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Policing Vulnerability: The Care and Control of Sex Workers Through Designated Police Officers

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The state's duty to protect vulnerable people gives rise to powerful forms of social intervention, especially in policing. This article reports from co-produced multimethods research focussed on one form of policing vulnerability within an English police force; the role of a specialist sex worker liaison officer (SWLO). Findings highlight that an enhanced focus on vulnerability through the role was highly valued by sex workers; building trust and improving investigations of crimes against sex workers. However, social control was the defining parameter for the intervention, with different implications across the diversity of the sex industry. Drawing on Gilson's (2021) intersectional feminist philosophy work, we situate findings within critical attention to policing vulnerability, arguing the embedding of vulnerability within governance apparatus orientated to social control must be met with vigilance if it is to be progressive rather than reactionary.

KEY WORDS: vulnerability, sex work, policing, harm reduction, justice, social control

INTRODUCTION

Against a backdrop of deepening austerity politics and chronically residualized social support, operational focus on vulnerability has been increasingly taking root in UK policing. Appealing to safeguarding and prevention functions of policy and practice, the idea of vulnerability as a priority area in policing is now widely promoted nationally in England and Wales, advanced locally through Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (Menichelli 2020) and in governance of specific issues such as sex work (Brown and Sanders 2017; National Police Chief's Council [NPCC] 2023b). Similar trends have been observed internationally (Asquith and Bartkowiak-Théron 2021). These developments reflect and reinforce a wider 'discursive explosion surrounding vulnerability' (Gilson 2021: 87) which philosophy scholars have linked to social conditions under neoliberalism where a sense of insecurity as recurring, ever-present and inevitable has become the norm for many. The expansion of the 'vulnerability zeitgeist' (Brown

2015: 1) into policing has far-reaching implications, but understanding how this plays out on the ground lags considerably behind rapid developments in policy and practice.

Emphasis on state duties to protect the vulnerable gives rise to powerful forms of social intervention. Although often deemed progressive, vulnerability interventions are more controversial in relation to the police, especially amidst an intensifying crisis of legitimacy associated with brutality, institutional misogyny and racism. Those subject to vulnerability interventions often fall within a 'vulnerability–transgression nexus' (Brown 2015: 85); people who are socially disadvantaged, disproportionately victimized and also deemed a social problem, criminalized and policed in ways that intensify marginalization and suffering (Singh 2017; Alexandrescu and Spicer 2023). Feminist research has underlined how vulnerability reinforces one-dimensional understandings of gender in criminal justice, embedding rather than challenging cultural and institutional sexism (Munro 2017), with anti-racist feminist scholars noting how victimization and passivity norms around White women's vulnerability have exacerbated exclusions of minoritized women (Phipps 2020). The blend of protective and controlling functions within policing has a long and disputed history, but within increasingly entwined social policy and criminal justice systems (Garland 2001; Crawford 2003), the mainstreaming of vulnerability in law enforcement arenas expresses 'contemporaneous punitive and humanitarian turns' (Aliverti 2020: 1117), representing 'profound changes *at the heart* of the state' (1120, original emphasis).

Sex workers' experiences of vulnerability policing offer important insights for wider vulnerability debates. Regulated primarily as a public nuisance and a morality risk, sex workers have been considered as 'specially vulnerable' in policy since the 1950s (Wolfenden 1957: 9–10) and long subjected to social control in the name of protection. In England, it is not illegal to sell or pay for sex, but soliciting is prohibited, along with any organization of sex work such as working with others, running a brothel and involvement of third parties (Release 2017). This means police have a contentious dual role as 'prosecutors and (alleged) protectors' of sex workers (Stardust *et al.* 2021: 147). Research has underlined how sex workers are made vulnerable through quasi-criminalisation, whilst also being the focus for local multi-agency initiatives which aim to mitigate vulnerability; especially via community safety agendas (Phoenix 2008; Grenfell *et al.* 2023). Vulnerability is therefore a deeply contested concept in sex work (Munro and Scoular 2012), bound up with 'rescue politics' and fractious debates about agency (Brown and Sanders 2017) connected to over-policing of sex workers and narratives about the harms of sex work which have advanced criminalization. However, the turn to vulnerability in sex work policing can shift police attitudes and behaviour away from hostile objections to sex work rooted in stigma and more traditional forms of police culture, potentially supporting harm reduction and nuanced approaches to victimization and offending (Sanders *et al.* 2021).

This article advances vulnerability and policing debates through reporting findings from an empirical case study of what could be considered the more progressive end of sex work policing; the work of designated police sex worker liaison officers (SWLOs). We report from multimethods research focussed on one SWLO operating in a major city in the North of England, within a large metropolitan police force. The SWLO study was co-produced with police and with sex workers. Underpinning the article and the empirical study is a theoretical orientation concerned with what has been variously described as 'repressive welfarism' (Phoenix 2009) or 'authoritarian therapeutism' (Wacquant 2013: 249); new and intensifying forms of governance which regulate marginalized populations through interwoven welfare and penal mechanisms within a wider context of welfare support erosion (Flint 2019). We draw on Gilson's (2021) intersectional feminist philosophy vulnerability work which considers oppression and violence, mobilizing this to anchor our approach to sex worker vulnerability. Gilson (2021: 86) defines vulnerability as an 'openness to being affected' which includes but is not limited to a 'propensity to harm' (102); a shared condition but always materialized and experienced differentially. For Gilson, structural and institutional dimensions of the production

of vulnerability encompass socio-historical conditions as well as relationships and human agency; but the term is ascribed unevenly to people who are situated differently in light of socially salient identity-related group memberships, 'imperilling or privileging' accordingly (Gilson 2016: 44). The article approaches sex worker vulnerability as 'a position in a social order where physical and emotional suffering is inflicted and patterned by economic and historic injustice, cultural stigma and gendered, sexualised and racialised discriminations' where 'a multitude of identities, stories, embodiments, emotions, practices and performances' are in operation (Brown and Sanders 2017: 439).

We begin with an overview of literature which explores how care and control operate through vulnerability policing, with special attention to sex workers. Next, we set out the study's research methods, highlighting co-production elements. Findings are then reported focussing on (1) the nature of the role as a vulnerability intervention, (2) bridging and blurring of care and control and (3) impacts of the role. In our discussion, we draw applied and theoretical insights together using Gilson's (2021) work to consider how vulnerability might be a progressive rather than reactionary force in policing. It is important to note we do not present the SWLO role as an exemplar of the general policing of sex work, which has been found to be oppressive, brutal, corrupt and life-threatening for sex workers (Platt *et al.* 2018; Stardust *et al.* 2021; Grenfell *et al.* 2023). In focussing on more 'progressive' sex work policing our intention is not to shift gaze away from widespread, deep-rooted and acute injustices faced by sex workers and entrenched through criminalization (O'Neill and Jobe 2022). We hope that through detailed critical consideration of the SWLO role, insights might support justice and rights for sex workers and contribute to debates about the role of the police in addressing vulnerability.

Policing vulnerability and sex work

Vulnerability is now ubiquitous as a concept underpinning police work and the operation of closely allied Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships, well-suited to targeting and rationing services whilst maintaining service provision (Brown 2015; Menichelli 2021). The College of Policing's *National Vulnerability Action Plan* (NPCC 2023a) highlights the centrality of vulnerability in contemporary policing and police force responses to vulnerability are a key performance indicator in quality inspections (see HMICFRS 2015). Reviewing community safety partnership plans across England and Wales, Menichelli (2020: 51) found moves towards vulnerability were 'the most salient feature'. Although operating often in relation to victimhood (Walklate 2011), vulnerability policing extends to suspects and perpetrators, particularly people deemed to 'lack' agency. Arenas of policing where vulnerability is prominent include police custody (Dehaghani 2019), hate crime (Roulstone *et al.* 2011), child sexual exploitation (CSE) (Brown 2019), exploitation in the context of drug markets (Moyle 2019) and drug use (Alexandrescu and Spicer 2023) as well as sex work (Brown and Sanders 2017). One key principle in the NPCC's (2023b: 7) guidance on sex work, for example, is to 'maximize safety and reduce vulnerability' (see also Sanders *et al.* 2021).

Propelling the rise of vulnerability policing has been the growing political and cultural significance of the violence against women and girls agenda and the high profile of crimes like CSE and human trafficking. There has also been growing interest in public health approaches to crime parcelled in vulnerability rationales as a way of de-emphasizing 'problem' behaviour as individual responsibility (Enang *et al.* 2019) and the rise of trauma as a frame for understanding experiences of harm. At the same time, a growing crisis of legitimacy has engulfed the police, with vulnerability policing considered a vehicle for shifting occupational culture (Sanders *et al.* 2021; Bacon 2022). Following the global financial crises and other economic and social crises including the Covid 19 pandemic, the role of policing in deepening social problems and operating within voids left by withdrawal of social support apparatus has become increasingly contested (Crawford 2024).

Definitions of vulnerability are notoriously amorphous across policy and practice (Brown *et al.* 2017) with policing no exception (Keay and Kirby 2018). Although problems arising from definition issues are not necessarily intrinsic to the concept (Cole 2016) the boundarylessness of vulnerability expands discretion in policing (Menichelli 2020). The College of Policing's definition enshrined in the *National Vulnerability Action Plan* (NPCC 2023a: 5) is widely drawn upon in national and local strategic documents, whereby: 'A person is vulnerable if, as a result of their situation or circumstances, they are unable to take care of or protect themselves or others from harm or exploitation'. This definition nestles a range of 'personal' factors (age, gender, disability, ethnicity) within numerous 'situational' factors (risky behaviour, poverty, adverse family circumstances, third-party exploitation). With little precision on the interplay between identity categories and social stratification, political currency has been key in recognition and delineation of vulnerability; especially in relation to victims (Butler 2004; Chakraborti and Garland 2012) but also for socially disadvantaged or traumatized offenders who face unstable vulnerability status (Hannah-Moffat 2005).

Deep-seated and intractable approaches to 'deservingness' remain in operation through the lens of vulnerability as commonly applied in criminal justice (Brown 2019; Dehaghani 2019), with commentaries noting how vulnerability institutionalizes what Christie (1986) termed 'ideal victimhood' (Walklate 2011; Munro 2017). Persistent failures to address victimization of the most vulnerable are an enduring feature of the criminal justice system, with some vulnerable victims appearing to have little or no political currency (Chakraborti and Garland 2012). Highly stigmatized groups such as sex workers, who challenge traditional social norms as well as binary classifications of 'offender' and 'victim' tend to be processed as 'offenders' and are seen as undeserving of state protections and rights (Drake and Henley 2014). Sex work research has consistently shown how the criminalization of acts apparently 'against' women and girls (such as trafficking and brothel keeping) in practice have led to de facto criminalization of women and girls held responsible for failing to be 'saved', reflecting developements referred to by some as 'carceral protectionism' (Rodriguez *et al.* 2020).

Sex workers are strongly associated with vulnerability, not only in relation to work-related violence and exploitation, but also in terms of unmet health needs and extreme social marginalization in the case of street-based workers. Most sex work transactions take place without incident (Kinnell 2008), but many sex workers experience physical and sexual violence in the course of their work (Sanders 2016). Systematic reviews demonstrate how repressive policing substantially increases violence against sex workers (Deering *et al.* 2014; Platt *et al.* 2018), deterring sex workers from reporting crimes for fear of prosecution or being discredited as a victim (Kinnell 2008; Sanders 2016; Campbell 2017). Whilst policy essentializes sex worker vulnerability, significant patterns of difference and diversity are evident. Work environments shape experiences and likelihood of reporting, intersecting with structural conditions related to gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, nationality, immigration status and anti-poverty discrimination (Platt *et al.* 2018, Connelly *et al.* 2021; Koenig *et al.* 2023). Street-based sex workers, for example, experience higher levels of violence and are more likely to report, whereas crimes against online sex workers often go unreported due to them operating more 'under the radar' (Connelly *et al.* 2021). For migrant sex workers—the most vulnerable to violence—risk of investigation and deportation further reduces willingness to report (Mai 2009). The intersection of criminalization with gender stereotypes, homophobia, transphobia and racism affects occupational health and safety of male and non-binary sex workers (Koenig *et al.* 2023).

Online sale of sex is the largest sector of the sex industry but, since the 1950s, street-based sex work has remained a primary policy focus, with criminalization of brothels and the high profile of 'anti-trafficking' initiatives meaning migrant off-street sex workers are more

heavily surveilled and policed. Whilst official rhetoric around sex worker vulnerability may encourage sympathy, women who sell sex remain primarily seen as undeserving deviant victims due to their 'risky' occupation and are responsibilized for sex work-related violence (Krüsi *et al.* 2016), with vulnerability rationales noted as entrenching this approach (Munro and Scoular 2012). In England and Wales, the absence of a strong national sex work policy has resulted in a 'patchwork' of variation force-by-force, from heavy enforcement through to informal or formal tolerance and/or protection-based approaches (Feis-Bryce 2017). Unwritten 'rules of engagement' develop locally, opening gaps between official policy and practice on the ground (see Campbell 2017: 56). The context of quasi-criminalization houses an unstable diversity of approaches and faced with intensifying resource pressures and the futility of enforcement, some police forces have tried new approaches. This includes deployment of specialist SWLOs who act as a designated point of contact on crimes against sex workers. Considered best practice by the NPCC due to their focus on vulnerability rather than enforcement (NPCC 2023b), SWLOs existed in 10 of the 43 police forces in England and Wales in 2021 (Sanders *et al.* 2021).

Methods: the SWLO study

This article draws on data gathered through a 12-month research project funded by the N8 Policing Research Partnership (N8PRP) which investigated the role of one SWLO in policing vulnerability. We took a multimethods co-produced approach which was deliberately flexible and varied, aimed at amplifying sex worker perspectives which are often marginalized in research. We also worked closely with local police (a requirement of the funding).[1] Sex workers advised us on the design and process of undertaking the study through drop-ins, informal groups run alongside drop-ins, open access creative arts workshops, a discussion group held with a local sex worker-led collective and online workshops with sex workers known through sex work research advisory networks. Sex workers worked with researchers to shape qualitative instruments and supported analysis through the findings discussion workshops. Sex workers who took part in co-production workshops were paid £25 in vouchers and an agreed consultancy payment was provided to the sex worker collective. Findings were used to co-produce a publicly available SWLO role descriptor resource for police forces to use to embed 'best practice' in similar roles. This role descriptor was co-produced through various meetings/consultations with sex workers, the police force and the NPCC's National Working Group on Sex Work, work which also supported analysis and write-up of findings.

We conducted in-depth interviews with ten sex workers and three days of SWLO shadowing, with a month of diary keeping undertaken by the SWLO to supplement understanding of the role. We conducted interviews (n = 12) and focus groups (n = 3) with a total of 20 'key informant' stakeholders, including police officers (front line and key strategic roles), local support professionals and representatives of prominent community groups. Quantitative data on crimes against sex workers were also analysed, provided by National Ugly Mugs (NUM), a specialist organization operating a national self-report scheme where sex workers can report crime anonymously without fear of reprisal. We worked with our partner police force to analyse local police data on reporting and outcomes in cases that could be linked to the SWLO on police systems (n = 78).[2]

The ten sex workers interviewed for the study had directly engaged with the SWLO in various capacities. The sample included six street-based sex workers and four indoor/online sex workers; all

1 The development of the study was informed by the lead researcher's role as Trustee/Chair of Trustees at the local sex work support service for 15 years and previous role as a member of the city council's strategic partnership on sex work.

2 Analysis of crime data was undertaken in full compliance with strict information sharing protocols that govern the work of the University of York and our various partners in the project.

were cisgender women aged 21–40+; six identified as White British, two as mixed heritage British and two as East European ethnicities with EU nationality.[3] We recruited participants largely from researcher presence in two regular sex worker support agency drop-ins which allowed women familiarity with the research project in a setting where they felt comfortable. One of the drop-ins was run by a city-centre project for street, indoor and online sex workers; the other was for street-based sex workers, held by a small organization based in the local street sex work area. Sex workers were told about the study in advance by staff, with accessible recruitment flyers advertising the study distributed widely. Both support services directly enabled some interviews, for example, with staff supporting women to attend the drop-in on days researchers were present. All sex workers who took part in interviews were paid £25 in supermarket vouchers as a thank you for their time and expertise.

To ensure we captured perspectives of those who had not engaged with the SWLO, who may be reluctant to engage with police and those who preferred not to participate in formalized interviews, a researcher and participatory artist ran informal arts-based workshops alongside sex worker drop-in provision at both organizations; offering indian head massages, reiki-inspired treatments and/or high-end takeaway pampering products and food as thank yous for views on the SWLO role and on what should be key messages developed from the study. No formal sign-in or personal details were required for participation at the sessions, with deliberately inclusive and flexible routes to taking part in whatever capacity people preferred. Around 20 sex workers provided perspectives on the study through these workshops and they helped co-produce findings via this informal route. Through these arts-based sessions we worked with sex workers to make three images conveying key messages on the SWLO role (see Figures 1–3).

In total, 30+ sex workers were involved in the research project. It should be noted that only a small subsection of the full diversity of the sex industry participated. In particular, male and trans sex workers were not represented. In part this mirrored the SWLO's (and partner organizations') work focus on mainly cisgender women (with small numbers of trans women and no men), an issue we return to later. Shadowing notes, the SWLO diary, interviews and focus group data were analysed guided by 'thematic network' approaches (Attride-Stirling 2001). The research was conducted with ethical approval from the University of York, with the protection and safety of sex workers and the importance of amplifying sex worker voices the highest priorities. Names are pseudonyms and potentially identifying details have been changed. Given the ethical need to centre the perspectives of sex workers and for reasons of space, we draw primarily on qualitative data and co-produced insights, supplementing these with observations and quantitative data on key themes.

Findings: policing vulnerability through SWLOs

Research findings focus on three themes: (1) the SWLO role as a policing vulnerability intervention, (2) the blend of care and control that underpinned the work of the officer and (3) the resulting impacts of the role. Sex worker perspectives on each theme are amplified using the three images co-created with sex workers.

The SWLO role as a policing vulnerability intervention

Perspectives on the purpose of the SWLO role were broadly shared amongst participants, centering on proactive community engagement with sex workers, building trust with the aim of

3 A support worker was present in all group workshops and in some interviews where sex workers expressed a preference for this. One interview was through a translation service. The SWLO had supported hundreds of sex workers which meant risk of identifiability was not high for sex workers interviewed.

increasing crime reporting and supporting crime investigations to ensure 'positive' criminal justice outcomes when sex workers were victims of crime. The SWLO mostly worked in plain clothes and in an unmarked car. As in most other forces, the officer was a woman but this was not a designated requirement of the role. The SWLO was based in the neighbourhood policing team local to the street sex work area, but the role was citywide involving outreach work in saunas and massage parlours which we discuss further below. She worked closely with many specialist teams in her district and in the wider force and beyond, notably serious and complex crime (CID) and modern slavery lead whose remit included raids on brothels and massage parlours. She was overqualified for the SWLO position, indicative of her strong commitment to justice for sex workers evident also through interactions and advocacy we observed in shadowing. She had extensive knowledge of sex work from nearly 5 years in the role; something sex workers felt was vital; underlined in Figure 1.

Key informants emphasized how the SWLO helped address vulnerability as part of the rising safeguarding agenda: '[vulnerability]'s a massive thing these days, and sex workers are almost like that group who are not usually spoke up about' (Police Community Support Officer [PCSO]). SWLOs were considered as specialist vulnerability roles which now formed a core function of policing, a view shared by police partners as well as police. As one local support worker stated: 'protecting the vulnerable is the very heart of any police officer's job'. The SWLO invested considerable effort in building relationships of trust with the sex work community. The success of her role centred on sex workers perceiving her as authentic, consistently present and trustworthy, factors that other researchers have noted as essential in similar policing positions (Johansen 2024); arguably making her a different kind of police officer to more traditional roles, with compassion and empathy central to her work (Bacon 2022).

Fig. 1 Key message image co-created with sex workers—What makes a good SWLO

Bridging and blurring care and control

Key informants, sex workers and the SWLO herself all used a similar language of 'help' to describe what the role involved, as Kat (aged 37), a street-based mixed heritage British woman described:

> She comes across like she really does want to help you, do you know what I mean? She's a really nice person and she does do what she can in her job for you as well.

The SWLO picked up on support needs of street-based women through her proactive community presence, bringing these immediately to the attention of the local specialist sex work services, who then linked women up with wider support (drug services, housing, etc.). From diary keeping and observations, it was clear she was engaged in wide-ranging community engagement and support work, from discussing concerns about a potentially violent partner and driving a sex worker to pick up a methadone script; to obtaining shoes for a woman released from prison without footwear, arranging crisis support after assaults and physically moving women to safe places in situations of extreme danger. Leanne (aged 41, White British) who was street-based and had experienced domestic violence described home visits where 'she [SWLO] would come out and see to my safety'.

The SWLO cultivated trust and what was widely termed 'respect' through her work. This was highly valued by sex workers and key informants alike, as we see here from Vanessa (aged 39, White British) who was street-based, in this account of an assault:

> I want to make a statement with Debbie's[4] support there, so I can look at a face—at a kind trusting face—and say: 'Vanessa, come on, you can do this'.

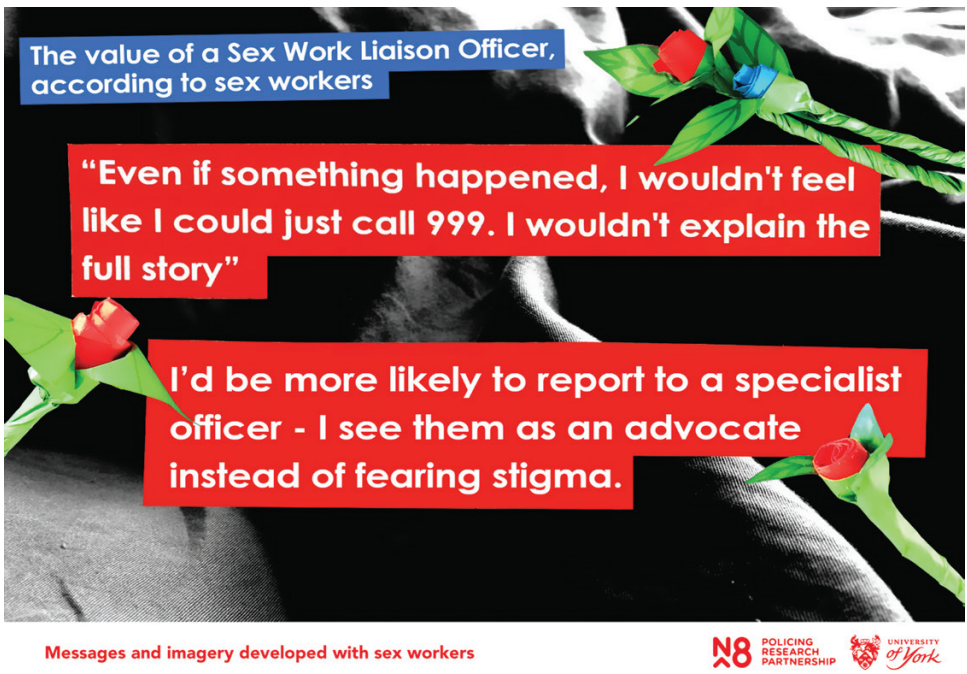

Fig. 2 Key message image co-created with sex workers—The value of a SWLO

4 We have used Debbie as a pseudonym for the SWLO where she was discussed in first name terms. The use of the SWLO's first name by interviewees (especially sex workers) sometimes implied a sense of strong connection; we felt retaining a first name helped convey this.

One of the most often-told stories of close support was the SWLO being present at the birth of the child of a sex worker who was a victim involved in a long and difficult criminal investigation and trial. Police officers and sex workers alike noted how historic abuse towards sex workers and longstanding tensions with police made trust especially difficult, with a public messaging function also evident in the visibility of the role:

> We've got very much a supportive face of the police where it's supposed to be about support rather than being about punishment and enforcement. (Support worker for sex workers)

With fear of stigma being a key context for the SWLO's work as underlined in Figure 2, there are hints here that behind the SWLO as the 'supportive face' of police responses to sex workers, there could be a gap between rhetoric and reality in terms of policing vulnerability (see also Grenfell *et al.* 2023).

Social control functions were core to every aspect of the operation of the role, as articulated by the SWLO: 'it's around helping to encourage sex workers to follow the expectations and rules to do what's necessary to avoid becoming within the criminal justice system'. Both sex workers and key informants noted the role 'softened' enforcement:

> … without the SWLO we'd be banging our head against a brick wall and we would literally just be enforcing. (Police Inspector)

> Years ago, there was no one to speak to or anything, so you would get nicked and that. Now, there's someone there. (Leanne, 41, White British street-based sex worker)

The SWLO played a crucial role in police decision-making; specifically expanding discretionary space on whether people were victims or offenders, often with powerful effects such as neutralizing punitive impulses or triggering victim support, as in this case described by the SWLO:

> When you just took that initial snapshot, she looks problematic. She's got reams of offences against her, where he only… he has a couple and looks like the ideal citizen. But knowing her and knowing her vulnerabilities, and having some interactions with him, I'm able to say, 'actually, he's the problem here'.

Discretion over who was vulnerable (or not) in a context of resource pressures meant that for some sex workers, 'not fitting very well into that victim box, they're going to lose out' (SWLO). Interpersonal dynamics infused police discussions of these challenges, with this Inspector noting frustrations in 'not making a difference' with some women:

> … for some of them they are positive with us. It's just those few problematic ones that cause all the issues all of the time and they're the ones that are really hard to manage. (Police Inspector)

Findings therefore show the benefits and drawbacks of expanding police discretion in relation to vulnerability, which we return to in our discussion.

The SWLO undertook bi-monthly visits to saunas and massage parlours in partnership with specialist sex work support staff. Described as 'welfare visits', observations noted how these sent clear messages about police support for victimization. Visits also helped assist identification of exploitation and trafficking. Framed by police interviewees as 'mapping vulnerability', surveillance aspects were notable:

> …. not necessarily involving any kind of criminality [...] just looking at where our vulnerability lies in the city. And we might have no more interactions with those ladies once they've been mapped'. (Modern Slavery Police Officer)

As evident in observations, the SWLO gave careful consideration of risks to sex workers from police contact via these visits. The principle that these visits were a response to specific concerns ('intelligence'/calls from the public) was deemed important in limiting unwarranted surveillance. For partner agencies, the visits were favourable over the dangers of alternative policing approaches; 'Previously, they'd do raids and loads of police officers would come and they'd take them all out and question them. It's trying to avoid that' (Support worker for sex workers). Some migrant sex workers spoke warmly about engagement with the SWLO that ensued from visits, but other sex workers indicated this made them uncomfortable. The photographing of migrant sex worker identification cards proved especially controversial in discussions. For the police, this assisted speedy investigations of serious crimes; but for sex workers, very real risks from 'anti-trafficking' partnership work between police and the Home Office (Global Network of Sex Work Projects 2018)—which had resulted locally in immigration deportations and detainments—loomed large.

Enforcement agendas central in community safety partnerships produce precarious and life-threatening situations for sex workers (Grenfell *et al.* 2023; Neville and Sanders McDonagh 2017); and these were fundamental to the remit and orientation of the SWLO. Street sex worker interviews underlined how enforcement agendas permeated SWLO encounters, as described here by Vanessa (aged 39, White British, street-based):

> She has caught me a few times [...] working under pressure, when I've had to be working, because I was forced to work extra hours when I didn't want to do it, and get caught and get arrested.

A significant amount of the SWLO's time was spent on multi-agency liaison work to secure closures of premises using anti-social behaviour (ASB) powers, including places where sex workers worked and lived. Her casework priorities were commonly driven by complaints from local residents and businesses, often via a dedicated phone line established by police for residents to raise concerns about street sex workers. One community leader considered the SWLO as crucial in 'navigating the very difficult boundary between the police and the residents', which they saw as 'in opposition'. 'Sweeps' or targeted patrols and the issuing of verbal warnings and fines for soliciting and kerb crawling were also part of the SWLO role, especially when resources were stretched. Police interviewees noted that despite high levels of discretion and the considerable subtleties of the SWLO's work, criminalization remained the defining parameter:

> You're gathering trust and gathering intelligence on one side; then the second side of it, you're actually having to enforce; I think [enforcement]'s an overall role. Debbie's a police officer at the end of the day. (Modern Slavery Police Officer)

> [Police] don't want to be seen to be going too far in terms of supporting an enforcement approach, particularly of women sex workers, for obvious reasons. I think Debbie is obviously going to have that in mind as well, but she doesn't see that as stopping her acting, working with the police officers [...] it's quite a subtle thing of her role. She is a police officer; if she sees a crime taking place, a serious crime, she'd have a responsibility for dealing with that. (Police Chief Inspector)

Significant also was that indoor and online sex workers—those less visible—were not well-served; men not at all.[5] Focus on street-based and indoor migrant workers reflected longstanding community safety concerns: 'We take on the tip of the iceberg, the stuff that raises its head, because it causes someone a problem' (Police Inspector).

The SWLO played an important role challenging local residents who used stigmatizing and offensive language towards sex workers; robustly deploying police powers to tackle community harassment and abuse of sex workers. However, the role further embedded asymmetrical power dynamics that underpin urban community safety partnership approaches to sex work. Situated within wider enforcement and complaint-driven apparatus, at times gestures to vulnerability fell into the background, especially when police were faced with those who 'persistently' breached local enforcement rules:

> We've got a system where we give them a first warning, second warning, a Home Office caution, then once the Home Office caution has come in and they've had nothing in three months, they could have another Home Office caution, but within the three months they do it again, they are coming into a police station for an interview and then they'll be going to court. They know about the rules. (Police Officer, Neighbourhood Team)

As noted in similar spheres such as homelessness, 'the policing of marginality [goes] beyond the police and politicians to encompass the residents and businesses who directly instigate the policing' (Herring 2019: 794–5). We now move to consider impacts of this bridging and blurring of care and control in the SWLO role.

Impact of the SWLO role: protection and peril

A key theme across sex worker interviews was that the SWLO's work sent a clear message that 'being a sex worker does not mean you deserve to be a victim of sexual violence. It is not an occupational hazard' (arts workshop discussion). Both key informant and sex worker participants shared the view that bringing crimes against sex workers into the criminal justice system was beneficial and important, and that the SWLO supported this:

> I didn't want to report it to the police or anything, and then I came down here [support project] and Debbie was here, and after speaking with Debbie that's when I wanted to take it further. (Kat, 37, White British, street-based)

In some cases, trust and respect built by the SWLO had shifted dynamics resulting from historical legacies of hostility, as Emma emphasized (aged 39, White British, street-based):

> Thirty years of my life, I've hated the police. Debbie has changed my perspective on the police. I was brought up in a family that didn't like the police. She has changed my perspective.

Data on crime reporting are notoriously slippery especially in relation to sex work; and when the SWLO role was created, a range of other measures were implemented to improve sex workers' safety locally; but since the introduction of the SWLO role there had been notable increases in sex workers reporting crimes via the NUM sex worker report scheme. In 2012, 0 per cent of just 14 NUM reports in the force area had sex workers' permission to share with

5 Estimating the size of any sex industry is notoriously difficult, but for context, the local sex work support service estimated (at time of fieldwork) over 1,000 people working indoors/online and around 100 sex workers known to them as street-based.

police. This was up to around 50 per cent (of approximately 60 reports) in 2015 and 2016; then dropped to around 30 per cent (of 47 and 24 reports, respectively) in 2017 and 2018, still a substantial increase overall since the role started, from one of the worst positions in the UK for the force in 2012.[6]

As other research has underlined, alongside criminalization, police inaction is a major issue of concern for sex workers (Stardust *et al.* 2021) thus surveillance aspects were not discussed in wholly negative terms as illustrated by Louise (aged 28, mixed heritage British and street-based): 'it makes you know that there's someone out there, basically monitoring you—and not in a bad way'. Sex workers further valued the role for focussing on what they wanted in terms of criminal justice responses. The SWLO was 'open and honest' about reporting processes and provided greater knowledge on legal rights, as Danielle (22, White British) who worked indoors indicated:

> I don't really know what's okay and what's not okay. Especially in terms of the law […] she explained what could happen next if I wanted it to.

Several sex workers noted how SWLO legal information and trust influenced labour conditions:

> You feel confident in telling on somebody else, especially now you know the outcomes. (Leanne, 41, White British, street-based)

> … it's different now because when a customer will ask for his money back, you don't have to give him back. You can call the police and they will say, 'No, you cannot take the money back because if you buy bread, you eat it half and after you want the money back?' [Laughter] That's not possible. (Krista, 25, migrant sex worker, worked indoors)

Rights information from the SWLO could be especially valuable for migrant sex workers who had moved from places with highly repressive policing. Krista felt more empowered in her dealings with police after her engagement with the SWLO: 'They [police] cannot say it's illegal. If they say that you can tell them, "Read the law!"'.

The SWLO role was also considered vital to generating a 'bigger, better intelligence picture' (Chief Inspector), increasing likelihood of identifying and prosecuting those who abuse and exploit others: 'more effective action against the people who are really causing the most harm' (Inspector). SWLO community work was considered 'absolutely pivotal' in trafficking cases (Modern Slavery Police Officer). Several women had made trafficking reports as a result of SWLO visits to indoor premises, with referrals to the national safeguarding scheme (National Referral Mechanism) made up to a year after the SWLO had initially had contact; with some sex workers assisting trafficking investigations. The value of the role in progressing investigations towards conviction came through strongly. Vanessa (aged 39, White British, street-based), for example, felt the SWLO was the lynch pin in her case:

> I'm seeing it through, I'm taking them to court … and I'm getting them put in prison, because I know that Debbie will have my back. Does that make any sense? [...] I will trust them, because of Debbie.

6 The 2017–2018 decline may reflect changes in approach or a monitoring issue. The researchers worked with the police force to help refresh the NUM SWLO reporting pathway. It has not been possible for researchers to access data after fieldwork in 2019; high levels of politicization around the policing of sex work across the force meant the council became extremely cautious about research partnerships on sex work.

The SWLO's work with sex workers taking victim statements was seen as crucial, especially with people with 'additional vulnerabilities' such as women who used drugs:

> … people who would never give statements to us in a million years, and it might take her three or four days of going back every day, but she'll get the statement; whereas we don't have that relationship with them. (Police Officer, Neighbourhood Team)

The SWLO was widely credited as critical in several successful convictions for very serious crimes against sex workers:

> There is no doubt in my mind, in particular with the rape allegation, that that person, that suspect wouldn't have been found guilty at court because she would never have got that far without having the support from Debbie that she'd built-up over many, many months before. (Police Officer, Serious and Complex Crime)

Describing her role as 'softening' traditional investigatory approaches, the SWLO routinely advised police colleagues: 'how they could best work with [sex workers] to get the best evidence, and not go in heavy-handed, and be respectful of some of the boundaries and working relationship that we've created'. One Detective Sergeant saw the SWLO as 'vital' in securing the arrest and subsequent conviction of the perpetrator of a high-profile sex work homicide in 2015, a case which underscored the importance of the role for several participants. The role was described by some (including sex workers) as 'advocacy'; with the SWLO seeing it as 'fighting the case for sex workers within the police'. This was considered a corrective power within the wider criminal justice system which commonly failed sex workers, as one PCSO saw it: 'Justice for women that I think otherwise would have missed out'.

It was notable, however, that the SWLO role had limited effect on a broader longstanding justice gap carved out by criminalization, stigmatization and ingrained institutional hostility to sex workers. Despite positive experiences with the SWLO, deep and enduring mistrust of the police remained the norm. One woman in an arts workshop discussion stated: 'I'd never report to any police' and another added 'if you speak to police, you're seen as a grass, it doesn't matter who the officer is'. Sex workers recalled not reporting violent assaults within a framework of criminalization: 'I wasn't meant to be there in the first place anyway' (Louise, aged 28, mixed heritage British, street-based). Considerable barriers to reporting remained and wider justice system shortcomings led to a loss of faith:

> That statement that I gave about the man breaking my nose […] They couldn't prosecute him, and Debbie didn't know nothing about it. (Kat, aged 37, mixed heritage, street-based)

Kat's case had resulted in no further action (NFA) which overwhelmingly remained the most likely outcome. Quantitative insights showed 86 per cent of the crime reports to the SWLO (78 cases we were able to track from 2014 to 2019) resulted in NFA.

This was a source of pain and frustration for sex workers: 'You hand them the criminals and the criminals go free. Where's the justice in that?' (arts workshop discussion). Although the SWLO worked hard to give sex workers control over and respect within criminal justice proceedings, the less specialist wider system often failed to deliver the same:

> If they're failed by the police or if they're failed through court, then more damage can be done. The criminal justice system itself is really traumatising, everybody knows that, don't they. (Sex work support Service Manager)

Standard access routes to police (not via the SWLO) were not generally considered an option, and certain sex workers would only talk to the SWLO:

> To have to say to them, 'Look, I'm a sex worker and this has just happened', there's a bit of shame in it I think. (Naomi, 21, White British, worked indoors)

> I wouldn't want to talk to anybody else, to be honest. (Beth, 32, White British, street-based)

When trust was limited to the SWLO, investigation opportunities were missed—for example, forensic windows closing when the SWLO was off-duty.

Notably, punitive outcomes had not substantially diminished alongside long-term implementation of the SWLO role. During our fieldwork in 2019, monthly local council bulletins for 6 months in 2019 (Jan-Jun) showed street-based sex workers routinely fined and arrested, with 54 official warnings issued, 18 arrests,[7] 12 Home Office Cautions, 19 'house closures' (evictions) using ASB powers and 30 male purchasers arrested/formally warned. In wider discussion about policing vulnerability, the question of whether sex workers get justice led to some unequivocal responses: 'Do we fuck. We're the last ones to get justice, because of what we do' (arts workshop discussion). One of the three key messages developed through arts workshops (see Figure 3) underlined the shortcomings of the role in terms of the wider justice gap experienced by sex workers.

Fig. 3 Key message image co-created with sex workers—It feels like we don't deserve justice

7 For breaches of Anti-Social/Criminal Behaviour Orders and also failure to attend court.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Investigating the SWLO role as a policing vulnerability intervention reminds us that police interactions with vulnerable and criminalized groups are not simply repressive or supportive but involve 'plural responses' (Marks *et al.* 2020: 58). Empirical findings show how policing has capacity to be compassionate and respectful to marginalized groups such as sex workers, but that this remains exceptional. In amongst longstanding failures in access to justice for certain groups, police are charged with the contradictions of oppressive control models and urgent protection imperatives, now in a context of wider decimation of support infrastructures. Our findings on specialist vulnerability policing of sex work contribute to a wider literature around harm reduction possibilities in policing, exploring how far the police can be allies in pushing forward projects which combat health, social and legal harms to marginalized communities (Armstrong 2017; Campbell 2017; Kammersgaard 2019; Bacon 2022) amidst growing awareness of the harms of criminalization and intense resource pressures (Marks *et al.* 2020). The study progresses understanding about the role of the police in responding to marginalized people at a time when penal responses remain fixed in policy but within a bleak social policy landscape dominated by increasing harms to the most vulnerable.

Findings show how specialist officers hold transformative potential in terms of relational aspects of policing criminalized populations. Sex workers felt the SWLO responded to them with 'respect' and the role fostered space for compassionate, rights-based policing, even supporting empowerment at work in some cases. The officer's role sent a message that crimes against sex workers would be investigated and in a small number of cases the SWLO played a vital part in securing responses to and convictions for crimes against sex workers. Feminist and abolitionist debates continue about whether a conviction represents a 'good outcome' given the criminal justice system's role in punishing and entrenching marginalization, including in relation to violence against women (O'Neill and Jobe 2022), but in the most serious criminal cases—the homicide investigation, for example—it is hard to argue against the SWLO's value in securing the conviction and incarceration of the perpetrator. Specialist roles like SWLOs foster police officers becoming more experienced, knowledgeable, in closer proximity with people deemed as offenders and not blaming people for their situations; all factors which can support less punitive policing (Marks *at al.* 2020; Johansen 2024) and which promote cultural change in policing (Sanders *et al.* 2021; Bacon 2022).

However, the study showed how even in vulnerability policing directly in line with NPCC best practice, there are significant limitations in delivering justice for sex workers. In most cases sex workers did not see their reported cases progress further and experienced harm as a result. Enforcement imperatives crowded out possibilities for a genuinely trusting and respectful relationship with sex workers and, whilst the SWLO role challenged the status quo on the ground, command structures which supported the longstanding justice gap carved out by criminalization, stigmatization and police institutional hostility to sex workers were left unchallenged. Force apparatus continued to sustain and create the vulnerabilities which the SWLO role aimed to mitigate, which might be deemed carceral looping rather than progressive policing. Potentially, the 'success' of the role even allowed the force to direct attention away from significant levels of punitive sanctions against sex workers. Ground-level investigation of care and control therefore revealed more dangerous aspects of vulnerability policing, adding to the literature on the harms of vulnerability-based policing for sex workers (Munro and Scoular 2012; Grenfell *et al.* 2023) and the inadequacies of policing where policy frameworks demand contradictory goals of prohibition alongside 'safeguarding' (Koch *et al.* 2024).

The SWLO study adds empirical depth to concerns about how vulnerability potentially expands coercive power in the name of protection, especially through expansion of discretion

in the policing of criminalized groups. The micro-dynamics of using vulnerability rationales to process sex workers through police systems as victims instead of offenders offered a means of disrupting criminalization. However, there were gaps in rhetoric and reality in policing vulnerability, underlined starkly in the SWLO's role in enforcement action on public nuisance complaints, gathering information that helped shut down premises used for sex work and in 'welfare visits' that some sex workers found invasive or unhelpful. Rather than responding to well-evidenced broader diversity of sex worker vulnerability which includes male, trans, indoor and online sex workers, the SWLO role entrenched focus on street and migrant sex workers. Social justice imperatives were always subservient to public order and community safety approaches; firmly rooted in complaint-led policing which especially harms stigmatized and acutely disadvantaged citizens (Herring 2019). The study adds to work underlining the pressing need for a more clearly defined position on the role and limits of the police in multi-agency working and in society more generally (Crawford 2024).

On vulnerability theory, the study makes an empirical contribution to theoretical work which distinguishes between reactionary and progressive assertions of vulnerability (Oliviero 2016; Gilson 2021). In policing we see how vulnerability invokes what Oliviero (2016: 19) terms reactive assertions and 'reflexes' which are commonsense and instinctual, tending toward 'reactionary outcomes' and obscuring the structural, institutional and historical dimensions of how vulnerability is produced. Drawing on Michel's (2016) notion of 'enunciated vulnerability' rooted in critical race studies, Gilson (2021: 94) notes how in relation to the 'hyper-visibility of objectified, stereotyped bodies', vulnerability is asserted in service of othering rather than to foster empathy or a sense of sharedness; with openness to others and moments of abuse transformed into a state of suffering through regimes of meaning and power. In the SWLO's correctional adjustments for 'non-ideal' victims, for example, we see people being 'polarized' by virtue of their vulnerability (Gilson 2021: 103) within limited accountability and rights frameworks. The study supports other feminist-inspired work on vulnerability as furthering 'carceral protectionism', showing how 'good' women and children deemed worthy of paternalistic protection are 'rescued' through policing vulnerability whilst those less worthy are subject to harsh and traumatizing forms of criminalization; trauma the state then uses as rationale for further carceral protectionism without acknowledgement of its own role in generating (Rodriguez *et al.* 2020: 538). In reactionary vulnerability, making vulnerability visible is a tool for surveillance and control; deepening rather than alleviating harm due to 'dangerous depoliticization' (Gilson 2021: 109).

For Gilson, progressive vulnerability must be political; 'critically attuned to existing power dynamics and their histories' (2021: 109), which in the context of the SWLO role means focus on the policy of criminalization which constrains and contours all police interaction with sex workers; with policing vulnerability approaches risking more and deeper contact with those already over-policed and under-protected. Fleetwood and Lea (2022: 174) contend that specialist policing can support moves towards minimal policing models, but police independence and lack of accountability in multi-working urgently requires addressing to ensure that 'harm problems' are not 'redefined as crime problems' through police being at the front line of service responses to vulnerability. Bringing these dangers into frame opens up questions about whether the benefits of the SWLO role could be delivered by less risky means in quasi-criminalized contexts. Models such as Independent Domestic or Sexual Violence Advisors (IDVAs/ISVAs) illustrate options here. More muscular approaches would involve restriction of police roles in multi-agency work such as through the introduction of a what Fleetwood and Lea (2022: 177) provisionally call a higher-level 'Controller' authority, restricting police autonomy in situations and contexts where police presence is necessary but ensuring police do not encroach into social problems.

Gilson's progressive vulnerability returns us to the drivers of vulnerability; namely criminal and administrative prohibitions of sex work. Although not fully resolving power imbalances, stigmatization and responsibilization, decriminalization enables sex workers to report violence and disputes to all police and not just one officer (Armstrong 2017) and supports the fundamental shift from policing people as 'offenders' towards treating them as citizens with rights (Kammersgaard 2019). Decriminalization also tackles stigma embedded in (arguably minority) public hostilities that harm sex workers in 'community safety' contexts; key drivers of reactionary vulnerability. Progressive vulnerability also takes us beyond criminalization/decriminalization, to the social policy solutions that lie beyond policing; safe and secure housing for all; minimal welfare conditionality in the social security system; an end to the hostile environment; accessible healthcare; improvements to specialist substance misuse and mental health services; addressing intersectional hostilities across all public institutions.

Vulnerability and its governance look very different from perspectives beyond western economic liberal democracies. Although far from ubiquitous, widening diversity of governance techniques associated with vulnerability means fragmented spaces of struggle which urgently need further critical attention due to pace of developments in practice. The English SWLO study underlines that whilst we continue to criminalize activities rooted in social drivers, reactionary vulnerability responses will dominate; with policing vulnerability remaining firmly within the contours of repressive welfarism. Progressive vulnerability policing requires systematic minimization of the harms of enforcement as well as acknowledgement and careful mitigation of the risks that closer police contact entails for sex workers and other over-policed and under-protected groups. Amidst current social conditions in the UK, lessening the harms of insecurity, oppression and violence via policing vulnerability is not insignificant, but allowing this to become the dominant frame for solution-craft is deeply dangerous to marginalized communities.

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