the ability to totally ban clients from viewing a worker’s accounts, content and removing the ability to contact them. Platforms also offer the ability to restrict a client’s access, whilst continuing to allow them to purchase content and send tips as a means to reduce lost income. Chaturbate also offers the capacity to set up custom lists of banned words which cannot be used within their streams.

However, these functions were felt by our respondents to have limited success in stopping abuse and harassment. Firstly, clients can create new accounts using alternative email addresses, and workers experienced cases of repeated abuse and harassment from clients on the platform, who easily overcame blocking features. None of the four platforms offered the ability to block by IP address or payment details, and this was felt to be a significant drawback within platforms’ attempts to limit the prevalence of abuse.

Secondly, on OnlyFans there was a financial disincentive to ban clients outright due to the practice of refunding a client’s subscription fee. Upon banning a client, they are automatically refunded the subscription fee and this is deducted from a workers earnings. Therefore workers are faced with the choice of losing income, or allowing someone who may have subjected them to sexual harassment or verbal abuse to continue to view their sensitive content.

“You’re punished for using the block feature by virtue of them getting their subscription price back. So like it, you know, it’s always, when you’re faced with that kind of low level, I guess, sexual harassment, you have to balance well, OK, is it worth it for me to lose the money if I block this person?”

Oli, UK – OnlyFans

AdultWork was the only one of the four platforms which did not offer inbuilt features for reporting clients and abusive messages. Workers using AdultWork often did not know how to report abuse and harassment, and relied on generic support emails, often failing to receive a response to these reports. Across all four platforms, workers said that they didn't know what actions were taken following the reporting of abusive behaviour from clients, and platforms rarely followed up with them. This leads to questions surrounding the effectiveness of reporting channels, and whether platforms are taking steps to protect workers from future abuse.

Doxing

Doxing involves maliciously revealing an individual's personal details online, such as their legal name, address, workplace, or other characteristics such as their gender or sexual identity (Petherick, 2023). Due to the stigmatised nature of the industry, many people do not tell their friends and family about their work, and so being doxed can have serious consequences, on both personal and professional levels. Sex workers risk being alienated or abandoned by their family if outed, and some sex workers have reported being forced to quit non-sex work jobs when their online sex work profiles were discovered (Dodgson, 2023; Paul, 2024). 34% of the survey participants have experienced being doxed in the course of their work. In interviews, two workers on OnlyFans spoke of their experiences being doxed by people who they knew or went to school with, who subscribed to their accounts and then reposted content and screenshots on private WhatsApp groups containing close friends and family. Another OnlyFans worker had a client threaten to dox them if they did not refund their subscription fee.

"I asked for a few extra days to complete the custom [content requested by the client] as I was unwell. The custom[er] refused to pay and then demanded I refund his subscription fee, then showed that he had taken screen shots of my content and intended to dox me online if I refused."

Survey Respondent – OnlyFans

One model on Chaturbate who worked both as a cam model and as a full-service sex worker seeing clients at her home, recounted a case of a client leaking her

address on a live stream. Another model on Streamate who was recognised in the street by a client had their location posted in their public stream. Other cases involved people finding participants' personal social media accounts and threatening to out them as a sex worker, or posting their legal names on social media sites

Stalking

Within our survey, 26% of respondents said that they had experienced stalking as a result of doing online sex work. This stalking occurred in different ways, both online and offline and affected workers who did in-person meetings and those who worked solely online. Thus, while in-person work is associated within an increased risk of offline stalking – some participants who did full service work used their personal homes for work, meaning clients knew their home address – stalking was a significant issue for workers regardless of the specific type of sex work undertaken.

One participant experienced clients taking covert pictures of her in public spaces, and sending them to their work social media accounts so that they knew they were being watched. Others had clients recognise them in public spaces and then message them to tell them where they had been seen. In an extreme case, one OnlyFans worker had a client repeatedly turn up at their home. Whilst theoretically workers do not need to reveal their faces, in practical terms, every worker we interviewed showed their face within the material they published. On the other hand, clients can remain totally anonymous and hidden; creating an additional level of fear if workers know they been identified, but not knowing by whom.

"Somebody recognized me on the street. And they didn't approach me, but they messaged me to say that they saw me and the same person also found out where I was working at the time purely by chance, because they followed the bar that I worked in on Instagram and there was a photo of me on their Instagram. But that's another big risk is that I think is just people knowing who you are and not knowing what they're gonna do with that information. You know, a lot of people get very... they really lean into the fantasy. If you're making these videos for them and talking to them and it's quite scary to think about how intensely they could

be thinking about this online relationship that you have with somebody. It sounds really extreme, but it's especially with that other person, it crossed my mind a few times where I was like, 'OK, he knows where I work. I don't know what he looks like. He could very like he could stalk me. He could know where I live'."

Marie, UK – OnlyFans

In addition to offline stalking, participants documented online stalking that occurred across different platforms. This included attempts to blackmail and trick workers into revealing information, such as their personal address. Workers documented clients offering to send them gifts as a means to discover their personal address, or attempting to coerce information about them as a means to stalk them both online and offline. Ayesha, a cam model based in Belgium, experienced one individual who repeatedly stalked her online and attempted to coerce personal information about her. This included making fake Twitter accounts for other sex workers she had publicly engaged with, and fake accounts on Chaturbate imitating her regular clients. She said that she has, to date, blocked 30 separate accounts created by him.

WITHIN OUR SURVEY, 26% OF RESPONDENTS SAID THAT THEY HAD EXPERIENCED STALKING AS A RESULT OF DOING ONLINE SEX WORK.

As a means to reduce the likelihood of doxing and stalking, all four platforms offer the ability to prevent people within a specific geographic region from viewing a worker's account – a practice known as geo-blocking. This exists at the scale of the nation state, or within the US at the scale of individual states, with workers able to remove themselves from being visible in search results for anyone located in these areas. Workers expressed reservations about the effectiveness of these tools as they can be overcome using a simple to install VPN. In addition, the granularity at which they operate meant workers were often financially disincentivised from using

them as they meant cutting workers off from significant markets. In cases where workers experienced stalking or doxing, none of workers we interviewed had access to bespoke tools, resources or support provided by the platform.

As a result of experiencing stalking, or simply the fear that this might occur, some workers performed using wigs, disguises or masks as a means to limit the chance of them being identified. Other participants had shifted away from working on platforms out of fear they were being watched.

Scams

Participants documented various different scams and attempted scams that were perpetrated against them during their work. These included attempts to trick workers into thinking they had been paid, sending them phishing links, buying gifts for workers but then cancelling the orders, attempting to hack a worker's accounts, or in more serious cases, pretending to recognise workers, saying they had gone to school together and attempting to use this as leverage to blackmail them. In other cases, individuals may market themselves as brand managers who can help workers maximise their incomes in return for a commission. This can be very high – as much as 40% – and the industry is highly unregulated, meaning workers are often at risk of exploitation due to the lack of protections in place.

"You have a lot of people who brand themselves as OnlyFans content managers who actually have no idea what they're doing anyway. They're just preying on young, usually young women, to be like 'we'll help you grow your platform, I'll do this, but I'm gonna take a 40% cut'. And if you're a young girl starting out on it and you don't know any better, you do get taken advantage of in that situation... So there are concerns in that area, and I think OnlyFans could probably do a better job at having good resources towards keeping yourself safe or financially stable, or maybe not financially stable but like financially conscious."

Amanda, UK – OnlyFans

None of the workers interviewed in our sample were aware of any protections or help provided by the platforms to reduce the occurrence of scams perpetrated by clients.

Location-Based Risks

In addition to the risks discussed above, workers undertaking in-person work face a unique set of risks including physical and sexual violence, stalking, being filmed, and police harassment and incarceration. AdultWork helps to mitigate some of these risks by providing features which enable workers to screen clients. This includes rating and feedback systems in which both clients and workers can provide comments or reviews following a booking (Figure 4). AdultWork also includes a feedback system only viewable to service providers, where workers can leave notes about a client for each other about a client’s conduct. This acts as a form of worker communication in which they are able to share knowledge about positive or negative experiences. Furthermore, when clients make a booking, workers are able to see if a client has made multiple accounts, how many bookings a client has made and over what time frame. AdultWork also directs workers to free services for screening clients provided by the organisation National Ugly Mugs. Together these features offer workers the capacity to make better informed decisions about whether to proceed with a booking request.

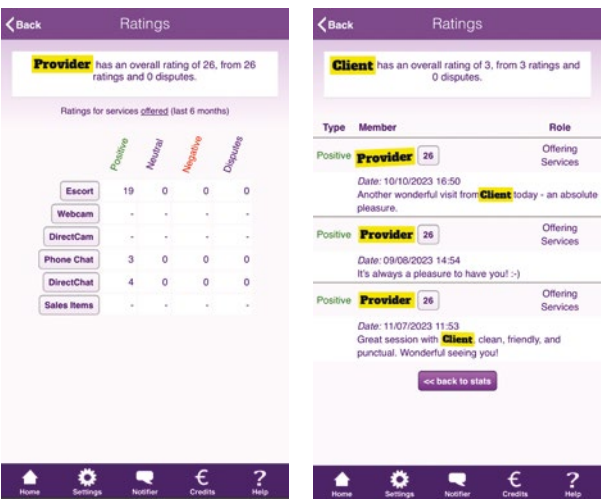


Figure 5 showing rating pages on AdultWork. Source: Interview participant.

Workers however felt that the level of support provided was minimal. In comparison with other platforms, they discussed the lack of safety features, including support and advice for protecting your identity and reducing the risks of stalking. AdultWork also did not provide workers with information about what measures they put in place for screening clients upon joining the platform.

“[The] site definitely feels like they don’t care about the workers, like they don’t really care. They’re just trying to make as much money from us as they can....it definitely just kind of feels like they almost prioritize the clients over protection of the workers.”

Freya, UK – AdultWork

Transgender workers reported that AdultWork offers limited options for how their gender identity is displayed to clients, resulting in greater risks of negative or violent encounters with clients. AdultWork offers no options for workers to identify as non-binary or trans-man in their profiles, nor any option to change your gender identity once your account is created. Workers explained how this creates situations where clients may expect a worker to have a specific gender-identity or genitalia. Workers feared that this mismatch between how their account was advertised and how they physically present increased the risk of negative interactions with a client. In this regard, the way the platform functions and the specific features available to workers directly contributes to an increased risk of violence.

Conclusion

Both interview and survey data revealed that workers on all four platforms experienced high levels of abuse and harassment, with little protection or intervention from platforms. Workers often spoke about experiencing adverse mental health as a result of this. Many workers spoke about having low expectations that the platforms would put in measures to combat this, despite feeling strongly that this was a serious issue which needed attention.

Principle 3: Contracts

To access the platform, workers must agree to the platform’s terms and conditions.¹⁹ These are hugely important as they define the working relationship between the worker and the platform, they define what rights workers have, what workers can and can’t do, their access to things like appeals, support from the platform, and what rights and powers the platform has. Workers across the four platforms are classified as self-employed and don’t therefore have employment contracts; instead, the terms and conditions outline their engagement with the platform and have a significant impact on the workers’ experience of the platform. Contravening them can result in workers being removed from the platform, and losing access to vital sources of income. This section examines the way in which workers engage with platforms’ terms and conditions. Here we discuss the issues related to access, comprehension, and with platforms implementing changes without explanation or advance warning.

Clarity

A common issue for workers was that they found the platform terms and conditions difficult to understand, with many finding that they were written in a form that made them both hard to read and lacked clarity in terms of what content is and isn’t allowed. Other interviewees said that they felt the terms and conditions were written in ways that gave platforms the ability to ban workers without reason, creating a sense of instability and the feeling that workers could not rely on platforms. This triggered feelings that they could be removed from the platform, losing their livelihoods, without the ability to appeal or contest these decisions.

Across all four platforms, the most significant challenge that workers faced related to what kinds of content and performances were permitted. There exists a huge array of different types of sexually explicit content, with complicated rules surrounding how these are policed. Workers across all the platforms felt that there was a lack of clarity about what types of content were allowed and what types of content contravened a platform’s terms of service. This meant they were constantly struggling to navigate rules that they could not fully understand, and that were never presented in a clear, easy to understand format. This includes if specific terms are banned, what types of role play are allowed

in live streams, what types of bodily fluids, and what sex acts can be shown on camera.²⁰ This lack of clarity resulted in a constant feeling of insecurity, with workers fearful about transgressing rules that they did not understand, leaving them at risk of having their content taken down and their accounts deleted.

On AdultWork, Chaturbate and OnlyFans, workers reported that they were not given advanced warning ahead of changes to the terms and conditions, or to the platform infrastructure and functioning. Whilst workers reported regularly having to agree to new terms of service, when changes were made it was impossible to understand what changes had been implemented. Oli described her experiences on OnlyFans by saying:

“To my knowledge, there is absolutely no communication. You don’t get an email saying that here’s what’s new or anything like that. To my knowledge, it’s not public. I mean, you could probably screenshot and compare and contrast, but because it’s also couched in that vague language, it’s not always obvious what exactly is happening behind the scenes.”

Oli, UK – OnlyFans

One issue specifically experienced by OnlyFans workers was the platform implementing changes to the terms and conditions that resulted in the retroactive flagging of content on their channels. In these cases, creators uploaded content following processes that were, at the time of uploading, within agreed parameters and were not flagged or identified as contravening any of the platform’s internal rules. However, subsequent changes resulted in content that was previously allowed, being retroactively flagged.

“A lot of the times they will update the terms of service and almost immediately in my experience, I’ve received red flags.... So you delete that content, which is very difficult, because scrolling back in time on OnlyFans is impossible. It can take like 2 hours for me just to get back to February and it’s really bad.... I’m very concerned at this point in

time, actually, about losing my account because I have had well over 500 of these red flags.”

Belle, UK – OnlyFans

In another widely discussed case within our interviews, OnlyFans changed their rules on how to register content that involves multiple performers. Whilst previously it was possible to upload content without written consent from everyone featured, rules came into effect which required all parties to be registered on the platform and to have signed and uploaded a written contract to be featured. This resulted in creators having content deleted from their pages without forewarning.

“Recently there’s been a big push on kind of release forms. And although I think that it is all good to do, because the system is so buggy, I’ve seen it with people where like every single piece of content they’ve had with another content creator has been removed, just because the system and the platform doesn’t work that well, which obviously creates a whole onslaught of issues for them if you get so much content removed.”

Amanda, UK – OnlyFans

Thus, whilst workers generally understood the need for changes to the working practices, the way in which OnlyFans managed this change put undue strain on creators, leading to problems with deleted content and fears of account deactivation.

In contrast to the other three platforms, the research participants from Streamate outlined how the platform has a system where workers can receive notifications about changes that are coming into place. The company notifies workers via email and company-managed Discord forums ahead of proposed changes.

Tasha: So if something really important is happening, they’ll send like a big email to everyone just to make sure that we get it, cause some people obviously don’t use the group chat or they don’t check their messages.

Interviewer: And how far in advance have they told you before making changes, would you say that they give you? (sic)

Tasha: Well, if it’s a big change, generally it feels like they let us know as soon as they know, but obviously, I don’t know when they found out. So that might not be the case, but it was definitely in enough time to be able to work around it.

Tasha, UK - Streamate



Stolen Content

Workers are at significant risk of having their content and images stolen and their cam streams recorded, with this content often reposted on free porn sites and social media sites. For the most part, the theft of content was through clients taking screenshots of images and screen recordings of videos and live streams. However, on Chaturbate the issue of stolen content was felt to be far more systemic, involving the automatic recording and reposting of all a worker’s streams by bots embedded within the site.

Stolen content was felt to be an issue for a number of reasons. Firstly, workers felt that their content and images were their intellectual property and the sharing of these without consent was a significant violation of their rights. They also feared that this devalued their content and resulted in lower earnings as clients could get their content elsewhere for less. Secondly the stealing of content was thought to increase the risk of being outed and doxed. Content being shared across social media without consent by unregulated third parties increased the risk of being discovered by friends, family, employers or landlords, and led to feelings of anxiety and stress about the potential implications of having your work revealed.

Furthermore, whilst all the platforms offer tools which enable you to block regions by geographic region, the illicit recording and reposting of content meant that these geo-blocks became less effective, as content was hosted on third party sites making it available across all regions.

Of the four platforms, OnlyFans, Streamate and Chaturbate all offer measures to help workers recover content if it is stolen and reposted. They offer the ability for workers to submit a Digital Millenium Copyright Act (DMCA) request through the platform, with the platform submitting a legal request to offending sites to get content taken down. This has the benefit for workers of reducing the labour associated with submitting a request and protecting their identity, as they do not have to put their legal name on associated forms. Whilst a useful tool, this method suffers from several drawbacks. Firstly, a number of jurisdictions around the world do not comply with DMCA requests, meaning that if a worker’s

content is hosted on a domain located in one of these countries, the request will likely be ineffective. Secondly, the burden of responsibility for locating stolen content remains with the worker, and platforms do not assist in the process of finding content which has been illegally copied.²¹

Data Protection

Workers often lack clarity in terms of how their data is stored and processed, with fears that information that could out them as a sex worker is being passed on to external parties. In particular, full-service workers using AdultWork feared that data could be passed on to domestic and foreign governments. Given the stigmatised and criminalised nature of their work this means that workers fear they may face difficulties travelling abroad.

“My concern is because I hear a lot of stuff about people being stopped at the US border and things like that. So that is something that is going to be a big concern of mine for traveling. I still have to upload a photo of myself with my ID to the backend, but I don’t know where that’s stored or how that’s being kept.”

Margo, UK – AdultWork

This fear stems from both a lack of clarity on how AdultWork uses and stores sensitive data, and the perception of an antagonistic relationship between workers and the platform. Workers did not trust that the platform was acting in their best interests in regards to protecting their identity and status as a sex worker from state actors.

Conclusion

The lack of clarity in the terms and conditions that workers must agree to, combined with other factors such as the lack of clear channels of support and communication, works to create an often antagonistic relationship between workers and the platforms. Many of our research participants felt that platforms used broad and imprecise language as a means to give them

greater ability to pick and choose how and when these rules were implemented. This contributed to a feeling of instability, with workers experiencing a pervasive

sense of precarity; never sure if their actions would contravene the platform’s rules and place them at risk of deactivation.

Box 2 - Payment Processors

In 2023 the payment processor SpankPay announced in a tweet that it would be closing down after four years in operation. SpankPay was a sex worker led payment processor that used cryptocurrency to provide a means for sex workers to receive payment for their work. It was set up to serve the sex worker community who face widespread banking discrimination, making it hard for them to receive payment from clients. Yet SpankPay too fell victim to this same discrimination when Wyre, the company’s upstream payment processor, terminated their account, as it would no longer facilitate payments for adult services (Cole, 2023). Upon announcing the closure, they tweeted “Operating SpankPay in a hostile banking environment has always been challenging, but the escalating attacks have become untenable for our small team and the niche market we serve” (SpankPay [@SpankPay], 2023).

This same banking discrimination effects online sex work platforms, which must use banks to process payments between workers and clients. This puts payment processors in a position of power within the industry, as they can choose who they work with and under what conditions (Beebe, 2022). As such, they have the ability to impose rules and regulations that platforms must conform to. In practice, this works through a tiered governance structure in which the rules are created by financial networks and implemented by banks and other financial institutions (Nillsson and Barker, 2022).

Visa and Mastercard are payment networks which work with banks and other financial institutions that offer access to their global financial networks. These two companies control 90% of global financial transactions outside of China (BBC News, 2022), operating as a global duopoly. Since the nineties, these two companies have issued rules and regulations on pornography, and what types of content can be bought and sold using their payment networks, operating as de facto regulators of the porn industry at a global scale (Nillsson and Barker, 2022).

Visa and Mastercard shape how platforms function by laying out the terms for what types of content can be hosted on a platform, how this content is moderated, and what verification measures a platform must have in place, in order to access their networks (Franco and Webber, 2024). These rules are then interpreted and enforced by the payment processors who transact directly with the adult entertainment businesses (Franco and Webber, 2024) – in this case, the platforms. Thus, these third party businesses have a powerful and important role in shaping the forms of governance that platforms employ (Tusikov, 2021), impacting the working conditions that workers experiences when using the platforms to earn a living (Franco and Webber, 2024).

Principle 4: Management

While a platform’s terms and conditions lay out the rules which workers have to abide by, these are enforced and policed by systems of management, including automated management systems (such as tools which monitor content, and analyse text for banned terms) and interventions by human managers. These management structures are also how workers get help when things go wrong, and how they appeal decisions made by the platform, such as account deactivations and suspensions. This section examines the issues workers encounter relating to management, including the different channels of communication to management that workers have access to, issues relating to suspensions and deactivations, and access to an appeals process.

Channels of Communication

Whilst undertaking their work, many workers encounter problems and issues which they need help and support with. All four platforms offer support services to workers, with the ability to contact staff and request help in resolving problems. Across the four platforms, 53% of our survey participants said they were able to contact a human representative, with 35% saying they didn’t know if they could. However, in our interviews many workers spoke about the inadequacy of these support channels, which often left them feeling isolated and alone, and lacking the level of support they needed to deal with problems that arose in the course of their work. Contacting the platforms typically involved emailing generic support emails, with responses often being copy and pasted, lacking personalisation to the specific issue at hand, or helpful responses. Wait times for responses often varied from a few days to several weeks, and some workers speculated that support was outsourced.

“I assume that their customer support is outsourced because the answers that we get back are, you know, it’s like when you call a support centre for a company, and they’ve outsourced their support. You get a copy and pasted script sent back to you, which is just a kind of vague either directly from the terms and conditions, which I can read myself, or it’s a slightly elaborated version of that. I don’t believe that it’s a direct channel, just

based off the answers that we get in the way that they interact with us.”

Oli, UK – OnlyFans

This lack of direct support and open channels of communication between workers and platform management was particularly challenging, given the stigmatised nature of the work and the severe risks that workers faced. In many cases workers lacked the sense that platforms would be there to provide the necessary support if things did go wrong.

“Some of the issues that we can face on the platform can be really scary. It would make the threat of those things feel a lot less scary if I knew that there was an actual person that I could speak to about it and be guaranteed that they’re taking it seriously.”

Marie, UK – OnlyFans

Workers on Streamate however, praised the level of support that they were given by the platform and the channels of communication that the platform operated. This included group chats with platform representatives, access to a Discord forum where workers could ask questions and raise issues, and regular webinars.

Streamate also had a representative who was active on a well-known camming forum who would respond to worker issues and whom workers could contact should they have an issue. Access to this named individual was seen by workers as hugely beneficial, often helping them resolve issues and problems they faced.

Deactivation and Suspensions

Whilst on the platforms, workers have to navigate platform rules and regulations, which are often opaque and difficult to understand, as discussed in the previous section. Failure to comply with these rules can result in disciplinary actions, with 50% of our survey respondents saying they had experienced a disciplinary action taken against them by the platform on which they worked; the most severe being account suspensions

and deactivation. Deactivation means that workers lose access to their accounts and sources of income. In some cases, workers lost unclaimed wages owed to them by the platforms. This was a constant threat which affected participants across the four platforms, and across the interviews there was a pervasive feeling of instability, and a fear that workers could lose access to their accounts without warning. Both deactivation and suspensions meant losing access to your account, which often meant that workers were unable to collect evidence to contest punitive decisions made against them.

None of the platforms outlined a clear process for what would lead to deactivation, and whilst in some cases workers were issued with a warning in response to their violation of platform rules, it was not clear how many warnings they would have to receive before being deactivated.

“It’s really scary because it’s like I don’t know where I stand like, how many times do I have to violate a term that I don’t understand to have my platform just removed?”

Ester, UK – OnlyFans

In some cases, workers were not clear about the specific reasons why they had been suspended or deactivated, leaving them uncertain about what they had done wrong, and therefore at risk of unwittingly repeating banned actions and being deactivated.

One Chilean OnlyFans creator had her account deactivated after she was asked to reverify her identity documents. Whilst previously she had verified these documents without issue, the automated system refused to accept her documents, accusing her of identity fraud.

“After about two weeks... they sent me an email saying that my account was going to be deleted. And that I couldn’t do anything so I kept asking why it was going to be deleted? What rules did I break? If I broke any rules, tell me no so I could remove that content, but they didn’t send any warning. They didn’t send any possibility.”

Pia, Chile – OnlyFans

Ultimately her account was deleted after nine months of working on the platform, and she lost access to her income and subscribers.

Appeals

Whilst several of the platforms do provide access to an appeals process for contesting account deactivation and content removal on their websites, in our interviews workers were often unaware that these existed. Across the four platforms, only 18% of participants said an appeals process was generally available to them if they experienced actions from the platform that affected them. 29% that an appeals process wasn’t available, and 53% said they didn’t know. Workers often didn’t understand the processes for how to submit appeals, how these would be managed and by whom. They often felt the only channels to appeal decisions were generic support emails, with no guarantee that these emails would be answered. Whilst workers were, in some cases, able to contest these account deactivations, it was often not clear to them how to provide evidence to support their cases, and the formal channels through which to do this.

Conclusion

Our findings for fair management reveal the many issues that workers experienced in getting support from the platforms. Given the stigmatised nature of the work, the risks which workers are exposed to (such as abuse and harassment, stalking, doxing and the very real risks of losing employment, housing, or physical violence should they be outed as a sex worker) are serious and severe. Lack of access to platform management and adequate support navigating and resolving issues that emerge in relation to the work thus take on heightened importance and shape worker’s feelings of security and safety. The threat of deactivation and the lack of clarity surrounding how to contest disciplinary actions, including deactivations, creates a climate of precarity in which workers experience instability about whether their access to platforms will be taken away. While in some cases these appeals processes do exist, our findings point to the need for platforms to better outline and explain how to access and use these systems.

Principle 5: Representation

Fair Representation relates to the ability of workers to collectively bargain with the platform through formal organisations which represent and campaign on behalf of workers. These include trade unions, workers organisations or other groups which have the interests of workers as their central concern.

Since the mid 1980s, the number of sex worker unions has grown globally, although they predominantly exist in countries where sex work is not criminalised (Gall, 2014). However, this movement faces significant challenges, due to the stigma faced by the workers and the shifting legal contexts in which the work sits. Many established trade unions have also been reluctant to allow sex workers to join them even when it is technically possible. Resistance to unionisation also frequently comes from managers (including platforms) who have financial interests in sex workers remaining unorganised, as well as from those who believe that sex work should be abolished. However, despite the challenging context in which sex worker unions sit, they continue to grow, and the past decade has seen significant wins for sex worker unions globally.

Whilst some of the workers we interviewed were members of a union, no union had entered into formal negotiations with any of the four platforms to represent workers on their behalf, meaning the avenues for collective bargaining remain limited. This section presents data looking at workers’ willingness to join a union, why workers felt unions were important, their experience getting help with issues related to their work from unions, and the issues related to organising on platforms, given the globalised nature of their workforces.

Out of 79 workers who completed our survey, 69% said they were unaware of any trade unions representing workers on the platform they worked on, whilst 79% said they were unaware of any workers’ associations. In contrast, 77% said that they would be interested in joining an organisation, such as a union or workers association, that provided workers with collective representation and worked to improve working conditions and wages, with only 9% saying they would not be interested.

Reasons for unions

In interviews, workers elaborated that they thought unions were important for workers undertaking sex work via digital platforms, as they would help workers to stand up to platforms. They felt unionisation would lead to platforms implementing positive changes, help if platforms implemented changes that negatively affected workers, such as raising the rate of commission, and counter their feelings of individual powerlessness in the face of the platform. Workers spoke of feeling that they aren’t listened to unless they already have a large social media following and that a union would help individual workers to have a voice in shaping how the platform functions.

“I need these platforms as of right now to make money to pay my bills and survive. And I know these sites know that.... So yeah, I would love a union. I’d love somebody, for it to be their duty and their role to just pester and talk to Chaturbate until things change for the better. That would be great. So I can spend less time worrying about that and spend more time working and making money.”

Charlie, US – Chaturbate

In online communities, workers spoke of how there are regular calls for strikes, class action lawsuits, and collective action to be taken against the platforms as a means to improve working conditions. However, these are seldom followed through given the lack of effective organisation and collective representation. In addition to collective bargaining and union representation, participants identified numerous positive benefits that unionisation could bring. These included hopes that it would help reduce the stigma experienced by workers and normalise it as a job, helping the general public to recognise the issues that workers faced.

“I believe that unions would normalise this field of work for the outside world more, once people see that we also have normal lives with normal work interests and are not just a bunch of ‘outlaws.’”

Survey Response – Chaturbate

Others spoke of the isolation of sex work and how they had joined trade unions as this gave them access to a community of sex workers, providing them with both practical and emotional support. In this way unions were able to help workers overcome the barriers placed on them by a labour process that keeps workers separate and does not provide shared spaces in which workers can come together and share their experiences.

Experiences of unions

18% of our survey respondents reported being a member of a trade union,²² however in interviews, workers expressed mixed experiences of receiving support for issues affecting them on the platforms. Some workers reported positive experiences receiving practical support with things like tax returns. Others pointed to the important campaigning work done by unions like the Sex Workers' Union in the UK, and their campaigning work against malpractice by AdultWork. This includes attempts to hold company officials to account and campaign against changes introduced by the platform which negatively impact workers. Yet others said that they felt that they would only contact their union for major issues such as account deactivation, rather than issues they experienced like abuse and harassment. One worker said she had to wait five months for a response from her union to a query about the commission taken by an agency she had joined for her cam work on AdultWork.

International Dimensions

Participants recognised the complexity of representing workers who undertake remote platform sex work, given the international scale at which they operate and the geographic spread of workers across different parts of the world. A further complication was the various legal classifications of sex worker across the world, with many countries criminalising in-person sex work as well as remote sex work. This means that the issues workers face in different parts of the world are hugely diverse, limiting the scope for collective action.

"I work a legal job, I pay taxes, I'm not facing any systemic discrimination on the part of like, I mean I am like obviously being a sex worker, but no banking discrimination, if I get a refused an apartment and if I knew it was because of sex work I could maybe take some legal steps.... and there is a lot of workers on Chaturbate whose work is criminalized in their countries. So we are coming from very, very different backgrounds and we have very different needs. So yeah, I feel there is some disconnect because like I might talk about one thing and someone is like, what are you talking about? I just want to have this basic thing of my work being recognized as to work when I might want to fight to get hourly rate (up), right?"

Astra, Poland – Chaturbate



Noemí Jiménez / Pexels

Box 3 – Instability and the OnlyFans Ban

In August of 2021, OnlyFans announced plans that it was banning sexually explicit content from the platform, giving just 6 weeks' notice before this would come into effect. Sex workers took to social media to vent their anxiety, fear and anger at the decision, which threatened to leave creators destitute, pulling the rug from under their feet and depriving them of an essential source of income. The decision, which even years later remains shrouded in mystery, was made in response to the declining number of payment providers willing to process payments related to the buying and selling of porn (Nilsson, 2021). It followed the decision by Mastercard and Visa to cease processing payments for the world's biggest porn site, Pornhub, and was seen by many as a pre-emptive move to avoid the same fate (Barry, 2021).

THE DECISION BY ONLYFANS TO BAN SEXUALLY EXPLICIT CONTENT HIGHLIGHTS THE RADICAL INSTABILITY THAT SEX WORKERS FACE IN USING PRIVATE ONLINE PLATFORMS AND THE DIFFICULTIES THEY FACE NAVIGATING THE POLICING OF SEXUALLY EXPLICIT CONTENT ONLINE.

In an interview with the research team, one worker described how the platform "descended into chaos", and the devastation she felt. "My job might disappear that was really upsetting as well, but it was sort of like the panic." Yet a mere five days later, the company announced that it was suspending the ban, announcing in a Tweet that it had "secured assurances necessary to support our diverse creator community" (OnlyFans, 2021). Sex workers would continue to be able to use the platform but many did so with trepidation, fearing that the platform would once again decide to remove sexual content, and the months and years of toil they had put into building a channel and

growing a following would be erased. Whilst many workers we interviewed found OnlyFans to be a hugely important source of income that enabled them to afford everyday necessities, the company seldom publicly acknowledge the centrality of sexual content to their business model. In an analysis of OnlyFans' own blog posts, van der Nagel (2021) found that only 13% of posts highlighting different creators on the platform focused on sex workers.

The decision by OnlyFans to ban sexually explicit content highlights the radical instability that sex workers face in using private online platforms and the difficulties they face navigating the policing of sexually explicit content online, but OnlyFans is by no means a unique case. Across the four platforms we investigated, workers reported fears that platforms could remove them without warning, that they might be deactivated, but also that the platforms themselves might be closed down through the removal of payment services or by government legislation. This fear combines with the legal classification of workers as self-employed, meaning they have little recourse to contest decisions made by the platforms, and contributes to a near constant state of precarity and insecurity for many workers.

As a practical response, many workers had accounts on multiple different platforms, protecting them against platforms going down, or losing their accounts through deactivation. 81% of respondents to our survey used more than one sex work platform. Amia, a cam model who uses multiple different platforms outlined how this was a direct response to fears that you could lose access at any time.

"It's terrifying, and that's also why I have the foresight. So if I end up being kicked out of one of them, then at least I won't end up completely jobless."

Amia, Portugal – Streamate and Chaturbate

Discussion

This research demonstrates that workers encounter numerous problems whilst working via digital platforms. Our findings demonstrate that workers experience issues surrounding pay variability, with wages that may vary significantly day to day. Workers on camming platforms often experience long waiting times with large amounts of unpaid working time.

Costs associated with online sex work can be high, with a large initial investment in technological equipment to enable people to start working in the industry, with no guarantee these costs will be recouped. Clients may initiate refunds and chargebacks which result in lost income and workers have minimal avenues to contest these. Platform commissions, whilst variable, often comprise a significant proportion of a worker's income.

PEOPLE TURN TO SEX WORK FOR A RANGE OF DIFFERENT REASONS INCLUDING THE ABILITY TO CONTROL THEIR WORK SCHEDULE, HIGH WAGES, SEXUAL PLEASURE, WORKPLACE HARASSMENT AND SEXISM IN MAINSTREAM WORK, TO GAIN ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE FROM ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS TO PAY FOR EDUCATION, BECAUSE THEY ENJOY THE WORK, AND AS WORK TO FIT AROUND CARING RESPONSIBILITIES

The findings show that abuse and harassment is a prevalent issue for workers, which includes threats of physical and sexual violence. Abuse often takes place based on protected characteristics including race, gender and sexuality. Doxing, in which someone's identity and personal details are maliciously revealed online, was

experienced by a third of our research participants, whilst a quarter had experienced stalking from clients. Workers also navigate attempts to scam them into revealing their details or tricking workers into thinking they've been paid.

Workers commonly experience issues relating to their contracts including a lack of clarity in terms of what content is allowed on the platforms. This means that workers may experience disciplinary actions as a result of attempting to navigate rules that they struggle to understand. On OnlyFans, changes to terms of service resulted in the retroactive flagging of content and fears of disciplinary actions against workers. Workers also experience having their content stolen and reposted on third party sites, and are often unclear about how sensitive personal data is stored and who has access to it.

These findings show that whilst channels of communication for support between workers and platform management exist, many workers find these channels to be inadequate. Half of the workers in this study had experienced disciplinary actions against them, including deactivations and suspensions. Workers are often unaware of appeals processes, or find these processes unclear and difficult to navigate.

Many workers recognise the importance and benefit of trade union representation and expressed willingness to join an organisation which campaigned for their rights at work. However, no union currently has entered into formal negotiations with any of the four platforms, meaning workers lack opportunities for collective representation and bargaining. Yet despite these issues, platforms are

an extremely important and powerful means for workers to earn enough to support themselves. People turn to sex work for a range of different reasons including the ability to control their work schedule, high wages, sexual pleasure, workplace harassment and sexism in mainstream work, to gain economic independence from abusive relationships (Vanwesenbeeck, 2001), to pay for education, because they enjoy the work (Sanders and Hardy, 2010), and as work to fit around caring responsibilities (Beckham et al., 2015).

Platforms, such as the four studied here, provide an important means by which workers put food on the table for themselves and those they love. Many of the workers interviewed face discrimination that means it's harder for them to find employment within mainstream work. Platform sex work offers the means to counter this exclusion and provides them with opportunities to earn and overcome barriers such as disabilities, the capacity to earn around caring responsibilities – such as looking after children, partners, friends or parents – and fitting work around education.

Sex work suffers from a negativity bias within popular media coverage (Weitzer, 2018) and social science research (Vanwesenbeeck, 2001). The majority of articles, reports, films and TV shows have a tendency to emphasise the negative aspects of sex work over the positive, often conflating sex work with human trafficking, and highlighting the worst cases of abuse and violence (Weitzer, 2018). What is often written out is the perspectives of sex workers themselves and their everyday experiences of work, encompassing both the good and the bad (Benoit et al., 2018). We recognise this negativity bias and the tendency to write out positive experiences. Whilst in this report we primarily discuss poor conditions, we recognise the many positive experiences and fulfilling reasons for doing sex work.

In highlighting the negative experiences of platform sex work we are not arguing for any platform's closure, or that online sex work should not exist. Rather we recognise the importance of online sex work as an income stream for many people and the need for these platforms to remain in operation. In highlighting poor working practices and conditions, our contention is that platforms can do better, that working conditions can be improved, and that fairer platform work is not only possible but attainable.

There are several key steps to achieving fairer working conditions. The first of these is the decriminalisation of all forms of consensual sex work. Whilst in some countries remote sex work is legal (notably the majority of Western Europe, and the Americas), in large parts of the world it is not. Furthermore, in-person sex work mediated via platforms remains criminalised or partially criminalised in the majority of countries around the world (Global Network of Sex Work Projects, 2021).

THE MAJORITY OF ARTICLES, REPORTS, FILMS AND TV SHOWS HAVE A TENDENCY TO EMPHASISE THE NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF SEX WORK OVER THE POSITIVE, OFTEN CONFLATING SEX WORK WITH HUMAN TRAFFICKING, AND HIGHLIGHTING THE WORST CASES OF ABUSE AND VIOLENCE. WHAT IS OFTEN WRITTEN OUT IS THE PERSPECTIVES OF SEX WORKERS THEMSELVES AND THEIR EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES OF WORK, ENCOMPASSING BOTH THE GOOD AND THE BAD.

The full decriminalisation of all forms of consensual sex work is supported by organisations including Amnesty International (Amnesty International, 2016), The World Health Organisation (World Health Organization, 2012) and Human Rights Watch (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Decriminalisation can help reduce the prevalence of physical, sexual and emotional abuse against sex workers (World Health Organization et al., 2013). In a 2013 report, the WHO found that working in criminalised contexts increases the risk of eviction, forcing workers into street working and exposing them to a greater chance of violence. The report found that the fear of arrest meant workers often had to work in less visible and less secure locations, and they were not able to spend time assessing risks to their safety in their negotiations with clients. Sex workers were also reluctant to report violence against them out of fear of being prosecuted themselves (World Health Organization et al., 2013).

Secondly, the stigma associated with sex work must be reduced. Stigma has far reaching and severe impacts on an individual's quality of life and is linked to social exclusion, economic exclusions, physical and mental wellbeing, and challenges accessing health services (Benoit et al., 2018). Therefore it is important to actively resist sex work stigma in all its forms. Weitzer (2018) points to a number of ways in which the stigma associated with sex work can be resisted, including the removal of derogatory language from public and private discourse; shifts in mass media representations of sex work; decriminalisation; industry mobilisation – whereby business involved in the industry, such as platforms, work to reduce the stigma associated with sex work; and sex worker activism.

Finally, the digital platforms that increasingly mediate sex work must implement changes which positively benefit workers. These companies won't do this on their own, and facilitating change is a collective effort in which we can all play a role. We must utilise worker activism, consumer pressure, academic research and legislative reform to encourage platforms to make positive changes to their working practices.

However, what changes platforms can and should implement is often hard to determine, and requires collective agreement. As a means to aid this process, we have created a set of principles based on our research

which comprise a set of minimum standards for what we suggest constitutes fair platform sex work. These are basic thresholds which, if implemented would positively benefit the working lives of sex workers working via online platforms. These principles are based on our research interviews and surveys and were discussed and revised at a stakeholder workshop held in June 2024 with two representatives from sex worker-led organisations, one independent sex worker, one representative from a third sector organisation, and two academics.

These principles have three key aims:

1. To act as a road map for platforms as to what changes they can and should implement to improve the experiences of workers.
2. To help the public, activists and policy makers understand the key areas which are most in need of improvement and the key changes which could be implemented to how platforms function.
3. As a tool to allow Fairwork to conduct future research to score platforms working within the sector. Fairwork evaluates the work conditions of digital labour platforms in the platform economy internationally, and scores individual platforms on how well, or how poorly, they do. Future research will focus on whether or not platforms comply with each of these principles.



Kato Blackmore / Unsplash

PRINCIPLES

Fairwork Sex Work Principles



Principle 1: Pay

1.1 - Ensures workers earn at least the local minimum wage after costs (one point)

Workers can sometimes face the risk of a client not paying for work that has been completed. To achieve this point platforms must guarantee that this is not possible. Where a client considers that work is not completed satisfactorily, there must be a clear and reasonable process for rejection decisions. Additionally, timeliness and regularity of payment are crucial to evidencing fair pay.

The platform must satisfy all of the following:

- Payments are made within an agreed timeframe.
- Workers can choose to be paid in a recognised national currency.
- Workers can request funds from their account on a regular basis with defined withdrawal thresholds.
- A clear arbitration process is in place when clients request refunds.²³
- Workers are not financially impacted by blocking clients, and fees that have been paid to them are not refunded to the clients if they choose to block them.
- Platform commissions and fees are clear, transparent and applied evenly for workers regardless of experience, geographic location, income, or other factors.

- Platforms provide clear guidance for different payment options, including clear and accessible information on different fees that workers will encounter.²⁴

1.2 - Chargebacks and banking discrimination are mitigated

Sex workers using online labour platform face banking discrimination and are at increased risk of chargebacks (when a purchaser disputes payment and demands their money back).²⁵ To achieve this point platforms must demonstrate that they are taking steps to mitigate this risk to workers.

- Platforms provide clear and transparent information about the risk of chargebacks to workers and workers are warned before completing work for a client with a known history of chargebacks.
- Clients who initiate chargebacks no longer have access to the worker's content.
- Platforms can demonstrate that they are operating due diligence in protecting workers from chargebacks and implementing measures to reduce their occurrence.²⁶
- Platforms provide clear and accessible information on how payments will appear on bank statements, including a visual depiction of what that will look like.



Principle 2: Conditions

2.1 - Health and safety risks are mitigated (one point)

Health and safety risks to workers can include exposure to psychologically harmful material, financial scams, stalking, doxing, harassment, and breaches of data privacy. To achieve this point the platform must demonstrate policies and processes that minimise risks to workers.

The platform must satisfy all of the following:

- There are processes for job-related health and safety risks (including psychological risks) to be identified and addressed. Platforms provide adequate measures to protect workers' identities and take necessary data security and privacy measures to prevent online stalking, doxing and identity theft.²⁷ These measures are implemented in a timely manner, effectively, and transparently.
- There are clear reporting channels and documented penalties for clients who subject workers to abuse, harassment, threats of violence, who threaten to reveal their personal details, or jeopardise workers' health and safety in any other way.²⁸ Measures are put in place to stop repeat offenders.²⁹
- Workers are informed of the outcome of decisions and measures taken against clients following the reporting of an incident, or provided with a reason why they cannot be informed of the outcome.

- There are mechanisms to reduce the risk of clients discriminating against workers on any basis listed above and to reduce and limit racist, transphobic, homophobic, sexist, religious, ableist and ageist or any other form of abuse on the platform.

2.2 - Ensures safe working conditions (one additional point)

Workers may encounter significant health and safety risks within their work, and platforms can help to reduce workers' exposure to these risks by providing technical features and training for new workers. To achieve this point, platforms must demonstrate that they are taking a proactive approach to minimise workers' exposure to potential risks.

- The platform implements processes and has documented policies for limiting the ability for clients to illicitly steal and record workers' content.³⁰
- Workers are given full rights to be forgotten, should they decide to remove their profiles from the platform and delete past content.
- Platforms offer optional training to workers as to how to undertake the work safely and effectively. This can be either in the form of training sessions, or comprehensive guides and resources available to workers. When appropriate, workers are made aware of and directed to external services that provide help and support at a local, national and international level.

the worker could be expected to understand and is accessible at all times.

- Workers are notified of proposed changes in a reasonable timeframe before changes come into effect. In cases where changes to the terms and conditions result in the retrospective flagging and deletion of existing content, no disciplinary actions are taken against the worker.
- The contract clearly outlines in an accessible form what content is not allowed on the platform in a way that is comprehensible to workers. This information is unambiguous and outlines specific rules around niche



Principle 2: Contracts

3.1 - Clear terms and conditions are available (one point)

The terms and conditions³¹ governing platform work are not always clear and accessible to workers. To achieve this point the platform must demonstrate that workers are able to understand, agree to, and access the conditions of their work, and that they can seek legal recourse if the platform breaches those conditions.

The platform must satisfy all the following:

- The contract and platform's terms and conditions are written in clear and comprehensible language that

content, where applicable. Information about allowed content is available in an accessible form to workers whilst they undertake live streams and chats.

- Workers have access to clear information as to how their data and information – including any relevant identity documents shared by the worker – is stored; who has access to this data, including external parties; how this data is used; what happens to workers' data after their account is deleted or deactivated; and how long this data will be retained for. Platforms outline who has ownership and copyright to content uploaded to the platform, including what happens to this content once workers leave the platform.

3.2 - Workers are supported when clients break contractual rules (one additional point)

Platforms mediate communication, the sharing of data and financial payments between clients and workers. Therefore they have a responsibility for oversight of the relationship between workers and clients, and to protect workers' interests.

The platform must satisfy all the following:

- The platform recognises the risk of worker's original content being stolen from the platform, as it relates to a breach in intellectual property, and provides information and assistance to workers to help remove stolen content (such as recorded streams or videos) from other platforms where they have been uploaded.³²
- Platforms provide workers with precise and transparent information in cases where they cross-post worker content to additional websites.

Except in cases where the worker is either in a standard employment relationship, or work is subcontracted to them through a third party,³³ the platform makes clear to workers:

- Working schedules cannot be imposed on workers.
- The worker retains the freedom to choose which tasks to accept or refuse.
- Refusal by workers of offered tasks does not punitively impact their rating or reputation.



Principle 4: Management

4.1 There is due process for decisions affecting workers (one point)

Platform workers can experience deactivation or being barred from accessing the platform, sometimes without due process; both of which result in a loss of income. Workers may be subject to other penalties or disciplinary decisions without the ability to contact the platform to challenge or appeal them if they believe they are unfair. To achieve this point, platforms must demonstrate that workers can meaningfully appeal disciplinary actions, including those concerning ratings and feedback.

The platform must satisfy all of the following:

- There is a channel for workers to communicate with a human representative of the platform. This channel is documented in policies that are easily accessible to workers, and communications are responded to within a reasonable timeframe.

- Workers receive an explanation for all punitive actions, including reductions in their rating/platform standing, deleted content, penalties, account blocks, deactivation and any other disciplinary actions. In cases of deleted content, workers are given the opportunity to amend and reupload it.
- The process for workers to appeal punitive actions, including negative feedback, deleted content and work rejections is non-arduous, documented in the contract, and is available to workers who no longer have access to the platform.
- In cases of deactivation or platform closure, workers are still able to withdraw existing earnings from the platform.

4.2 There is equity in the management process (one additional point)

The majority of platforms do not actively discriminate against particular groups of workers. However, they

may inadvertently exacerbate pre-existing inequalities through their design and management. Workers may also experience abuse and discrimination from clients based on protected or other characteristics. To achieve this point, platforms must show that they have policies against discrimination that can occur between different user groups, and that workers are assured that they will not be disadvantaged through management processes.

The platform must satisfy all of the following:

- There is a policy which guarantees that the platform will not discriminate against persons on the grounds of racial, ethnic, social or minority background, caste, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, language, gender,

Principle 5: Representation

5.1 - Workers have access to representation, and freedom of association (one point)

To observe workers' right to fair representation, platforms must ensure that workers have information about their options for representation in a dispute, and must ensure they have access to an independent advocate. Platforms must also guarantee that workers have freedom of association, as enshrined in the constitution of the International Labour Organisation and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The platform must satisfy all of the following:

- The platform publicly commits to support any effort by its workers to collectively organise or form a trade union. This could be done by, for instance, adding the following text in their contracts: "[company] will support any effort by its workers to collectively organise or form a trade union. Collective bargaining through trade unions can often bring about more favourable working conditions". Platforms are also required to direct workers to the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) and their list of member organisations to aid workers in identifying local labour unions and groups advocating for workers.³⁶
- Freedom of association is not inhibited and groups of workers are not disadvantaged in any way for communicating their concerns, demands and wishes to management.

sex, sexual orientation, disability, age, geographical location, migration status or any other status.

- Platforms operate equality and parity in how the platform's rules are implemented for both clients and workers,³⁴ and for content creators creating both explicit and non-explicit content.³⁵
- The platform specifies the methods used to manage work including ranking and page allocation systems, and what factors determine these rankings (including when algorithms are used). Substantive changes to methods of managing and allocating work are preceded by a worker consultation.

5.2 - There is collective governance or bargaining (one additional point)

The ability for workers to organise and collectively express their voice is an important prerequisite for fair working conditions. Workers must be able to assert their demands through a representational body which is free from any influence by platform management. Where such a body does not exist, it is incumbent on platforms to ensure workers' voices can be represented by encouraging its formation.

The platform must satisfy either 1, 2, or 3:

- 1 It is democratically governed by workers.³⁷
- 2 It formally engages with an independent collective body of workers, an elected works council or trade union, and has not refused to engage with collective bodies who seek representation and/or bargaining. New workers are advised of the existence of these bodies.
- 3 If such a body does not exist, or such bodies have not requested recognition by the platform, the platform has engaged in a formal process of dialogue with local and/or international representative bodies of workers to discuss what structures and processes of representation can look like for platform workers.

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ENDNOTES

1. This information comes from the registration date of certain profiles on the site. AdultWork itself releases no details of how long it's been in operation.
2. All names have been changed to protect worker anonymity.
3. Full-service sex work refers to types of sex work that involve sex acts such as penetrative and oral sex.
4. Emotional labour refers to how workers must manage their internal feelings and emotions as a means to create a positive experience for clients (Hochschild, 2007).
5. The exception to this is OnlyFans, which has released some public documents outlining information about their business (Fenix International Limited, 2024, 2022).
6. The Tax Justice Network defines secrecy jurisdictions as a jurisdiction "which provides facilities that enable people or entities to escape or undermine the laws, rules and regulations of other jurisdictions elsewhere, using secrecy as a prime tool" (The Tax Justice Network, n.d.).
7. <https://www.linkedin.com/in/olevente/>
8. <https://www.linkedin.com/in/laszloczero/>
9. <https://www.somo.nl/the-counter/>
10. In the UK, as an example, around 0.5% of the population identify as transgender (Jovaisaite, 2023).
11. Given the commonplace conflation of migration by sex workers and sex trafficking (Rossoni, 2021), we reiterate that no worker in our sample reported experiences of trafficking or coercion.
12. A full discussion of the relationship between content creation platforms, like OnlyFans, and social media platforms is beyond the scope of this report. For further information see (van der Nagel, 2021).
13. The term 'black box systems' refers to how decisions made by computational systems rely on processes which are not viewable or understandable by the average user. Therefore, it is often impossible to understand why and how a certain outcome has been reached.
14. This rate is complicated by the affiliate programme run by the platform, which allows workers to benefit financially whenever someone they've directed to the site purchases tokens, meaning in theory the commission taken by the platform can fall to 30% in certain cases. However the commission most workers encounter for using the platform is 50%.
15. Misogynoir is a term to describe the combination of misogyny and racism, characterising a prejudice towards black women.
16. Anti-Blackness, or Anti-Black racism is characterised by prejudice, collective hatred, and discrimination or extreme aversion towards people who are racialised as Black people.
17. Whorephobia is the hatred or stigmatization of sex workers.
18. MAGA refers to Make America Great Again, the campaign slogan for Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, which has become popular within right wing communities.
19. In reality, workers may have to agree to a number of different terms including community guidelines, model or broadcaster agreements, and terms of service. In this research we use "terms and conditions" as short hand for all documents which outline the contractual relationship between the worker and platform.
20. As a response to this lack of clarity, workers have produced and circulated easy to understand versions of the terms of service, which lay out in simple terms the key takeaways and knowledge that workers need to do the job; see Ladder (n.d.).
21. Third party services and tools for automatically identifying stolen content do exist, but are associated with regular monthly payments of up to \$99 US dollars.
22. This relatively high percentage is likely due to the method of recruitment used – the call for participants was shared widely in UK sex worker organising spaces, including communication channels for the Sex Workers Union.
23. As a guideline:
 - Workers should be able to contest refunds and work rejection decisions.
 - Workers receive a clear and reasonable explanation for why refunds have been granted.
 - Workers may attempt to redo rejected work – such as custom content – at least once.
 - If the worker contests the refund decision, the case is reviewed (a second time) by a neutral third party, who makes a binding decision; the platform agrees not to punish the worker in any way if the third party decides in favour of the worker.
 - Rejected content is not available to the client.
24. This includes what different third-party payment providers a platform works with, the types of payments that a worker can receive (such as cryptocurrencies and fiat payments), and the different banking fees and commissions that these options incur.
25. Chargebacks are distinct from refunds requested through the platform as they are initiated at the level of the payment provider. Therefore, the platform itself does not have control over whether the funds are returned or not.
26. Measures may include, for example, 'Know Your Customer Checks', transaction monitoring and suspicious activity reporting.
27. Examples include measures such as geographic blocking (in which entire regions or countries are blocked from viewing a worker's profile), allowing workers to have their face covered on the platform, use of pseudonyms, provisions of information about how to stay anonymous, or two factor authentication. Workers must have the ability to include false information (such as a legally inaccurate nationality) within their public account profile and no information provided by workers within identity verification processes should be displayed publicly without the worker's consent. In addition, workers must be able to select their gender identity from a comprehensive range of options and be able to change what gender is displayed on their account.

28. In cases where clients break the law, workers' autonomy is paramount in deciding whether or not to involve the police about an incident, and platforms should not involve law enforcement without the consent of the worker involved.
29. Examples would include measures such as banning clients based on their IP address and preventing them starting new accounts using a different email.
30. Examples of technological measures that platforms may put in place include processes to ban screen recording and screenshots, and implementing cryptographic fingerprinting of content.
31. In this section we use "terms and conditions" as shorthand for all documents which outline the contractual relationship between the worker and platform, including community guidelines, model or broadcaster agreements, and terms of service.
32. Specifically this relates to help and assistance submitting DMCA requests.
33. Such as if the worker works at a professional camming studio which offer a number of different contractual arrangements.
34. This includes rules around banned terms and what words each party is allowed to use within communications on the platform.
35. Many platforms host creators who produce a range of different types of content and can host workers who produce explicit and non-explicit content. Rules and regulations should be implemented fairly for all types of content hosted by the platform.
36. The relevant list of projects can be found here: <https://www.nswp.org/members>
37. Such as if the platform is a workers' cooperative.

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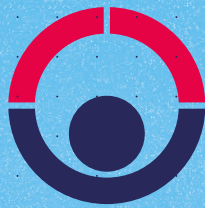
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