

Women buying sex in Australia: gendered expectations and stigma
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Contemporary sex industry narratives typically depict men buying sex from women. A UNSW project investigated the social context and climate in which women buy sex, and examined sex worker understandings of their female clients and women's experiences buying sex. The context analysis and sex worker study found evidence of a double standard of expected gender behaviour, positioning women as not demanding or desiring commercial sex.

Exploring first-hand experiences of buying sex, this paper draws on semi-structured Skype interviews with 21 women who bought sex in Australia. Participants responded to social media posts and advertisements on adult services websites, resulting in a diverse sample. The study used interpretive phenomenological analysis to explore themes of relevance to the participants.

Stigma was highlighted in several ways as a major barrier for women buying sex. Nine participants expressly noted that their motivations to participate in the study included reduction of stigmatising of women buying sex. Participants felt they experienced greater and different stigma buying sex than men, specifically naming 'slut shaming' and the exchange of money as stigmas affecting women. In contrast, five participants said they largely escaped hostility directed at males who buy sex when commercial sex is considered as exploitative. Two participants were concerned regarding their legal status if sex industry clients become criminalised in the future. Most participants had not disclosed their activities to (m)any people.

Women are not expected to desire commercial sex when performing a feminine role. Expectations that women do not initiate sex, or could easily have non-commercial sex, augment stigma experienced by women who buy sex. Stigmas are multi-layered, experienced in specific ways by women and reflected in a lack of disclosure of buying sex. The effect of stigma in preventing women from speaking about buying sex, renders them invisible in most debates about commercial sex.