

Between a rock and a hard place

The unseen category of young Roma men selling sex in Oslo and beyond

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Introduction

“I’ve been doing it since I was twelve, going with men. I’m only 20, but I’ve been through so much I feel like 50. I feel like I’m old.”

The quote above is from an interview with Ivan, the first young Roma man that we met during this project. Ivan had been sleeping rough for the past few nights, but you could not tell from his appearance. Dressed in stylish clothing and with a trendy haircut, he looked just like any young man you would see passing down the street in Oslo. However, Ivan was in a desperate situation; he had made hardly any money in the month he had stayed in Oslo, and he was panicking over not being able to send money home to his pregnant girlfriend and their young child. He missed his family terribly, especially since his child recently had a birthday. Ivan had never visited Pro Sentret, or any other service provider for that matter. He had no idea that there was such a place. Ivan was happy and grateful for the modest services we could offer him; a meal, some guidance on where he could find a place to sleep; people to talk to that were nice and non-judgemental. A week after we first met him, he called us up telling us that a client had given him money for a ticket back home to Romania and that he was leaving the next day. He was thrilled.

Ivan’s story is not unique among the young Roma men migrating through Europe selling sex in the hope of a better future. Despite it being a vulnerable group, Roma men and boys are mostly left out of the general discussion on prostitution and human trafficking for sexual purposes. This is perplexing, considering that the group and its strife has been known to European service providers for quite some time. For instance, research has shown that service providers in Northern Europe, now estimate that men from Romania and Bulgaria make up the majority in male street and bar prostitution.¹

¹ Gille C. *Romanians and Bulgarians in male street sex work in German cities*, 2007. Ellison,

This report aims to put focus on a group often overlooked in both public, academic and policy level discourse on prostitution and trafficking. As will be shown, the group is both highly vulnerable, and often subjected, to exploitation and trafficking without being in the searchlight of service providers working in the field.

Method

Women from Bulgaria and Romania now make up the majority of the persons that Pro Sentret and other service providers encounter during outreach in the street prostitution environment in Oslo. In 2016-2017, Pro Sentret made a mapping of persons from Bulgaria and Romania, as a response to what we perceived as a concentration of vulnerability factors within the group such as poor health, illiteracy, extreme poverty and cognitive difficulties.

Prior to this mapping, Pro Sentret had had little contact with men from this group apart from a few male service users from Bulgaria and Romania that identified as gay. Some of these worked in the areas associated with female street prostitution, and they usually dressed in women’s attire when working. During the 2016-2017 mapping² however, some of the service providers consulted, most notably Møtstedet, described having had more contact with more men than women from Romania and Bulgaria that sold, or were suspected of selling sex. The information about the group was sparse, even among the service providers who stated having had contact with it, something that was indicative of the group did not seek out service providers who catered to persons who sell sexual services. Pro Sentret therefore identified a need for mapping the group separately and more in-depth.

At an early state, Møtstedet, the service providers who made Pro Sentret aware of the group in the earlier mapping, were involved in

G, & Weitzer, R. *Young men doing business: Male bar prostitution in Berlin and Prague*. 2017.

² Kock, I. *Vulnerable persons from Bulgaria and Romania who sell sex in Oslo: Experiences from Pro Sentret and other actors in Oslo*. 2017

drawing up a study design. Since knowledge was limited in the staff group at Møtstedet, partly due to an influx of new employees, a workshop was held by Pro Sentret in January to raise awareness on the group. During the workshop, a representative from Pro Sentret and the director of Møtstedet presented knowledge about the group based on both previous experience from Møtstedet and literature on the subject. Members of staff were encouraged to be attentive to the young Bulgarian and Romanian men who visited the centre, observing and mapping their livelihood and life situation.

A follow-up meeting was set up in June, in which the staff group would share their experiences with the group during winter and spring. The results were however meagre: Møtstedet staff had held suspicions that a few young men who visited the centre might be involved in prostitution but were unable to confirm this. Further, in previous years, Møtstedet staff had experienced an upsurge in men in the target group during spring and early summer. In 2018 however, there was no such upsurge.

Initially, the information gathered by Møtstedet was to make up the majority of the material of the mapping. However, since the results were poor regarding the amount of material gathered, the mapping mainly uses other sources.

From about April 2018, a field worker at Pro Sentret worked with establishing contact with men in the target group, as well as mapping the milieu in general.³ The fieldworker used a snowball method; male escorts were asked if they knew any Romanian or Bulgarian men who sold sex. Eventually, three young men in the target group were interviewed for the mapping. Interviews were semi-structured, and were conducted in English, Spanish and Norwegian. In two of the interviews, both the fieldworker and the senior executive officer conducted the interview and in one, only the senior executive officer. All three men received a 750 NOK gift card for their participation.

³ The fieldworker has previous experience of outreach work among men who sell sex to men, and has a vast network within the milieu.

To contextualise the men's narratives in Oslo, we wanted supplement with data from South-Eastern Europe. Therefore, A Dose of Love, a Bulgarian NGO who works with harm reduction among persons who sell sex, MSM and drug users in Burgas, Bulgaria, was involved in the project. Pro Sentret has been consulting with the NGO since 2016 on various topics concerning persons from Bulgaria who sell sex, particularly Roma peoples. In early summer, Dose of Love arranged a group interview with six of their male service users who sell sex. The organisation summarised the results in a report, and their findings have been included in this report.

We have also consulted with the Salvation Army, who runs a centre for persons in the street environment with a focus on Roma people, and Uteseksjonen.⁴ Further, Christoph Gille, a researcher in social work at the University of Cologne, provided insight and guidance on the project.

Men and boys who sell sex to men

Prostitution, both in public and academic discourse, is mostly a phenomenon associated with women and girls. Indeed, most persons selling sexual services are women, but men and boys also make up a significant part of prostitution markets globally. Some researchers have suggested that the market for male prostitution is growing. However, since estimating the actual size of global populations in prostitution is challenging, the assumed growth in this market is difficult to assess statistically.

The clandestine nature of prostitution, often operating on or outside of the margins of legality, severely limits knowledge of it. Estimates as to the size of the prostitution market can thus be both over- and underestimates of the market. Estimates are often based on service providers and authorities self-report, potentially biasing the numbers towards persons who have received services and or have been observed through outreach.

⁴ A municipal outreach service.

The latest estimate of the size of the Norwegian prostitution market was made by research institute FAFO in 2008.⁵ The report estimated that 3057 persons sold sexual services in Norway in 2008 and that 93% were women, 2 % men and 4 % transgendered. No men were registered as selling sex in the street environment; hence the estimate is based on advertisements and service providers.⁶ TAMPEP, on the other hand, estimated that on average 7% of sex sellers in Europe were male in 2009.⁷

Men who sell sex to men (MSSM) are not a homogenous group. As in female prostitution, the market that MSSM operates in is stratified, involves several different arenas and the level of agency for MSSM varies greatly. In much of the literature, prostitution is often divided into street- and indoor prostitution. However, this distinction is likely both misrepresentative and outdated, perhaps especially so when it comes to male prostitution. MSSM solicit clients through websites, dating apps and social media, in bars, clubs, streets, saunas, railway stations. It is important to note that these arenas are not mutually exclusive; MSSM may drift between different arenas or operate on several arenas simultaneously.

There seems to be a consensus in the literature on male prostitution that MSSM overwhelmingly sells sex to other men. Although there is an emerging academic interest for women who buy sex from men, most of the available research involves female sex tourism. Some researchers have referred to this type of tourism as "romance tourism", rather than sex tourism, and the relationship

⁵ Tveit, M & Skilbrei, M. *Mangfoldig marked: Prostitusjonens omfang, innhold og organisering*. 2008

⁶ However, the estimate of the number of sex sellers working indoors is made based on websites that primarily caters to men who buy sex from women. Prior mappings by Pro Sentret shows that male sex sellers rarely operate on these types of websites, instead preferring to advertise in sites designated for MSM and or dating services for MSM.

⁷ TAMPEP. Sex work in Europe: A mapping of the prostitution scene in 25 European countries. 2009

between the (female) sex and the (male) sex seller may be less based on sex, and more on romantic companionship.⁸ In a global overview of male escort websites, however, Kumar et al. found that 11 % of the sites catered to women only, with another 10% catering to heterosexual couples, something the authors argues could be an indication of a growing market for men who sell sex to women.⁹

The Roma: Europe's lost minority

The Roma are Europe's largest minority group. Estimates of the size of the group vary between 7 and 9 million people and out of these; approximately 70 % reside in Central and South-Eastern Europe.¹⁰ Bulgaria, Romania, Macedonia and Slovakia have the highest proportion of Roma, making between 6 and 11 % of the total population.¹¹

The Roma is a heterogeneous group; within the group, there are different clans, languages and religious affiliations. Marginalisation and discrimination of the Roma are however rife, regardless of which country they reside in. In comparison to majority populations, the Roma have a substantially higher poverty ratio. According to the World Bank, 71 % of Roma in Eastern Europe live in deep poverty.¹² There are considerable discrepancies in unemployment between Roma and non-Roma in Bulgaria. Unemployment in the general population in Romania and Bulgaria is 6, 8 % and 10 % respectively. Unemployment within among Roma however, is between 50-90 % in Romania and 76 % in Bulgaria.¹³ The Roma also stands out from the majority populations when it comes to educational levels. For instance, in Romania, 70 % of Roma children were enrolled in primary school

⁸ Bauer, I. L. *Romance tourism or female sex tourism?* 2014

⁹ Kumar, N. et al. *A Global Overview of Male Escort Websites*. 2017.

¹⁰ Ringold et al. *Roma in an expanding Europe: Breaking the poverty cycle*. 2005

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² worldbank.org

¹³ SOU 2016:6. *Framtid sökes: Slutredovisning från den nationella samordnaren för utsatta EU-medborgare*. 2016

by comparison to 93, 5 % of majority populations' children.¹⁴ Illiteracy rates also differ significantly: Only 2-3 % in Romania and less than 1 % in Bulgaria of the general population are illiterate. In the Roma population, however, 21 % of Roma men and 30 % of Roma women are illiterate.¹⁵ In Bulgaria, numbers are lower with 10 % of Roma men and 16 % of Roma women.¹⁶

Although there has been focus on prostitution and trafficking for sexual purposes among Roma peoples in Europe in recent years, it has mainly revolved around women and girls.

In a study of 405 Roma men in an impoverished settlement in Bulgaria, nearly 52 % described having a male partner in their lifetime, and 34 % described having had both male and female partners in the last year.¹⁷ Further, two-thirds of the men who stated that their most recent anal intercourse was with a male partner reported having received some form of remuneration.¹⁸ This is an exceptionally high number. By comparison, the 2010 European Men-Who-Have-Sex-With-Men Internet Survey, only 5 % of the respondents (in Romania, 7 %) reported having been paid for sex in the last year.¹⁹

All the three men we have interviewed self-identify as Roma and come from the same impoverished region in Romanian Moldavia. Their background life situation are to a degree consistent with the general Roma population: a lack of formal education/illiteracy, very limited opportunities in the regular work market in their home country, a lack of formal work

experience, migration and, in the case of Ivan, forming a family at a very young age.

Five of the six men interviewed by Dose of Love in Bulgaria also identified as Roma. Their backgrounds and life situations differ little from the men interviewed in Oslo with one major distinction: While the men in Oslo grew up with their families, several of the men in Bulgaria were brought up in state care. A disproportionate number of Roma children are brought up in institutions due to the poverty and marginalisation of the parents.²⁰ Further, racial discrimination limits the possibility of Roma children in institutions to be adopted.²¹ Growing up in state care, together with low education and other poverty-related factors, is a precursor for becoming a victim of human trafficking.

In the female prostitution market, Pro Sentret and other service providers have seen the diminishing of the street prostitution market in the last decade; those who are able, and have the skills and resources, have started selling sex from the internet. Left in street prostitution are the women who are the most vulnerable, of which a majority now are Bulgarian or Romanian nationals. In a way, the three men interviewed are the male equivalent of the vulnerable Bulgarian and Romanian women.

Although largely missing from public discourse on prostitution, there are indications that the group make up a substantial part of the most vulnerable MSSM, working bars and on the streets. Ellison and Weitzer, in a study of male bar prostitution in Berlin, found that most of the men who worked in bars were Romanians or Bulgarians predominantly of Roma origin.²² The authors state that nationals and more educated male sex sellers resort to selling sex via the internet. Young Roma men, however, often lack the skills and stability to work from the internet, mainly due to poor language skills

¹⁴ Landinfo, Utlendingsenhetens fagenhet for landinformasjon. *Romania: Situasjonen for rombefolkningen. 2014*

¹⁵ SOU 2016:6. *Framtid sökes: Slutredovisning från den nationella samordnaren för utsatta EU-medborgare. 2016*

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Amirkhanian, Y. A. et al. *High-risk sexual behavior, HIV/STD prevalence, and risk predictors in the social networks of young Roma (Gypsy) men in Bulgaria. 2013*

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ The EMIS Network. *EMIS 2010: The European Men-Who-Have-Sex-With-Men Internet Survey. Findings from 38 countries. 2010*

²⁰ D'Arcy, K. & Brodie, I. *Roma Children and Young People in Bulgaria: Patterns of Risk and Effective Protection in Relation to Child Sexual Exploitation. 2015*

²¹ Ibid.

²² G, & Weitzer, R. *Young men doing business: Male bar prostitution in Berlin and Prague. 2017.*

and being functionally illiterate, and therefore resorting to selling sex in bars.

The men and their life situations

Ivan

Ivan is twenty years old. Born and raised in a town in Romanian Moldavia, Ivan describes himself as gypsy. He has four siblings and mother and stepfather in Romania: "My (biological) father is alive, but I do not want contact with him. I was brought up by my stepfather, and I see him as my real dad." The stepfather recently passed away, which was hard on Ivan as they were close.

Ivan also has a family of his own.

Although very young, Ivan and his girlfriend have a daughter together and a second child on the way. His girlfriend does not work, so Ivan is the sole provider for the family. Being away from his daughter is particularly draining emotionally: "It was her birthday a few days ago. It was hard. Not being there."

At the time of the interview, Ivan has been in Oslo for about a month and a half. It is his second time in the country; he first came to Oslo in 2014, i.e. when he was 16. Although young, Ivan has been in transit in Europe since his early teens and prefers not to stay for too long in one place, usually two to four months before returning to Romania. He has lived in Spain, France, UK and Sweden, working various jobs including construction work, carpentry and painting. Jobs are however hard to come by, and he has faced severe discrimination because of his nationality: "I don't say I'm from Romania, but from Spain, UK, Germany... But I'm Gypsy, we are from everywhere. Some say we came from India, but I asked someone who was from there and he didn't know of us."

Ivan lived with a close friend for the first few weeks he was in Oslo. The friend lived in an apartment owned by a Norwegian man who let male sex sellers live there in exchange for sex. Eventually, the friend was told by the homeowner that Ivan had to move out. At the time of the interview, Ivan has been sleeping

rough: "It's horrible, but I slept on the street. I mean it's ok: I'm young; I have two strong arms and legs. And my people (Roma) does this (sleep rough) and I am no better than they are."

Luca

Luca is 28 but looks much younger than his years. A Roma from Romanian Moldavia, he grew up with his parents in abject poverty. Luca does not have a partner or children, but he occasionally sends remittances to his parents. Luca went to school for three or four years: "I learned to write my name, that's all".

In Romania, Luca had held sporadic jobs in agriculture in Romania, but for an illiterate person of Roma origin, finding stable employment is not feasible. Luca first migrated when he was 20 after hearing about Norway from a friend, and he has not migrated to other countries than Norway. He has been in Oslo for about six months, but he has stayed in the city periodically before. Unlike Ivan, Luca has not had a lot of migration experience and has only stayed in Romania and Norway.

In Oslo, Luca lives with a client who, in addition to providing him with a place to sleep, also gives him money for food when Luca is broke. Luca implied that the arrangement is transactional and that Luca gets a place to stay and occasionally food in exchange for sexual favours.

Vasile

Vasile is 28 and has been in Norway on and off for over ten years. He is from Romanian Moldavia and is Roma. Like Luca, Ivan has only migrated to Norway. He was 17 when he first arrived and started selling sex shortly after. Vasile is the only one of the three men that does not specify whether he support his children or other family members. He has five children by different women. One of the children lives in Norway, as he was married to a Norwegian citizen of Roma origin, but he does not have contact with the child due to a conflict with the mother. Vasile used to live with his wife and their child. Now divorced, he moves around between friends. Since he does not have a Norwegian residence permit, he needs to leave the country regularly.

Migration

Of the five men interviewed in Bulgaria, four had had experience of migrating to other countries in Europe. They had often been poorly prepared for their journeys and took very few safety precautions. The motivations for travelling abroad for the five men included making “easy money”, but also finding a boyfriend/husband who would take care of them financially. All the six men interviewed in Bulgaria aspired to migrate to Northern and Western Europe and expected a bright future living and working there. However, knowledge of the law, social attitudes, labour market requirements and living conditions in Europe was minimal, making them vulnerable to fall victims to trafficking, procuring and organised crime.

Gille identified three reasons for migrating to sell sex among his Romanian and Bulgarian informants: *The escape from severe poverty*, the wish for “a little bit big money” and *the flight from a homophobic environment*.²³ All of three of the men interviewed in Oslo can be said to belong in the first category²⁴, while the men in Bulgaria likely belong in the second and possibly third, categories. However, as Gille points out, the reasons are not necessarily constant and can change over the years.²⁵

In comparison to the men interviewed in Bulgaria, the men in Oslo have been in migratory flux for longer. Their aspirations are modest (finding a proper job and housing), and we saw very little of wanting to make “easy money”. The harsh realities; the demands of the European labour market, the living and housing expenses and the racially motivated discrimination, severely stunts any such aspirations.

Regular work

The men interviewed in Bulgaria lacked formal education. Some were involved in criminal

activities and or had been in prison, and only two had any work experience. Of the three men we spoke with in Oslo however, all had work experience outside of selling sex, in both the white, grey and black economy. Selling sex was generally portrayed as a last resource when other work opportunities were scarce.

In Romania, Luca had done some agricultural work, but it was seasonal and surviving on the wages was difficult. Luca previously had a job at a carwash in Oslo. The work was okay, but he worked between 8 am and 8 pm every day of the week. Luca persevered, however, hoping that the job would generate a contract making him eligible for a Norwegian id-number. When this failed to materialise, Luca realised that the owner, a Middle Eastern man, was exploiting him. Since then, gathering bottles and selling sex has been his only income-generating activities.

Vasili had held many jobs outside of sex work in Oslo including in car service and restaurants, of which many were legal, white economy jobs: “I’ve even worked for Oslo Municipality!” He now works (legally) for a fast food restaurant, something he describes as “better than nothing”, but he also experiences discrimination from his colleagues for being Romanian and Roma. He finds this stressing and does not understand why his mainly middle-eastern colleagues feel that he is lesser than they are: “I speak Norwegian well, and they don’t. Yet they look down on me!” The kind of structural racism Vasile describes, of being at the bottom of the pecking order features in all three men’s narratives. Being excluded from the regular labour market was not necessarily only due to a lack of formal education, but to nationality and ethnicity as well. Vasile is discriminated against by other immigrants, despite his language proficiency, solely for being Romanian and Roma.

Ivan told us that he avoided telling potential employers that he was Romanian, often presenting his British driver's license as identification. Ivan has worked in several different sectors in France, Spain, Sweden and the UK. He particularly liked the UK where he stayed for four years; he had a good job, a

²³ Gille C. *Romanians and Bulgarians in male street sex work in German cities*. 2007

²⁴ For Luca, who identifies as queer, migration might be partly motivated by escaping a homophobic environment, but he did not mention this during the interview.

²⁵ Gille C. *Romanians and Bulgarians in male street sex work in German cities*. 2007

place to live and even got a British drivers licence. However, living expenses were too high in relation to wages, something that ate into remittances to his family back in Romania, so he left the UK. After leaving, but before coming to Oslo, Ivan had a brief stint painting houses in Sweden. Ivan describes a hopeless situation of unemployment and discrimination in Romania. He only went to school for five or six years, but he is not illiterate. He is fluent in English and Spanish, and also has a drivers licence, making him the most skilled of the three men we have interviewed. Jobs are scarce, even for people with qualifications, and for Roma with little education, chances for finding employment are minuscule. He describes Romania as a lost cause, partially blaming the country's situation on the people themselves: "When people (from wealthy countries) come to Romania, it's like going to the fifties. Everything is old. Nobody wants to change, work and move forward. I don't understand why people (Romanians) don't want to work hard and change. It's embarrassing." Here, Ivan internalises the idea of Roma (and Romanians) as lazy and fickle, putting the reason for their strife down to individual traits rather than the structures that enable Roma discrimination and marginalisation.

This *individualisation* of the Roma's problems was present in all three men's narratives, but it also held implications for their interactions with countrymen. Luca had no Romanian friends or acquaintances in Oslo, and he held a very negative view of his countrymen in Oslo: "They are bad people. I don't hang out with any Romanians, I don't hang out with people who don't want to work or do criminal stuff. The police stop them a lot and they get arrested. If I'm with them I will be arrested too." Luca says that he gets stopped by the police frequently, and they seem surprised by the fact that he does not have a criminal record. Luca also tells us that the police came to the apartment where he lives to "look for drugs". Whether this was targeted at Luca specifically, or at the owner of the apartment is unclear. However, the police

inspection had no consequence as they did not find any drugs.

According to Ivan, there were many people from his hometown in Oslo; begging, doing street performances, collecting bottles, but he did not interact with them much: "I nod as a greeting maybe, but I don't talk to them much". He does, however, know five or six Romanian men who sell sex in Oslo, and he has a brother who lives in a different Norwegian city.

All the men talk about having a strong work ethos, and that their countrymen (who beg, steal or don't want to work) are ruining chances for hard working and honest people, both in Oslo and back home. All three men place great emphasis on not being involved in criminal activities.

Vasile actively avoids interacting with countrymen who are begging or doing other street work. As with Luca, this is a question of avoiding "guilt by association", of not wanting to be seen with persons who are (potentially) involved in crime.

Selling sex was framed as a way of staying away from crime by the three men. Vasile explains: "When I first came here (to Norway), I was arrested for stealing some stuff. I really didn't want to go back to jail, so I started selling sex to men instead." Like Luca, Vasile also describes that the police frequently stop his friends to ask for identification papers. Vasile however, did not have to show ID, something he put down to the fact that he is fluent in Norwegian.

Although there is no basis for questioning the men's framing of selling sex to stay away from criminal activities; actively staying away from countrymen can also hold implications for managing the double stigma of both homosexuality and prostitution. Portraying their countrymen as "bad", and themselves as hardworking and "good", they frame the staying away from their countrymen as a choice, rendering themselves as active subjects. Mai, in his study of Romanian and Albanian male sex sellers in Italy²⁶, found that

²⁶ Mai, N. *Surfing liquid modernity: Albanian and Romanian male sex workers in Europe*. 2015

his informants emphasised the higher income sex work in comparison to other menial jobs.. Menial jobs were described as “slavery”, and selling sex was a smart way of avoiding it. Gille, in his study of Bulgarian and Romanian male sex workers²⁷, found that one of his informants’ stigma management strategies was to frame sex work as “the last choice” when opportunities for finding work are non-existent, or that the working conditions of available jobs were more exploitative than sex work, something that is more concordant to how the informants of this report framed selling sex. Luca, who worked at the car wash, realised that the job was not going anywhere and that he was exploited, Ivan who liked his job in the UK, decided to leave because he was not earning enough money. He hated selling sex, but the motivation was his family’s well-being: “It’s hard. I hate doing it, but I just tell myself “I’m doing this for my family”. It’s for them.” As shown, actively staying away from countrymen held several implications. One reason was tied to their individualisation of Roma and Romanian’s problems, framing countrymen as “bad” or “lazy”, simultaneously portraying themselves as “hard-working” and having a strong work ethos. Partially related to this, was staying away from countrymen (who were seen as criminals) as a way of staying away from being associated with crime.

Further, although not stated explicitly by the men, was avoiding countrymen as a form of stigma management. We, and other service providers are aware of several cases of harassment and even physical assaults within the Roma and Romanians involved in street work (begging, collecting bottles etc.) targeting countrymen who were suspected of, or identified as having sex with men. This type of harassment has also happened inside of various low-threshold services such as shelters for the homeless, a service that some of the men interviewed would benefit from.

²⁷ Gille C. *Romanians and Bulgarians in male street sex work in German cities*. 2007.

Selling sex

According to research, adolescents and young adult men who sell sex *opportunistically*, tend to be more likely to be homeless, have uncompleted primary and or secondary education, in precarious living conditions and combining selling sex with other (including criminal) income generating activities, in comparison to more professional male escorts²⁸

Castaneda uses *professional* and a *nonprofessional male sex worker* to distinguish between groups of MSSM.²⁹ This distinction acknowledges the diversity within the group, rather than the physical spaces where sexual services are sold. Professional MSSM tends to be more financially secure, independent, and able to exercise more agency in choosing their clients, and are more likely to use the internet for soliciting clients. Nonprofessional MSSM on the other hand, tends to enter prostitution because of poverty and other social circumstances, able to exercise less decision power over clients, and tend to solicit clients in streets, bars or clubs, and to have sex work as a temporary strategy.³⁰ The MSSM who are the focus of this report mainly belongs to the latter category.

Although active on several arenas, Ivan's, Luca's and Vasile's main arena for finding clients is a well-known gay bar in Oslo. The bar has been known to Pro Sentret to be a site for transactional sex for many years, something that is confirmed by other service providers in Oslo.

In addition to selling sex at the gay bar, Ivan also uses the internet to find clients. Ivan does not use any of the designated web pages catering to men selling sex to men, as they

²⁸ West, D. *Male Prostitution*. 1993. Lankenau, S. E. et al. *Street careers: homelessness, drug use, and sex work among young men who have sex with men (YMSM)*. 2015. Ellison, G. *Drifters, Party Boys and Incumbents: The life patterns of male street-based sex workers*. 2017.

²⁹ Castañeda, H. *Structural vulnerability and access to medical care among migrant street-based male sex workers in Germany*. 2013.

³⁰ *Ibid*

have an advertising fee, but prefer using Grindr (a free dating app for MSM) where he has a profile. He also meets clients by “browsing” in central Oslo: “It’s like, I’ve done this for so long, and I can “see” who’s gay immediately. I’ve learned how to read people by just looking at them.”

Luca finds clients by hanging out outside the gay bar or by visiting parks and recreational areas that are known for gay cruising. Luca never mentions working inside of the bar, like Ivan and Vasili does, something that may be to be racially motivated discrimination. Luca, who is small, thin and very dark, may be less welcome than light-skinned Ivan and Vasili.

Vasile started selling sex when he was seventeen. He knew “some Roma” who worked inside a well known gay bar in Oslo, and they introduced him to work. Vasili was introduced to finding clients by “the Roma who worked there”, indicating that there was a Roma milieu in the bar. Through our field worker, we also received information of that “blond Romanians” worked in the bar. We do not know whether this is a different group, or related to the small networks of other men the three men we have interviewed belong to. It is worrying that Ivan and Vasili, who were 16 and 17 the first time they solicited clients in the gay bar; both were allowed into a bar that has an age limit of 20.³¹ Vasili specifically put this down to “being young and good looking”, and that the staff knew he was both underage and selling sex.

Going with men: Sexuality and sexual health

It is important not to confuse sexual practices with sexual identity. The now ubiquitous term Men who have Sex with Men (MSM), was coined in the 1990s to focus on sexual practice, not on sexual identity or orientation.³² This is

³¹ Norwegian alcohol law (Lov om omsetning av alkoholholdig drikk m.v. (alkoholoven) prohibits serving or selling alcohol to anyone under the age of 18 if alcohol level per volume is over 2,5 %, or under 20 if over 22 %.

(lovdata.no)

³² Young, R. M., & Meyer, I. H. *The trouble with “MSM” and “WSW”: erasure of the sexual-*

also translatable to men selling sex to, or buying sex from, men: Straight, gay or bisexual men sell sex to men as well as buy sex from men. Among MSSM in precarious life situations, i.e. in the nonprofessional group, identifying as straight, rather than gay or bisexual, seems to be a consistent trait throughout research literature on the group.

Mai found that his Romanian and Albanian MSSM informants, who identified as straight, distanced themselves from their gay clients (and the stigma of homosexuality) by only being the active part during anal intercourse.³³ Similarly, Gille argues that his Bulgarian and Romanian MSSM informants relate homosexuality to certain sexual practices (i.e. being passive during anal intercourse and active during oral sex), not men having sex with men. Avoiding engaging in these practices (by being active during anal sex and passive during oral sex) enabled the straight MSSM to sell sex to men without risking their identity as heterosexual men. This type of stigma management is by no means specific to Bulgarian and Romanian MSSB. Ellison, in a study of young MSSM in street prostitution in Manchester, observed this behaviour among British informants who were involved in survival sex.³⁴ The behaviour is also observed among the Norwegian young, non-professional MSSM service users of Pro Sentret, particularly among those of Middle Eastern descent.

During the interviews with Ivan, Vasile and Luca, the topic of sexual health and safe sex practice was not discussed at any depth. When the interviewer tried to encourage the men to visit the health clinic at Pro Sentret, all answered that they were healthy and did not need this service. But the men’s lack of knowledge of sexual health sometimes surfaced during interviews, such as in this excerpt from Vasile: “I didn’t have a clue of

minority person in public health discourse. 2005.

³³ Mai, N. *Surfing liquid modernity: Albanian and Romanian male sex workers in Europe.* 2015.

³⁴ Ellison, G. *Drifters, Party Boys and Incumbents: The life patterns of male street-based sex workers.* 2017.

what I was doing, I didn't even know how it was (physically) possible, what (body) parts to use." In the excerpt, Vasile describes his first time (when he was 17) soliciting clients in the gay bar, and it is plausible that his knowledge of sexual health has increased since then. However, it is indicative of the vulnerability of poorly educated, inexperienced boys and young men being outside of their homeland for the first time.³⁵

The (male) fieldworker managed to address the topic of sexual practice more successfully and found that knowledge on sexual health was poor, often lacking knowledge of how STI's are transmitted, for instance, that infection can spread even if you take the active role during anal intercourse. Not using a condom during insertive anal sex has been observed with other vulnerable (often young) male service users at Pro Sentret. Often, the rationale for this is that sustaining an erection with a partner you are not attracted to, is more difficult with a condom. There has also been an increase in demand for Viagra in this group for the same reasons.

However, not using a condom may also have an economic predicament. The men interviewed in Bulgaria stated that they were aware of their risky sexual behaviour, but that they sometimes skipped using a condom because it paid better. The men in Bulgaria also stated that they frequently took part in "group sex parties", because it paid better, something that is worrying from a sexual health perspective.

³⁵ C.f. Castañeda, H. *Structural vulnerability and access to medical care among migrant street-based male sex workers in Germany*. 2013.

Norwegian Penal Code

Section 257.

Human trafficking Any person who by violence, threats, taking advantage of a vulnerable situation or other improper conduct forces, exploits or deceives another person into/for

- a) prostitution or other sexual services,
- b) labour or services, including begging,
- c) active military service in a foreign country, or
- d) consenting to the removal of one of the person's internal organs,

shall be punished for human trafficking with imprisonment for a term not exceeding six years.

The same penalty shall be applied to any person who

- a) facilitates such force, exploitation or deception as specified in the first paragraph by procuring, transporting or receiving the person,
- b) otherwise contributes to the force, exploitation or deception, or
- c) provides payment or any other advantage to obtain consent for such a course of action from a person who has authority over the aggrieved person, or who receives such payment or advantage.

Any person who commits an act as specified in the first or second paragraph against a person who is under 18 years of age shall be subject to punishment regardless of whether the act involved violence, threats, taking advantage of a vulnerable situation or other improper conduct. Any person who was ignorant of the fact that the aggrieved person was under 18 years of age shall be subject to a penalty if he/she may be held to blame in any way for such ignorance.

Section 258. Aggravated human trafficking

Aggravated human trafficking is punishable by imprisonment for a term not exceeding 10 years. In determining whether the violation is aggravated, particular weight shall be given to whether the person subjected to the act was under 18 years of age, whether severe violence or force was used and whether the act generated significant proceeds. Any person who was ignorant of the fact that the aggrieved person was under 18 years of age shall be punished if he/she may be held to blame in any way for such ignorance.

(lovdata.no)

Human trafficking

According to Europol, 70 % of suspected human traffickers in Europe in 2013 and 2014 were EU-citizens.³⁶ Of the suspected traffickers, an absolute majority had their origin in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania or Nigeria.³⁷ Human traffickers tend to recruit their victims in their region, meaning that victims often are from the same region.

Romania and Bulgaria are hotspots for human trafficking.³⁸ Within the Norwegian context, there is also ground for concern; KOM, the Norwegian police coordination unit for human trafficking, report that Romania now is the second largest nationality among identified victims of human trafficking in Norway in 2015, Bulgaria the fifth.³⁹

The Roma are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking. Although exact numbers are unavailable, ethnicity is often not registered; there are estimates by the IOM that between 35, 4 % and 42, 6 % of Bulgarians being trafficked for sexual purposes are of Roma origin.⁴⁰ It is important to point out that the overrepresentation of Roma among victims of human trafficking is related to the group's general vulnerability, rather than to group dynamics and culture. Due to their marginalised status in the home countries, vulnerability factors for human trafficking; including poverty, lack of education and illiteracy, growing up in state care⁴¹, unstable family life and ethnic discrimination, all affect the Roma disproportionately.⁴²

Knowledge of human trafficking of Roma men and boys for sexual purposes is

scarce. Reports generally focus on women and girls; if trafficking of men is mentioned, it generally concerns forced labour or exploitation for criminal activities such as pick-pocketing.

In a 2015 report by the Centre for the study of Democracy, it is noted that a fifth of the identified victims for trafficking for sexual purposes in criminal proceedings in Bulgaria were boys.⁴³ However, these boys were not referred to assistance. Similarly, none of the boys identified as victims in Romania were referred to assistance.⁴⁴ It is worrying that so little attention is given to young male (including boys) victims of human trafficking for sexual purposes in general, and Roma males in particular.

Although none of the men we interviewed appeared to be in a trafficking situation at the time of the interviews, all may potentially have been victims of human trafficking at an earlier point in their lives. Ivan and Vasili both started selling sex as minors. In the case of Ivan, who despite being only 20 has been selling sex for eight years and had a long history of migration within the EU, there are indications of exploitation. Firstly, he did not migrate with parents or guardians, and considering that he started migrating in early adolescence; one must assume that someone facilitated his journey and possibly providing him with false documents to travel. Vasili, who came to Norway to "steal and beg", was "brought" to Norway by fellow Romanians. Considering he was only 17 at the time and had never been outside of Romania, this falls into the legal of definition human trafficking in the Norwegian penal code.

According to Norwegian penal law on human trafficking (see textbox on p. 13), if the victim is under legal age, criteria such as violence, threats or other improper conduct, does not need to be present in order for the crime to fall under the definition.

The case of Vasile, who was brought to Norway to "steal and beg" also point to the

³⁶ Europol. *Situation Report: Trafficking in human beings in the EU*. 2015.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Department of State, United States of America. *Trafficking in persons report*. 2015.

³⁹ KOM. *Rapport fra Koordineringsenheden for ofre for menneskehandel*. 2015

⁴⁰ IOM. *Second annual report 2005*. 2005.

⁴¹ D'Arcy, K. & Brodie, I. *Roma Children and Young People in Bulgaria: Patterns of Risk and Effective Protection in Relation to Child Sexual Exploitation*. 2015.

⁴² European Roma Rights Centre and People in Need. *Breaking the Silence: Trafficking in Romani Communities*. 2011.

⁴³ Center for the study of democracy. *Child trafficking in vulnerable Roma communities*. Center for the study of democracy. 2015.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

pressing issue of victims of human trafficking being exploited in both prostitution and criminal activities. From a societal and state perspective, it is of great importance to acknowledge this. Too often, focus tends to be on the criminal activities and too little on the potential exploitation that lies behind it. This also applies to women and girls, but there is a tendency to misidentify boys and men as perpetrators rather than acknowledging their victimhood.

Between a rock and a hard place: Acknowledging an unseen category

Ivan, Vasile and Luca are stuck between a rock and a hard place, in a situation where they are forced to choose between options that are equally bad; staying in Romania means remaining in a situation of hopelessness and abject poverty, migrating being excluded from the regular labour market and into the exploitative and demeaning black and grey economies.

This type of dilemma is not unique for Roma MSSM, but the reality for the migrants of today leaving their countries in search for a better future, regardless of whether they end up selling sex or not. What is particular to the group of Roma MSSM, is that they are largely missing from discussions on vulnerable people in prostitution or on human trafficking for sexual purposes.

This also holds implications for service provision. As shown, these men did not use either specialised providers such as Pro Sentret, nor did they feel that they could use services such as emergency shelters.

There is no doubt that the group may be helped by a variety of services, including specialised providers such as Pro Sentret. However, the lack of contact with service providers needs to be resolved. Physical outreach in the arenas such as gay bars and

cruising areas may be successful in establishing contact with this group.

As shown, the housing situation among the men was incredibly precarious: Luca stayed with a client, trading a place to sleep and food for sex, Ivan had stayed in an apartment owned by a man who let young MSSM stay there in exchange for sex and had after this slept rough. These types of living situations render the men vulnerable to exploitation. Rents are high in Oslo, hence finding an apartment is rarely a feasible option with the low incomes these MSSM have. Service providers offering shelter needs to increase focus on safety, violence and threats among peer groups, particularly regarding LGBTQI-issues, and actively address homophobia among its guests.

Sexual health literacy in the group appears to be very low. Information on MSM sexual safety needs to be easily accessed for the group, preferably from all service providers that may encounter the group in their services. Due to the indications of unprotected anal and oral intercourse, the group need also to be considered for both Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and Post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP).

In order to work effectively with prevention of both exploitation and sexual health in this group, it is of utmost importance we have well-established relations with service providers in the group's countries of origin to exchange information and experiences.

Lastly, considering the marginalised status and abject poverty of the Roma, the group that this report deals with is not likely to diminish in the foreseeable future. Therefore, urging the EU and other stakeholders to include men in discussions on human trafficking for sexual purposes and prostitution, but also sexual health, in the Roma population is of utmost importance.

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