To: Standing Committee on the Status of Women

Re: Human Trafficking of Women, Girls, and Gender Diverse People

Date: April 17, 2023

From: Sydney Brown

Introduction

I am currently a graduate student at Simon Fraser University researching the risks and benefits of using artificial intelligence in anti-trafficking initiatives by the police. Although my findings have not been published yet, I wanted to share some of the insights from my participants with the committee. As the committee looks for effective approaches to addressing sexual exploitation for the purposes of trafficking, they should keep in mind the impacts these initiatives have on the sex industry. Research has shown female sex workers are disproportionately affected by the criminalization of the sex industry (O'Doherty & Waters, 2019). As part of the project, I interviewed 18 sex workers, 2 academics, and 1 sex worker support worker to discuss their views on the technology and their thoughts on the potential risks and benefits. The majority of my participants were located in Canada, but I also spoke to individuals from the United States of America and England. I specifically studied 3 types of technology: 1) algorithms designed to find trafficking from the wording in escort ads, this includes algorithms designed to flag suspicious wording (i.e. young, or 24/7), and algorithms designed to flag ads that are worded similarly (i.e. to detect multiple ads being written by one person); 2) algorithms designed to flag suspicious escort ad activity, this includes multiple names in an ad, ads being posted, taken down then reposted, ads where all services are similarly priced, ads that change contact information, as well as one person posting multiple ads; and 3) algorithms designed to track cryptocurrency transactions.

Key Findings

My two main research questions were: 1) What are the risks and benefits of using artificial intelligence technology in anti-trafficking initiatives? 2) How could this technology disproportionately affect visible minority and migrant sex workers? My main conclusions include:

- **There is no consensus on whether the technology will be successful.** Each participant was asked whether they thought each of the technologies being studied would be successful at identifying exploitation in the sex industry. Overall, the participants support for the technology was low. Although, there was some support that some of the algorithms could work, the participants did not come to a consensus that any one algorithm would work or that the behaviour they were looking for is suspicious. Participants were asked if they could think of any other reasons why we are seeing this behaviour and I received an array of answers but the majority of participants gave examples of legitimate reasons for each of the behaviours the algorithms flag as suspicious.

- **The participants identified many risks of using AI technology against sex workers to find human trafficking.** When asked about the risks of the technology all (100%) of the participants offered risks they could see being associated with this technology. These include: taking away safer avenues of working, oversurveillance and over policing of the sex industry, criminalizing consensual sex workers, third parties and clients, increasing the chances of being outed, lower trust between sex workers and the police, and many more. Prior research has already shown that taking away online advertising

websites forces sex workers around the world into more dangerous and precarious situations (see Blunt & Wolf, 2020; Scoular et al., 2019; Tichenor, 2020).

- **These risks would disproportionately affect migrant, LGBTQ+ and racialized sex workers.** Twenty participants (95%) thought this technology would disproportionately affect already marginalized groups. Past research has already shown that racialized and migrant sex workers are disproportionately affected by over-policing in the sex industry caused by the anti-trafficking movement (see Beutin, 2017; Butler Burke, 2018; Lam & Lepp, 2019; Maynard, 2018; Millar & O'Doherty, 2020). Further, artificial intelligence has already been found to reproduce the racial bias of those who create it (see Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018; Robertson et al., 2020). As such, participants worried that the racial bias already seen in anti-trafficking police initiatives would be reproduced by these algorithms. LGBTQ+ participants were worried that this would only further marginalize trans and non-binary sex workers, since they are already excluded from the labour market. Without safe ways to support themselves and their families, they will be forced to work in more precarious situations to earn an income.
- **Sex workers did not trust the police use of this technology.** A large majority (81%) of participants felt that the police using this technology would negatively affect the sex industry. Three (14%) participants said they would trust police with it only if it was given to a specialized unit, who understood the intricacies of the sex industry. Only one participant fully supported giving the technology to the police. Participants spoke about the historical mistreatment of trafficking cases by the police and police not understanding the nuances of the sex industry as reasons for their lack of trust. The participants felt that police should only be involved if there is violence or minors involved, and felt that sex workers rights organizations are better equipped to handle exploitation.
- **Not enough is known about the sex industry online and human trafficking to be making this technology**. Both academics interviewed and the 12 (57%) other participants felt that academia does not know enough to be making this technology. Some participants mentioned how anti-sex work some academic research has been which would bias the algorithms further. Algorithms require large amounts of data to train, something that is not available in this case. Although these algorithms would produce an output, participants did not feel like it would produce anything meaningful. As mentioned by one of my participants, "garbage in, garbage out".

Conclusions and Recommendations
- Although these algorithms are made with the best intentions, we just do not know enough about the sex industry and human trafficking to be automating this process. Researchers should work with sex workers and sex workers organizations to ensure that any technology that is created is made ethically. My participants were adamant that any technology is made with meaningful collaboration with those who have lived experiences in the sex industry, including racialized sex workers, LGBTQ+ sex workers, clients, third parties, trafficking victims, and former sex workers.
- More research on the efficacy and the risks of this technology should be done before anyone should use the technology. Police should stop using these algorithms (i.e. Traffic Jam, Spotlight and cryptocurrency tracking) while studies are undertaken to fully understand the impacts these algorithms could have on the sex industry.
- Exploitation in the sex industry should be addressed by working with sex workers and sex worker rights organizations to better understand the issues facing sex workers.

Resources

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