

FLIPPING GENDERED POWER IN COMMERCIAL SEX: WHEN WOMEN BUY SEX IN AUSTRALIA

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Background: Socio-political contexts of sex work are often defined by theories of gendered power, whereby men exploit female victims. This study examined social discourse, and experiences of sex workers and of women who bought sex, presenting new evidence about gendered power in commercial sex.

Methods: The aim of the project is to increase understanding of women buying sex in Australia. A snapshot of social opinion was obtained through a textual analysis of 364 comments by 147 people discussing female sex tourism on an ABC news website. A thematic analysis of interview data from 17 sex workers who service female clients examined the market of female clients, their characteristics and behaviours. An interpretative phenomenological analysis examined data from interviews with 21 women who bought sex. Participants were recruited via social media, relevant organisations, and advertising on online escort advertising spaces. Interviews were conducted over Skype and lasted about one hour.

Results: Similar numbers of commentators said commercial sex is exploitative (n=26) or is work/fair trade (n=25). Sex workers described women who buy sex as a diverse and growing market, engaging all genders for a variety of services. Sex workers felt power to offer, limit and control a service while clients held consumer power to negotiate and receive a service regardless of gender. Buying sex was considered 'empowering' and 'increased confidence' of women who bought sex. Women spoke of being 'in control', stressing that exercising power in commercial sex was easier than in relationships often carrying broader relationship tensions.

Conclusions: Social views on gender power in relation to women buying sex differ markedly. Sex workers and female clients expressed few gender differences in client roles. Power in heterosexual bookings in sex was experienced as a new phenomenon for some women, related to learning to identify and communicate sexual desires and know boundaries to be respected.
