

The Cost of Buying Sex

A STUDY ABOUT THE ATTITUDES OF MEN
WHO PAY FOR SEX.



*funded by the Commissioner for Gender-Based Violence
and Domestic Violence*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Malta's first study of men who pay for sex finds that demand rests on a sense of male entitlement to women's bodies. It recommends an abolitionist (Equality) model that criminalises buying sex, not selling it.

THE STUDY

Funded by the Commissioner for Gender-Based Violence and Domestic Violence, the research team interviewed 72 men face-to-face for about two hours each. It used the protocol from Farley et al., (2022)'s six-country study of 763 buyers, so results can be compared internationally. Survey scales were analysed statistically, and open answers through Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

The sample is a convenience sample: half the men were not Maltese, wealthier men were under-represented, and social desirability may have softened answers. Results describe these 72 men only.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Buying is regular and starts young.** 49% buy sex at least monthly, and 42% first did so at 19 or younger. 97% meet women indoors, mostly via escort agencies (66%), massage parlours and hotels (47% each). Online platforms make access easier but less visible.
- **Payment is seen as buying compliance.** Most men endorsed treating prostitution as ordinary business. One said, "she might not want to do it, but she has to say yes to me... as I paid for it." 23.6% agreed they are entitled to do anything they want with a woman in prostitution.
- **Women are dehumanised, demonised or "rescued".** Buyers described women as a "commodity" to "own for that time", or as dangerous and diseased. Others cast themselves as rescuers, which also denies women's agency.
- **Exploitation is recognised but not reported.** 60% met a woman they believed was forced, and 70% had been with a woman who had a pimp. Only 2.9% (two men) ever told the authorities.

- **Preferences are racialised.** 63.9% preferred women from particular countries, at times justified with racist health and cultural stereotypes.
- **Rationalisations conflict.** Loneliness, the “girlfriend experience” and the claim that prostitution prevents rape sit beside shame and disgust. 54% rated harm to the woman above any benefit yet kept buying.
- **Sanctions would deter.** 85% would be deterred by the sex-offender register, 78% by jail or being named online. A €1,000 fine would deter half.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Stop penalising women in prostitution and review the soliciting and related offences.
2. Criminalise the purchase of sex under an abolitionist model, as Sweden, Norway, France and Ireland have done.
3. Hold pimps and traffickers accountable, using buyers’ knowledge of networks in investigations.
4. Fund a national exit programme (housing, income, healthcare, training, legal aid), in place before enforcement and never conditional on testifying.
5. Protection and support services should be established alongside, and where possible before, increased enforcement against pimps, traffickers and sex buyers. Women need to know that leaving prostitution will not result in homelessness, poverty or further vulnerability.
6. Train police and frontline staff to spot trafficking and pimp control, and to treat women as victims not as offenders. The perspectives of women who have exited prostitution should be central to the development and evaluation of Malta’s policies.
7. Expand prevention with young people on equality, consent, pornography and demand. The government has a responsibility to support a decent standard of living for all members of society. No woman should be placed in a position where she must contemplate entering prostitution to survive.
8. Malta should move towards a human-rights-based approach that recognises prostitution as an issue of gender inequality, exploitation and violence against women.
9. Involve survivors in shaping law and services, within a human-rights-based approach.
10. The government has a responsibility to support a decent standard of living for all members of society. No woman should be placed in a position where she must contemplate entering prostitution to survive. Guarantee social protection, and tighten accountability where buyers report links between pimps and officials.
11. Robust policies, laws and regulations, together with regular review mechanisms and appropriate sanctions, should be in place to ensure accountability, safeguard vulnerable individuals and uphold public trust in state institutions.

Future research should add an anonymous survey to reach men unwilling to be interviewed.

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GLOSSARY

Key terms as the report uses them. The report deliberately says “women in prostitution” and “sex buyers” rather than “sex workers” and “clients”, because it treats prostitution as exploitation and violence against women, not work.

Term	Meaning in this report
Women in prostitution/women who are prostituted	Women who sell sex. Used instead of “sex workers” to stress the exploitation and constraint most face.
Sex buyers/men who pay for sex	Men who pay women for sexual acts. Used instead of “clients” or “customers”.
Demand	The buyers’ willingness to pay for sex, which the report sees as what sustains prostitution, pimping and trafficking.
Pimp	A person who controls a woman in prostitution and lives off her earnings. Malta’s Criminal Code criminalises living off these earnings.
Trafficking	Recruiting or moving people by force, fraud or coercion to exploit them, including for prostitution (Criminal Code, Articles 248A and 248B).
Loitering and soliciting	Offering or seeking sex in public. Illegal in Malta, although prostitution itself is not.
Abolitionist (Equality) model	A legal approach that criminalises buying sex, pimping and trafficking, while not criminalising women who sell sex. First adopted by Sweden in 1999.
Decriminalisation	Removing criminal penalties. The report recommends this for women in prostitution only, not for buyers or pimps.
Legalisation	Regulating prostitution as a lawful business. Many buyers in the study favoured it; the report does not.

Term	Meaning in this report
Exit services	Support for women leaving prostitution, such as housing, income, healthcare, training and legal aid.
Entitlement	Buyers' belief that paying gives them a right to sex, and to the woman's compliance.
Dehumanisation	Describing women as objects or commodities rather than people.
Demonisation	Portraying women in prostitution as dangerous, dishonest or diseased, which shifts blame from the buyer.
Victim blaming	Holding women responsible for the harm done to them, for example because of how they dress or drink.
Rape myths	False beliefs that excuse or deny sexual violence, such as "women secretly enjoy forced sex".
Girlfriend experience	Paying for intimacy and companionship as well as sex.
Hostile masculinity	A set of attitudes combining hostility towards women with a desire to dominate them sexually.
Convenience sample	Participants were recruited because they were willing and available. Results describe these 72 men only.
Social desirability bias	Participants giving socially acceptable answers to protect their image , which may soften what buyers reported.
Mixed methods	Combining qualitative and quantitative research designs
Reflexive thematic analysis	The method used to find themes in the interview answers (Braun and Clarke).
Privacy floor	The rule that excluded groups of fewer than five men from comparisons to avoid identifying anyone.

INTRODUCTION

Although prostitution has been researched for many years in its different aspects, this has not been the case in Malta. There have been some studies that have interviewed women in prostitution and service providers. However, these were mainly qualitative and focused on the women's experiences (Borg, 2025; Cremona, 2026; Farrugia, 2024; Sammut, 2020). While this work has been valuable in giving a voice to women who are rarely heard, it has left an important part of the picture unexamined. What intrigued the researchers in this team was a series of studies carried out in Germany, the USA, India, Scotland, England and Cambodia, in which the attitudes of men who pay for sex were investigated (Farley et al., 2022).

These studies shifted the focus of inquiry from the women who sell sex to the men who buy it. Historically, research, policy and public discourse have concentrated on the women involved, often framing prostitution as a problem located in their behaviour, circumstances or choices. The men who pay for sex have, by contrast, remained largely invisible, rarely named in public debate, rarely studied, and rarely held accountable. Far less attention has been given to the demand side, even though it is the demand from buyers that sustains the sex trade. Without men willing to pay for sex, there would be no market for pimps and traffickers to profit from. By asking men directly about their motivations, their perceptions of the women they buy sex from, their attitudes towards violence and coercion, and their awareness of trafficking and exploitation, the international studies provided an evidence base that had previously been largely absent.

A notable feature of this body of research is its use of a common interview protocol across countries, which allows findings to be compared across very different cultural, legal and economic contexts. Despite these differences, striking similarities emerged. Among these were the sense of entitlement that men expressed because they "have paid" the women, the normalisation of trafficking and of women being involved in prostitution, and a deep distrust towards women who offer sex for money. Many buyers acknowledged that the women they bought sex from might have been under the control of a pimp or trafficker, yet this knowledge did not stop them. These themes emerged not only in our study but also in other countries that used the same questionnaire. The consistency of these findings across such varied settings suggests that the attitudes of sex buyers are shaped less by local circumstances than by broader beliefs about men, women and sex.

THE MALTESE CONTEXT

In Malta, as the law currently stands, prostitution itself is not illegal; rather, the law criminalises activities associated with it, including soliciting and loitering for prostitution, living off the earnings of prostitution, and operating or managing a brothel (Criminal Code, Chapter 9; White Slave Traffic (Suppression) Ordinance, Chapter 63). The legal framework also contains specific provisions addressing trafficking and sexual exploitation. Articles 248A and 248B of the Criminal Code criminalise trafficking for the provision of services and, more specifically, trafficking for prostitution, pornography, or other forms of sexual exploitation. Further provisions criminalise the prostitution and exploitation of minors, as well as the inducement of adults into prostitution. The restrictions on loitering and soliciting also reflect broader concerns with public morality and decency.

Although prostitution itself is not prohibited, the range of criminal offences surrounding it creates a complex and, at times, unclear legal framework, the application of which has been uneven. This is particularly relevant given available enforcement data. The Malta Independent reported that, between 2013 and 2022, women outnumbered men among individuals imprisoned in connection with prostitution-related offences (Zammit, 2023). This gender disparity highlights the importance of examining not only Malta's legal framework, but also how it operates in practice.

Research shows that very few women enter prostitution of their own free will or choice; many are drawn in through poverty, previous abuse, addiction, or coercion by a pimp or trafficker. It has also been reported that women's involvement in prostitution is frequently associated with socioeconomic disadvantage, previous abuse, homelessness, substance misuse and coercive or exploitative circumstances (European Parliament, 2023; FiLiA Women First, 2025; Gnaim-Mwassi et al., 2024). It is therefore difficult to justify a situation in which the women are the ones who are sentenced, while the men who exploit them, and the men who pay for them, are not.

Malta is also a small island state with a large tourism industry, a significant migrant population, and a Catholic tradition (Aquilina, 2018; National Statistics Office, 2024, 2026). Each of these factors may shape the local sex trade in particular ways, from the nationalities of the women involved, to the places where prostitution takes place, to the way it is talked about, or not talked about, in public. For the past fifteen years, the subject of prostitution has featured in electoral manifestos, with parties proposing different types of legislation. Proposals such as the one by the Coalition on Human Trafficking and Prostitution (2019) have ranged from decriminalisation to models that criminalise the purchase of sex rather than its sale. Yet these proposals were based on what happens in other countries, not on our local context. Without local evidence about the men who pay for sex, discussions about how Malta should regulate prostitution risk relying on assumptions or on findings from other countries that may not fully reflect the Maltese reality. Findings from other countries may not transfer directly to Malta because of its size, culture, religion, tourism and legal framework. Policy decisions should rest on local data rather than assumptions.

AIMS OF THE STUDY

The present study therefore sets out to explore demographics and answer the research question: What are the personal, cultural, and structural mechanisms, demographic profiles, and underlying ideological drivers that sustain the demand for prostitution?

Its main aims are to explore the attitudes and motivations of men in Malta who pay for sex, to examine how they perceive the women they buy sex from and the harms associated with prostitution, including trafficking and violence, and to compare the Maltese findings with those from other countries that used the same interview protocol.

In doing so, the study seeks to contribute to a more complete understanding of prostitution in Malta and to inform policy, service provision and public debate. The findings will be of relevance to legislators, who are likely to face decisions on prostitution law in the coming years. They will also be useful to NGOs and support services working with women in prostitution and victims of trafficking, to the police and the courts, and to educators working on prevention with young people. Hearing men speak about their own experiences, in their own words, may challenge long-held assumptions about who buys sex and why, and may shift the terms of the public debate.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

The language used to describe prostitution is itself contested, and different terms reflect different positions on the issue. In this report, we use the terms “women in prostitution” and “women who are prostituted” rather than “sex workers”, and “men who pay for sex” or “sex buyers” rather than “clients” or “customers”. These choices reflect the understanding, shared by the international studies on which this research is based, that prostitution is a form of exploitation and violence against women rather than a form of work. We recognise that others use different terms, and we have tried to use language consistently throughout.

Nevertheless, literature reflecting opposing perspectives was included where it converged with elements of the framework adopted in this study, particularly regarding the exploitation and vulnerability experienced by women involved in prostitution. This demonstrates openness to engaging with diverse viewpoints and recognising common ground despite broader ideological differences. The purpose of this study is not to widen the ideological gap but to contribute to the understanding and protection of women who may be at risk of, or subjected to, exploitation.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

This research is also important because the team of researchers undertook a very particular task. There is still a great deal of stigma surrounding prostitution in Malta, and men who were willing to come forward for face-to-face interviews were very hard to find. The three team members who received the calls had to be skilled in responding to callers and in deciding who was eligible. Some callers had to be turned down for different reasons, mainly because they did not meet the study’s criteria.

The interviewers underwent a week of training in Malta delivered by Dr Melissa Farley, who led the international studies. After every interview, the interviewers contacted the team to share their experience, and the team also attended regular sessions with a psychologist to look after their wellbeing. This is mentioned because it is not the usual procedure in research. Listening to men describe the purchase of women, sometimes in graphic detail and with little awareness of the harm involved, can be distressing. This highlights the fact that research on sexual violence is stressful and that emotional support for researchers is needed throughout the process.

STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

The report is structured as follows: the next part presents a review of the literature on prostitution and on men who pay for sex, both internationally and in Malta, to situate this study within existing research and to identify the questions that remain unanswered. This is followed by an account of the methodology, which was shaped in a way that is sensitive to the nature of the subject. The report then presents the main findings, together with a discussion that relates them to the international literature and to the Maltese context. The final chapter concludes and sets out our recommendations for policy and practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review provides a background to the research question: What are the personal, cultural, and structural mechanisms, demographic profiles, and underlying ideological drivers that sustain the demand for prostitution?

Rather than viewing prostitution as a collection of isolated economic transactions, this analysis situates prostitution within broader systems of gendered inequality, focusing specifically on how misogyny and male privilege shape both the desire for and perceived entitlement to sex buying.

STRATEGY FOR THE LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review covers publications from the 1990s to the present to examine the development of sex buying throughout the over recent decades. It consulted academic journals, books, and grey literature. Key search terms such as “women in prostitution,” “sex buyers,” “impact of sex buying,” and “sex buying statistical data” were entered into various databases, including PubMed, Sage, and Taylor & Francis, among others.

PREVALENCE OF SEX BUYING AROUND THE WORLD

This section provides a brief overview of the prevalence of sex buying around the world. Data on sex buying may vary significantly due to differing operational definitions of key terms across studies. Nevertheless, comparing global survey data provides critical insights into the scope and demographic patterns of sex buying.

EUROPE

Significant cross-national variation exists within the region. In the UK, the proportion of men reporting having ever paid for sex increased from 2.0% in 1990 to 4.2% in 2000 (Ward et al., 2005). In Spain, approximately 20.3% of men reported paying for sexual services at some point in their lives, with 15% having done so within the preceding year (Meneses et al., 2018). Furthermore, a survey in Germany revealed that roughly 27% of men reported lifetime engagement in transactional sex (Döring et al., 2022).

UNITED STATES

Population-level data on the general male population remain limited, with research primarily focusing on high-risk key populations (Javanbakht et al., 2018). However, 6.2% of respondents in a study by Thornburgh and Abt Associates (2018) had bought sex within the 12 months preceding the study.

SOUTH AMERICA

Transactional sex buying is relatively prevalent among men, with 7% to 10% reporting annual engagement. This figure rises above 10% among younger men aged 18–24 (Reyes-Diaz et al., 2022).

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Approximately 8% of sexually active men report ever having paid for sex (Hodgins et al., 2022). In Mozambique, past-year prevalence reached 10.4%, with higher concentrations in specific provinces (Baltazar et al., 2021). Conversely, a South African study recorded a lower rate, with approximately 3% of male respondents reporting past sexual encounters with women in prostitution (Jewkes et al., 2012).

ASIA

Regional and age-specific studies highlight stark disparities. Notably, among sexually active male youth in Cambodia, an exceptionally high proportion (82.5%) reported lifetime engagement in paid sex (Dizechi et al., 2018).

AUSTRALIA

A large national survey indicated that 17% of men have paid for sex at least once in their lifetime, while 2.2% reported doing so within the past year (Richters et al., 2014; Rissel et al., 2016). A study in Melbourne found that 12.2% of heterosexual men had paid for sex in the preceding three months, whereas women rarely reported purchasing sex (Chow et al., 2021).

MIDDLE EAST

Carael et al. (2006) conclude that research on sex buyers in the Middle East is scarce. What is known about the Middle East from the Global Slavery Index (Walk Free, 2021) is more concerned with the victims of sexual trafficking rather than the sex buyers. In 2021, an estimated 1.7 million people were trafficked daily in the Middle East and North Africa, with 52% experiencing labour trafficking, including commercial sexual exploitation. Although these numbers concern victims of trafficking, they indicate the demand for sex buying. In Israel, qualitative research indicates that client experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic varied substantially: while some men faced barriers to purchasing sex, others reported unchanged or increased access, mediated by complex dynamics surrounding masculinity and personal relationships (Prior, 2021; Tal-Hadar et al., 2024).

Table depicting a side by side comparison of the prevalence of sex buying around the world

Region	Country / Population	Metric / Timeframe	Prevalence	Citation
Europe	UK (Men)	Lifetime	2.0% (1990) → 4.2% (2000)	Ward et al., 2005
	Spain (Men)	Lifetime / Past Year	20.3% / 15.0%	Meneses et al., 2018
	Germany (Men)	Lifetime	~27.0%	Döring et al., 2022
US	MSM	Recent months	~17.0%	Javanbakht et al., 2018
Africa	Sub-Saharan Africa (Men)	Lifetime	~8.0%	Hodgins et al., 2022
	Mozambique (Men)	Past Year	10.4%	Baltazar et al., 2021
	South Africa (Men)	Unspecified timeframe	~3.0%	Jewkes et al., 2012
South America	General Men / Young Men	Annual	7.0–10.0% / >10.0% (Ages 18–24)	Reyes-Diaz et al., 2022
Asia	Cambodia (Male Youth)	Lifetime	82.5%	Dizechi et al., 2018
Australia	National Men	Lifetime / Past Year	17.0% / 2.2%	Richters et al., 2014; Rissel et al., 2016
	Melbourne (Heterosexual Men)	Past 3 Months	12.2%	Chow et al., 2021
	Melbourne (MSM)	Past 3 Months	6.4%	Chow et al., 2021

PREVALENCE OF SEX BUYING IN MALTA

According to Fenech (2024), the NSO reported that the number of escorts and women in ‘massage parlours’ experienced an increase between 2010 and 2022, while women in prostitution involved in the streets decreased by 87%. The NSO also indicated that only an estimated 5% of those engaged in prostitution are Maltese. It is estimated that 7% of the adult male Maltese population engage in commercial sex (Fenech, 2024)

THE PROFILE OF THE BUYER

Overall, men who pay for women in prostitution represent a heterogeneous group with complex psychological, social, and behavioural profiles shaped by cultural and situational factors (Barnard et al., 1993; Davis et al., 2020; Hammond & van Hooff, 2019; Meneses et al., 2018; Prior, 2021; Tal-Hadar et al., 2024).

Men who engage with women in prostitution come from diverse social groups. When compared to non-sex buyers, male sex buyers tend to exhibit higher levels of aggression, misogyny, hostile masculinity, and psychopathic traits, showing less empathy towards the women involved in prostitution (Davis et al., 2020; Farley et al., 2017). Additionally, sex buyers were more likely than men who did not buy sex to accept rape myths, engage in sexual aggression and report a greater likelihood of committing rape (Farley et al., 2017).

Studies in the UK show that men's motivation to buy sex is often rooted in hegemonic masculinity ideals, but at times also includes desires for intimacy and controlled social interaction. These findings therefore challenge the simplistic view of sex buyers as solely driven by sexual need (Hammond & van Hooff, 2019; Meneses et al., 2018).

Personality traits linked to the Dark Tetrad (narcissism, psychopathy, etc.) may characterise some sex buyers, especially those seeking dominance or novelty in outdoor prostitution settings (Davis et al., 2020). Apart from this, the work of Farley et al. (2011) also found a correlation between mental health challenges and substance use and alcohol abuse among sex buyers. Sex buying, the use of pornography, and sexual compulsivity also correlate with loneliness and emotional disconnection (Farley et al., 2011; Mestre-Bach & Potenza, 2023). Other research, including Diamond-Welch and Kosloski (2020) and Stoltz et al. (2007), correlates adverse childhood experiences with participation in prostitution.

Research indicates several sociodemographic factors associated with men paying for sex. These include being aged 25–34, being divorced or never married, having lower levels of education, residing in urban areas, and reporting a higher number of sexual partners (Misanew et al., 2024; Seidu et al., 2019). Factors associated with paying for sex also included not having a regular sexual partner and being older than 19 years (Rissel et al., 2016; Rissel et al., 2017). Collectively, these patterns highlight that men paying for sex is a prevalent behaviour globally.

It is also important to note that although some of this content explains the buyers' choices, it may also act as a way of rationalising and justifying sex buying in an attempt to refrain from shouldering responsibility (Prior & Peled, 2025; Raymond, 2013).

MOTIVATIONS FOR PURCHASING SEX

The list of motivational factors varies from leisure and sexual satisfaction without commitment to companionship, thrill-seeking, and dominance over women (Dimitrova et al., 2025; Meneses et al., 2018).

Where intimacy and companionship are concerned, the "girlfriend experience" is discussed in sex-buying literature. The "girlfriend experience" is a form of transactional sex where men pay women not only for sexual activity but also for companionship, intimacy, and emotional connection. This type of experience blurs the line between commercial sex and romantic relationships, as buyers often seek affection alongside sexual activity (Chu, 2023; Dominguez & Roe-Sepowitz, 2026; Hammond & van Hooff, 2019; Meneses et al., 2018).

Other literature emphasises issues such as the sex buyers' sense of entitlement. Male sex buyers frame their sexual urges as uncontrollable or biologically driven, thereby justifying and rationalising their involvement in prostitution (Jabbour, 2014; Shumka et al., 2017). Such narratives are underpinned by assumptions about innate male sexuality and the perceived entitlement of men to access women's bodies (Shumka et al., 2017). Additionally, online discussions among sex buyers often reproduced toxic forms of masculinity, normalised violence against women, and reinforced the idea that women are sexually available to men. By portraying sex buying as natural or necessary, these narratives obscured issues of power and entitlement, positioning men's sexual desires as justification for access to women's bodies (Alves & Cavallieri, 2021). These understandings are embedded within broader concepts of male privilege, entitlement, and misogyny (Davis et al., 2020; Manne, 2018, 2020; Schulz & Herrberg, 2026). Sexual scripts further shape the meanings men attach to buying sex and can reproduce hegemonic masculinities that reinforce privilege and misogyny (Bertone & Ferrero Camoletto, 2009; Flood, 2008; Huysamen & Boonzaier, 2015). Consequently, entitlement can facilitate the exercise of power over women in prostitution and contribute to their construction as a commodity (Farley, 2007; Farley et al., 2017; Senent, 2019). As Senent (2019) observes, sex buyers' "anger and resentment arise when their expectations of dominance are not met" (p. 16).

This sense of entitlement fuels racism and discrimination through the creation of stereotypes. Thompson (2022) identifies personal, cultural, and structural dimensions of discrimination, all of which can further victimise women within prostitution. Therefore, they are victimised not only because of prostitution but also because of their race. Additionally, migration status reinforces the discrimination and victimisation experienced by migrant women who are pushed into prostitution. Coşkun (2018) carried out research with Ugandan migrant women involved in prostitution in Turkey. The research demonstrated that restrictive migration policies, limited access to legal employment, poverty, and financial pressures constrained women's choices and contributed to their involvement in prostitution. These findings suggest that migrant women's experiences within prostitution are shaped not only by interpersonal attitudes and behaviours but also by wider systems of inequality. In particular, race and migration status can intensify vulnerability and exclusion through structural barriers that limit access to resources, rights, and opportunities. As argued by Thompson (2022), such experiences are rooted in broader structural and cultural forms of discrimination that perpetuate social and economic marginalisation and, in these circumstances, also sexual exploitation.

THE EXPERIENCE OF SEX BUYING

The experience of sex buyers often presents conflicted rationalisations. Although on the surface sex buyers appear to experience several conflicting rationalisations, these contradictions may be presented with the intention to justify the buying of sex, thereby enabling men to continue purchasing it (Dominguez & Roe-Sepowitz, 2026).

For instance, when the possibility of exploitation of women in prostitution is real, sex buyers still choose to buy sex and victim-blame them (Farley et al., 2017; Menaker & Franklin, 2018). This contradiction is present in literature that places the pimp-prostitute relationship on a continuum from coercion to a collaborative venture, although the literature agrees that a pimp is someone who controls the prostitute and takes a portion of the earnings. The extent of this control continues to be embedded in contradictions (Morselli & Savoie-Gargiso, 2014).

Another contradiction lies in the “girlfriend experience” phenomenon. Although sex buyers claim that this is simply the purchasing of sex, some men also seek genuine intimacy (Chu, 2023; Dominguez & Roe-Sepowitz, 2026; Hammond & van Hooff, 2019; Meneses et al., 2018). This relates to the concept of loneliness, which prompts men to seek intimacy through sex buying, adding to male-privileged stereotypes that encourage men to continue buying sex (Dominguez & Roe-Sepowitz, 2026).

THE VIEW OF THE PROSTITUTE

Misogynistic attitudes toward women in general, not just those in prostitution, are prevalent in society (Farley et al., 2017), with research indicating that sex buyers tend to hold negative views toward women broadly. Sex buyers tend to hold the women in prostitution responsible for the consequences of prostitution while ignoring buyers’ demand, without which prostitution could not exist, as argued by Grönvall (2022). These misogynistic attitudes exacerbate the situation and lead to the dehumanisation of women involved in prostitution (Farley et al., 2017; Keegan & Yonkova, 2018). Furthermore, as highlighted by Senent (2019), “Men know that, in prostitution, they can legitimately request a self-coerced, subservient role of women and enact traditional gender roles without being effectively challenged” (p. 18). This reasoning also allows the buyers to decide who is a victim of trafficking and who is a prostitute choosing to do this because she likes sex or money. Such privilege to decide on such a sensitive issue perpetuates women’s subordination to male expectations, a concept discussed by Manne (2018).

It is interesting to note that research highlights a noticeable reluctance to perceive women engaged in prostitution through the lens of familial proximity (Equality Now, 2018). Empirical findings by Farley et al. (2017) demonstrate that only a minority of respondents endorsed the idea of their daughters working in strip clubs, with sex buyers being significantly more likely to consider this acceptable (23%).

In the study by Keighley and Sanders (2024), some sex buyers recounted encountering women in prostitution under circumstances that suggested they were being sexually exploited. The study also highlighted that, despite these serious concerns, it was uncommon for sex buyers to report such exploitation to the police or any other authority. However, in other studies, some men who purchase sex describe themselves as wanting to support, protect, or even “save” some of the women in prostitution from whom they buy sex. Scholars, however, question whether these claims reflect genuine concern, a paternalistic desire to control women, or simply a way for buyers to rationalise their involvement in and perpetuation of an exploitative system (Keegan & Yonkova, 2018; Keighley & Sanders, 2024).

By contrast, once some of the sex buyers determine that these women are not victims, they choose to demonise them. Sex buyers have been noted to regard women in prostitution as immoral or dangerous, but then they also display reluctance to assume responsibility for their choices. For instance, in Korea, when evaluating condom usage patterns, “Johns” (sex buyers of women in prostitution) reported significantly lower usage rates, positioning them as the least likely demographic among the studied groups to practice consistent safe sex (Jung, 2013). This contributes to the understanding that buyers try to protect their self-image but avoid acknowledging the harm caused by their actions (Prior & Peled, 2025; Raymond, 2013).

ACCESS TO PROSTITUTION

Some countries, including Sweden, have adopted an abolitionist model which includes the criminalisation of sex buying. Despite this having a great impact on the demand, prostitution continues to persist, especially among wealthy and experienced buyers (Grönvall, 2022). This persistence suggests that sex buyers continue to feel entitled to women's bodies, despite the legal sanctions designed to protect women. Therefore, sex buyers' sense of entitlement to access prostitution closely relates to male privilege, misogyny, and patriarchy (Manne, 2018, 2020; Schulz & Herrberg, 2026).

A justification for access to prostitution noted in Farley et al. (2011) was the discourse proposing that if prostitution ceases to exist, then the rate of rape increases. They explained that men rationalise the act of buying sex through similar discourses which perpetuate the idea of male privilege and entitlement (Manne, 2018, 2020; Schulz & Herrberg 2026), by accommodating the sex buyers' demand to access sex whenever and however they want.

When sex buyers feel the need to abstain from prostitution, they do so for their own self-interest (Shively et al., 2008; Ward & Hussey, 2013). Grönvall (2022, 2024) found that sex buyers abstain from recommending prostitution due to concern for themselves, such as personal safety, rather than out of respect or care for the women involved. The same goes for the sex buyers' negative experiences of prostitution, which are motivated by self-interest rather than any consideration for the prostituted woman.

In addition, Montgomery (2008) found that in Thailand's commercial sex trade, child sexual exploitation and adult sex buying overlap significantly, as buyers frequently cross over between both markets without regard to the age of the individual. This pattern reflects entrenched male entitlement, reinforced by self-serving rationalisations that allow men to exert control over vulnerable groups. This indifference, manifested as low levels of empathy toward women in prostitution, also emerged in other studies (Farley et al., 2016; Malamuth & Huppert, 2017).

Lastly, where access is concerned, sex buyers also favour legalisation of prostitution (Farley et al., 2014; Monto & Milrod, 2014). These matters related to ensuring access reflect a sense of entitlement, misogyny, and patriarchy (Davis et al., 2020; Manne, 2018, 2020; Schulz & Herrberg, 2026).

CONCLUSION

This literature review highlights how sex buying is sustained not by isolated individual choices, but by deeply ingrained systems of misogyny and male privilege. Synthesising the prevalence and profile of male sex buyers reveals that prostitution is a widespread, normalised behaviour across diverse demographic strata, anchored by a culturally reinforced sense of men's entitlement to women's bodies. The actual experiences of those inside prostitution, marked by coercion and structural inequality, sharply contrast with the consumer perspective, which frequently degrades and objectifies female providers to justify their exploitation. Ultimately, viewing access to prostitution through the lens of gendered power dynamics reveals that the sex trade functions as both a reflection and a generator of patriarchal dominance, where economic leverage is routinely used to purchase compliance and reinforce male supremacy.

METHODOLOGY

This study was undertaken following the receipt of a grant from the Commissioner for Gender-Based Violence and Domestic Violence. It aimed to answer the research question: What are the personal, cultural, and structural mechanisms, demographic profiles, and underlying ideological drivers that sustain the demand for prostitution?

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study is situated within the pragmatist paradigm, as it integrates two different ontological and epistemological positions, namely positivism and constructivism. Adopting a mixed-methods design, the study combined quantitative and qualitative approaches through an interview guide that incorporated both structured quantitative elements and qualitative components. This approach enabled the collection of complementary forms of data, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the research question. Following the consideration of various data collection methods, the research team opted to use a tool originally developed in 1998 by Farley and her team, which had already been applied in multiple countries where it had produced robust and meaningful results.

DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

Dr Melissa Farley, who had conducted a six-country study (Germany, Cambodia, USA, Scotland, UK, India), interviewed a total of 763 sex buyers (Farley et al., 2022). Several online meetings were held with Dr Farley and the initial team leading the study. Three people were chosen to answer the mobile calls; they were trained on how to receive the calls, what to ask, and how to book the interviewees. Once ethics approval was granted, Dr Farley came to Malta for a week and trained the 10 interviewers, conducting one interview with a sex buyer in the presence of all the other interviewers. The interviewers conducted practice interviews with other interviewees. The interviewers all had an academic background, having completed research at least to the Master's level.

Once the team was confident enough to conduct the interviews, various forms of advertising were adopted to recruit participants. The participants had to be male and to have paid women for sexual practices. We stuck flyers on car windscreens and put up bright red posters in various locations such as bus stops, Paceville, localities where meetings were known to take place, village festas, and concerts. We also featured in local newspapers, on local television, and on social media. We encouraged interviewees to tell their friends, and word of mouth was an important source of referrals. We made sure we had men from all walks of life, backgrounds, nationalities, and ages.

Calls were received on one mobile number, which was diverted to three mobile phones manned by three people. Every call received was logged and given a number (C1, C2, etc.). We asked the following questions: Are you male? What is your age? Have you ever paid women for sexual practices? Give us a name to be used as your identification. Are you willing to do a two-hour in-person interview in a public place? If all the criteria were met, an interview was scheduled. We used two different cafeterias, one in Mosta and the other at the University Hub. On the eve of the interview, the people who had received the calls messaged the interviewees to confirm the appointment. They explained that the interviewer would be wearing a tag reading "Malta Research Team," attached to a bright yellow string.

Interviewees were informed that a two-hour in-person structured interview would be conducted in a cafeteria. We asked for a fake name and promised total confidentiality. A consent form was signed first. Contact numbers of professionals were given to interviewees in case they felt they needed help or wanted to ask further questions after the interview. Nothing was filmed or recorded; everything was written verbatim in front of the interviewee. Fifty euros were given to interviewees after the interview as compensation for their participation.

The interviewers worked on soft copies of the questionnaires. The questionnaires were available both in English and Maltese, and the interviewee chose the language that he found best to express himself in. Interviewees were provided with a hard copy of the questionnaire so that they could follow along closely. Answers were filled in front of the interviewee, and any additional comments were noted in the appropriate spaces. Non-alcoholic drinks were offered to interviewees, and breaks were given when needed.

Once an interview was complete, the interviewer made sure all the questions were properly completed, and a copy was sent to the statistical analyst and to the researcher responsible for the qualitative analysis. The interviewer then deleted their own copy of the interview.

The interviewers held meetings every fortnight to discuss any issues, difficulties, or problems encountered. We also held supervision sessions with a counselling psychologist. These meetings were of utmost importance, allowing the interviewers to unburden themselves and continue the interviews without bias or unresolved anger.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

This section describes the analytical approach used to examine the responses to the data collection tool. The same analytical approach was applied across the tool. Where the tool differed in its response scale or number of questions/statements (referred to as items), the analysis was adapted accordingly.

All analyses were exploratory in nature, without pre-registered hypotheses, and results describe this sample only. No claims are made about a wider population, and effect sizes are prioritised alongside p-values throughout, since statistical significance can be misleading in a sample of this size when interpreted alone.

A. DATA PREPARATION

Each survey was structured in matrix format, with one row per respondent per item. The columns showed the different Likert scale options. The given reply was noted in the column it corresponded to.

The first step was to consolidate the data from all 72 respondents into a master file, one per survey. A Google Apps Script was used to automate this process.

The second step was to carry out data quality checks. Before any analysis took place, the master raw data was checked for structural problems, including the correct number of distinct items (an incorrect number is indicative of errors during the consolidation process), answers falling outside the expected scale range (a wrong entry is indicative of a human entry error), and missing data (a wrong entry is indicative of a human entry error or the respondent not replying). Any such issues would halt the analysis and require acknowledgement and, if required, correction before proceeding, rather than being automatically adjusted or dropped.

The third step was to translate any replies in Maltese to English to facilitate analysis.

The fourth step was to convert the data from a matrix to a long format.

Since several items were worded in the opposite direction to most of the items measuring the same underlying attitude, these reverse-worded items were identified through a content review and reverse-scored before analysis, so that all items pointed in a consistent direction.

Finally, a check was carried out to flag respondents who gave an identical answer to every item. This straight-liner check was applied only where a survey used one consistent scale throughout; it was not meaningful for a survey combining several different response formats within the same item set and was not run in that case.

Where a survey combined several sub-scales with different response formats and ranges rather than a single scale throughout, each item was validated against its own sub-scale's valid range rather than one shared range.

B. DESCRIPTIVE DATA ANALYSIS

For each categorical, ordinal item, the median, mean, standard deviation, and the percentage of respondents who agreed or disagreed were calculated. Items were also examined for how divisive they were, based on the spread of responses and whether opinion clustered at both extremes of the scale or around a single point.

Where a survey combined items with different response formats, descriptive treatment was adapted to the format: binary yes/no items were summarised by percentage endorsement, while categorical, non-ordinal items were summarised by frequency table across their categories.

C. COMPARING PAIRED ITEMS

Where the same underlying measure regarding condom use was asked of the same respondents under two different, directly comparable conditions (with partners, with women in prostitution), a paired comparison was used. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used, and a false discovery rate correction was applied across the set of paired comparisons tested.

D. IDENTIFYING UNDERLYING THEMES

Following analysis at the individual item level, pairs and then groups of items were analysed together. First, Spearman's rank correlation was calculated between every pair of items, a method suited to ordinal survey data.

Then, to establish whether groups of items within each survey were tapping into the same underlying attitude, items that correlated closely with one another were grouped using Ward's hierarchical clustering method. This method starts grouping individual items together in small groupings and continues to identify increasingly broad groupings of related items.

For each of these candidate groupings, Cronbach's alpha was calculated with the intention of identifying internal consistency, i.e., "do these items behave the same?". Because this score can increase simply as more items are added to a grouping, the average correlation between the items themselves was also checked to confirm that a high score reflected genuine agreement between items rather than being an artefact of grouping size.

Groupings that met the reliability threshold (based on both Cronbach's alpha and the average correlation) were accepted as themes, and a composite score was calculated for each theme by averaging each respondent's answers to that theme's items. This was based on the proviso that respondents had answered enough of the theme's items to make the average meaningful.

Groupings that did not meet the reliability threshold were not forced into the analysis.

The above clustering and reliability testing were applied only to item sets without a known structure (i.e. items which were not clearly part of the same 'group'). Two exceptions were handled differently. The first exception is that item sets that repeated the same measure across a small number of pre-defined conditions (relating to condom use with partners vs women in prostitution) were excluded from clustering, since their structure was already known by design rather than something to discover statistically. The second exception was a set of binary items grounded in a conceptual categorisation of the severity of coercion tactic used. Here, composite mean, median and percentile scores were constructed directly from that categorisation (for example, a count of endorsed items, or the highest category reached) rather than through empirical clustering.

E. COMPARING DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS

Demographic characteristics of the survey respondents were used to test whether particular demographic subgroups answered differently to themes. Because the response scales used were ordinal and because the demographic variables all had three or more categories, the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test was used throughout. A false discovery rate correction was applied to reduce the likelihood that differences would appear meaningful purely by chance.

For each Kruskal-Wallis test, an effect size was calculated to show the magnitude of the difference/spread between the demographic's categories. Where a difference across three or more groups was found to be statistically robust, Dunn's post-hoc test identified specifically which groups differed from one another.

Any demographic subgroup with fewer than five respondents (referred to as the privacy floor) was excluded from group comparisons, and this exclusion was noted wherever it occurred, to avoid drawing conclusions from very small groups or identifying individual respondents.

Where a demographic variable was reduced to two categories after the privacy floor was applied, the Mann-Whitney U test was used in place of Kruskal-Wallis, with a corresponding rank-biserial effect size.

Where an item set did not form a reliable theme once clustered, demographic comparisons were run against the individual items directly rather than a composite score of the theme.

F. LINKING ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOUR SCORES

Behavioural measures were correlated against the attitude composite scores. A Spearman correlation was calculated for every pairing of a behavioural measure against an attitude composite, with false discovery rate correction applied across all the pairings tested within each block. Where one of the measures being linked was the categorical, non-ordinal item described above, Kruskal-Wallis was used.

QUALITATIVE DATA

The qualitative results and their analysis were extracted from the sections of the data collection tool that requested the sex buyers to expand their views and experiences. It was conducted using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021; University of Auckland, n.d.). This was deemed the best way to analyse the perspectives of sex buyers given the nature of the research question and the research team's positionality and insider information. The research question was set out to explore the personal, cultural, and structural mechanisms, demographic profiles, and underlying ideological drivers that sustain the demand for prostitution in Malta. Therefore, in addition to the valuable quantitative data, a set of themes addressing the various elements of the research question was required. The team considered other types of data analysis, such as content and discourse analysis; however, the research question was more concerned with the development of themes. This led to the selection of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) as the most suitable method for exploring and addressing the qualitative aspects of the research question. This research team's insider knowledge, grounded in long-standing familiarity with women in prostitution in Malta, enabled the development of arguments and insights that might remain inaccessible to researchers without such contextual understanding. This is consistent with Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021), who regard this component of reflexivity as a strength.

Braun and Clarke's (2021) RTA is a fluid, six-step, interpretive process in which the researcher first immerses themselves in the data to develop early analytic sensibilities, and then creates flexible, meaningful codes shaped by their theoretical position. RTA consists of six steps, namely familiarisation with the data, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition and naming, and the production of the final report. The codes from the data collected were actively gathered and shaped into candidate themes that represent patterned meaning across the dataset, followed by a reflexive phase of reviewing and refining themes to ensure they are coherent, conceptually robust, and distinct. The study generated five master themes, namely: The Buyers' Profile, The Buyer's Entitlement to Sexual Access and Control, Dehumanisation and Demonisation of Women in Prostitution, Conflicted Rationalisations and The Sex Buyers' Entry and Exit Routes.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethics approval was obtained from the Faculty of Wellbeing Research Ethics Committee, and the team started the study once the approval was granted.

Participants were remunerated in recognition of the time and effort required to complete the interview, which lasted approximately two hours. Furthermore, remuneration was provided to support participant retention and minimise attrition considering the complexity of the topic. These and other justifications for remuneration were supported in the study by Abdelazeem, et al. (2022).

As previously noted, the interviews were held in locations that were deemed safe for both the interviewer and the participant. Participants were also provided with the contact details of a psychologist who could offer support if needed, should any aspect of the interview process cause emotional distress or trigger difficult feelings. Furthermore, the research team knew

exactly the time and location of each interview and was available for interviewer consultation prior to, during and after all interviews. These practices are in line with the principle of non-maleficence, where researchers have an ethical obligation to avoid causing harm and to minimise foreseeable risks to participants (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019).

To protect participant confidentiality, all data were pseudonymised, and any identifying information was removed from the transcripts. As a result, participants were not identifiable in any reports or publications arising from the study, in line with the assurances provided in the informed consent process.

Facts were reported as presented by participants to ensure that the study reflects the views of sex buyers. This aligns with Sobočan et al. (2018), who emphasised accuracy in research. We apologise for any distress or offence that this reporting may cause to women in prostitution, other women, or any other individuals. The intention was to present the facts as reported by participants because altering their accounts may inadvertently minimise the realities and needs of women involved in prostitution.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

The most significant limitation of the study was the difficulty in recruiting a heterogeneous group of respondents. The remuneration offered appeared insufficient to attract individuals from wealthier and upper socioeconomic backgrounds, resulting in an underrepresentation of these groups. Another important limitation was participants' fear of being identified by significant others, which may have discouraged participation. In contrast, individuals who were on holiday and foreign nationals working or studying in Malta were more willing to take part, as they felt less likely to be recognised. Consequently, Maltese participants were 50% of the sample, limiting its diversity and representativeness.

Social desirability bias, shame, and sex buyers are three components that emerge in research on sex buyers. They are rooted in discourse that intersects in ways that shape how men publicly speak about their involvement in prostitution. Buying sex is socially stigmatised, and sex buyers often manage their self-presentation by offering accounts that minimise harm, emphasise mutuality, or frame their behaviour as normal and respectable, reflecting classic patterns of social desirability bias (Jonsson, 2023). Shame further intensifies the need for moral protection. Studies show that buyers experience both internal and external shame linked to criminalisation, gendered expectations, and public condemnation, prompting them to construct narratives that preserve a positive moral identity (Vuolajärvi, 2026). These dynamics produce familiar discursive strategies, such as reframing prostitution as consensual, portraying themselves as caring or responsible, and shifting blame onto women. These have all been documented in analyses of online sex-buyer forums where misogynistic, objectifying, and self-exonerating language is common (Jovanovski & Tyler, 2018). Together, social desirability pressures and shame shape a discourse that both conceals stigma and normalises exploitation, allowing buyers to present themselves as morally legitimate while distancing themselves from the harms inherent in prostitution.

Although the group was not particularly heterogeneous, with most participants being foreign workers or students, the discussions remained focused on the local context. Although social desirability bias may have impacted the data, this study remains the first local study that delves into sex buyers in Malta. In fact, most of the local studies available focus on women in prostitution. It therefore generated meaningful insights for policy and practice. Additionally, by integrating quantitative and qualitative methods, the study achieved the breadth and depth necessary to address the research question comprehensively.

CONCLUSION

This part presented the research design and methods of analysis adopted for the study. It also examined the ethical considerations, as well as the strengths and limitations of the research. The following presents the findings and analysis that emerged from the study, highlighting the key themes and insights identified through the data.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the findings and analysis that emerged from the data collection. It starts with the presentation of the demographics of the research participants. Following this, a table presenting the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the RTA is included. Since RTA was conducted within a mixed-methods framework, quantitative data were included in the master and sub-themes presented to provide context, illustrate distribution, or directly integrate the statistical data with qualitative themes. This way of presenting findings bridged the gap between numbers and narrative.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

SPECIFIC CHARACTERISTICS

This section describes the demographic composition of the 72 buyers who completed the interviews. As a convenience sample, this composition describes these buyers only and should not be read as representative of any wider population.

Demographic data were available for 68-72 of the 72 buyers., depending on the demographic variable.

Table 1 presents the demographic breakdown of the sample across nine variables: age band, education level, family income, father's education level, mother's education level, national identity, religion, sexual identity, and number of sexual partners.

Table 1A. Demographic characteristics of the buyers - Age (n=72)

	Age	Number of buyers	% of buyers
1	<25	7	10%
2	25-34	13	18%
3	35-44	27	38%
4	45-54	11	15%
5	55-64	5	7%
6	65+	9	13%

Table 1B. Demographic characteristics of the buyers - Education level (n=72)

	Education level	Number of buyers	% of buyers
1	Secondary	8	11%
2	Post -secondary	28	39%
3	Tertiary	36	50%

Table 1C. Demographic characteristics of the buyers - Family income (n=72)

	Family income	Number of buyers	% of buyers
1	€ 7,000 - € 17,500	21	29%
2	€ 17,501 - € 35,000	26	36%
3	€ 35,001 - € 52,500	13	18%
4	€ 52,501 - € 70,000	7	10%
5	€ 70,001 - € 90,000	2	3%
6	€ 125,001 or more	1	1%
7	LEFT BLANK	2	3%

Table 1D. Demographic characteristics of the buyers - Father's education level (n=72)

	Father's education level	Number of buyers	% of buyers
1	No School	5	7%
2	Primary	12	17%
3	Secondary	24	33%
4	Post-secondary	12	17%
5	Tertiary	15	21%
6	LEFT BLANK	4	6%

Table 1E. Demographic characteristics of the buyers - Mother's education level (n=72)

	Mother's education level	Number of buyers	% of buyers
1	No School	4	6%
2	Primary	12	17%
3	Secondary	28	39%
4	Post-secondary	13	18%
5	Tertiary	14	19%
6	LEFT BLANK	1	1%

Table 1F. Demographic characteristics of the buyers - National identity (n=72)

	National identity*	Number of buyers	% of buyers
1	African	6	8%
2	Asian	6	8%
3	European	17	24%
4	Maltese	36	50%
5	South American	3	4%
6	Dual national identity across two continents	2	3%
7	Rejects national identity	1	1%
8	LEFT BLANK	1	1%
* National identity was recorded at a more granular level and subsequently grouped into broader categories for reporting. African includes respondents identifying as Ethiopian, Nigerian. Asian includes respondents identifying as Indian, Pakistani. European includes respondents identifying as British, Dutch, Finnish, French, German & Polish, Italian, Macedonian, Polish, Serbian. South American includes respondents identifying as Brazilian, Colombian.			

Table 1G. Demographic characteristics of the buyers - Religion (n=72)

	Religion *	Number of buyers	% of buyers
1	Buddhism	2	3%
2	Christianity	42	58%
3	Hinduism	1	1%
4	Islam	3	4%
5	Other	9	13%
6	None	13	18%
7	LEFT BLANK	2	3%
* Religion was recorded at a more granular level and subsequently grouped into broader categories for reporting, to avoid identifying individual respondents from small religious groups. Christianity includes respondents identifying as Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Protestant. The category Other was self-selected by respondents.			

Table 1H. Demographic characteristics of the buyers - Sexual and gender identity (n=72)

	Sexual and gender identity	Number of buyers	% of buyers
1	Bisexual	7	10%
2	Heterosexual	64	89%
3	Transgender	1	1%

Table 11. Demographic characteristics of the buyers - Number of sexual partners (n=72)

	Number of sexual partners	Number of buyers	% of buyers
1	1 – 5	19	26%
2	6 – 10	8	11%
3	11 – 15	9	13%
4	16 – 25	10	14%
5	26 – 50	9	13%
6	51 – 100	7	10%
7	More than 101	10	14%

Looking at the largest categories within each variable, the sample was predominantly 35 to 44 years old (38% of buyers), had a tertiary level of education (50%), had a family income of €35K or less (65%), had parents with a secondary level of education (33% of fathers, 39% of mothers), were Maltese (50%), and Christian (58%), while 26% of buyers had 1-5 sexual partners.

Any demographic category with fewer than five buyers falls below the minimum group size set for this study and is excluded from the analysis stage. This impacts seven of the nine demographic variables: Family income, Father's level of education, Mother's level of education, National identity, Religion, Sexual and gender identity and Number of sexual partners.

FREQUENCY OF BUYING SEX

Just under half of buyers (49%) buy sex from a woman in prostitution at least once a month (Table 2). Another quarter (25%) go once or a few times a year. A further 21% of buyers go less than once a year, went once or twice only or no longer go. Those in the 'Other' section (6%) replied 'not often' (making it difficult to specify frequency) or said they used to go regularly in the past (but are not clear on whether they seek out women in prostitution). Previous research has similarly found that sex buying can be a frequent and repeated practice. In a six-country study, 17% of sex buyers reported purchasing sex once a week or more, while a further 40% reported purchasing sex several times a month to once a month (Farley et al., 2022).

These findings indicate variation in the extent to which participants engaged in sex buying. For some, purchasing sex formed a relatively regular practice, whereas for others it appeared to be occasional or located in the past. Their replies reflect different levels of engagement and different circumstances in which sex buying occurred.

Table 2. Frequency of buying sex from women in prostitution as reported by buyers (n=72)

Frequency	% of buyers
At least once a week	14%
At least once a month	35%
At least once every six months	19%
Once a year	6%
Less than once a year	14%
Only went once/twice	6%
I no longer go	1%
Other	6%

NUMBER OF WOMEN IN PROSTITUTION BUYERS HAVE BOUGHT FROM AND FREQUENCY OF VISITS

The number of women in prostitution that buyers reported having been with varied considerably. While 4% of buyers reported having been with only one woman in prostitution, 24% reported having been with 2–5 women, and 32% reported having been with 6–20 women. A further 24% reported having been with 21–50 women, while 14% reported having been with more than 100 women, with some buyers reporting numbers exceeding 1,000.

When it comes to the number of visits respondents made to women in prostitution, the numbers shift upward due to repeat visits, as per Table 3.

Table 3. Number of women in prostitution visited and number of visits to women in prostitution reported by buyers (n=72)

Women/ visits	% of buyers reporting they have been with [X] women in prostitution	% of buyers reporting they have been with women in prostitution [X] times (denotes repeat visits)
1	4%	4%
2-5	24%	14%
6-10	15%	11%
11-20	17%	25%
21-50	24%	14%
51-100	3%	7%
100+	14%	25%

AGE AT THE TIME OF THEIR FIRST SEX BUYING EXPERIENCE

The age at which participants first purchased sex also varied. Forty-two per cent reported that their first experience occurred at age 19 or younger, while 43% reported their first experience during their twenties. The remaining 15% reported that their first experience occurred at age 30 or later. Thirty six per cent reported that the encounter was also their first sexual experience (Table 4).

Table 4. Age of buyers at the time of their first experience with a woman in prostitution as reported by buyers (n=72)

Age (years)	% of buyers
<15	4%
15-19	38%
20-24	24%
25-29	19%
+30	15%

SOCIAL CONTEXT OF BUYERS' FIRST SEX BUYING EXPERIENCE

The circumstances surrounding this first experience provide further insight into how sex buying was introduced into participants' sexual lives. Seventy-one per cent reported that they experienced their first encounter alone, while 28% reported being accompanied by friends and 1% by a relative. (Table 5)

Table 5. Social context of first experience with a woman in prostitution as reported by buyers (n=69)

First experience with a woman in prostitution happened:	% of buyers
by oneself	71%
with a group of friends	28%
with a relative	1%

Over 80% of buyers said that they paid for their first experience with a woman in prostitution (Table 6). In unclear cases, buyers reported paying an unspecified share of the cost, or that someone in the group had paid without specifying their relationship to them.

Table 6. Person who paid for buyers' first experience with a woman in prostitution as reported by buyers (n=65)

Transaction paid by:	% of buyers
Respondent	82%
Friends	9%
Unclear	3%
Work colleague	3%
Father	2%
Split	2%

These findings demonstrate that first experiences of purchasing sex occurred within different social contexts. For some participants, sex buying was an individual decision, while for others it was introduced or facilitated through social relationships. The presence of friends in almost one-third of first experiences is particularly relevant to understanding the social context within which sex buying may become normalised.

LOCATION OF SEX BUYING

The geographical and physical contexts in which participants purchased sex further illustrate the accessibility of prostitution within the sample. Of the 72 buyers, 36% said they go to a specific locality to buy sex, with buyers mentioning 18 localities: Buġibba (because "there's more Colombians"), Birkirkara, Fgura, Gudja, Gżira, Hamrun, Msida, Paceville, St Julian's, Santa Venera, Sliema, St Paul's' Bay, Swieqi, Marsa, Marsascala, Ta' Xbiex, Valletta, and Xgħajra.

Reasons for choosing these localities varied, including convenience ("because it's close to where I live"), perceived "quality control" ("There are women available in Paceville. Unlike in Gzira, where the women are at the lower end of the available stock"), and distance ("Discreet u il-bogħod mid-dar [Discreet and far from home]").

In a separate question, 97% of buyers reported meeting women in prostitution indoors. Most reported finding women through escort agency websites (Table 7), although it was unclear where these meetings subsequently took place. Almost half reported meeting women through massage parlours and at hotels or guesthouses.

Escort agencies were the most frequently reported indoor setting, identified by 66% of participants. Massage parlours and hotels or guesthouses were each reported by 47%, while strip clubs, brothels and bars were each reported by 31%. Other settings included webcam or online services (30%), private parties (27%), lap-dance clubs (27%), other locations (14%), saunas (9%), karaoke venues (1%) and a drug/crack house (1%). Among those selecting "Other", most reported meeting women at private apartments or houses, including their own or those where the women were staying. As buyers could select multiple responses, these figures reflect the different methods through which they reported meeting women and may include buyers who used more than one method.

Outdoor sex buying was reported by 33% of participants. Among those reporting outdoor encounters, 83% identified a car or other vehicle as a setting, 54% reported streets and 25% reported parks.

Table 7. Indoor locations where buyers meet women in prostitution, as reported by buyers (n=70)

Business/location	% of buyers who meet women in prostitution inside
Escort agency	66%
Massage Parlour	47%
Hotel or guesthouse	47%
Strip club	31%
Brothel	31%
Bar	31%
Webcam or online	30%
Private party	27%
Lapdance club	27%
Other	14%
Sauna	9%
Karaoke	1%
Drug/crack house	1%

The range of locations demonstrates that sex buying occurred across both commercial and less formal settings. It also provides an important link to the qualitative findings concerning access to prostitution. While some participants referred to particular physical locations, others described prostitution as increasingly accessible through digital platforms. Access therefore extends beyond the physical presence of prostitution in particular localities and raises questions about how technological developments have altered the process through which buyers locate and contact women.

BUYERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD SPECIFIC SEXUAL ACTS

Eight items assessed how likely buyers reported they would be to engage in, or experience, a range of sexual acts if assured that no one would know and that they could not be punished, with responses ranging from "not at all likely" to "very likely". Figure 1 shows replies, indicating that buyers are more likely to want to go to a sex club than a strip club (54.2% vs 44.4% said likely or very likely), and more likely to want to engage with a woman in prostitution than have sex with another partner (70.8% vs 41.7%).

It is also interesting to observe how buyers treated engaging in an “unwanted act” differently from rape, with a few more indicating they would likely engage in this if they could be assured impunity (8.3% vs 1.4%). This suggests that the two formulations of sexual conduct were not treated equivalently, with a larger proportion indicating willingness to engage in an act described in less explicit criminal terms.

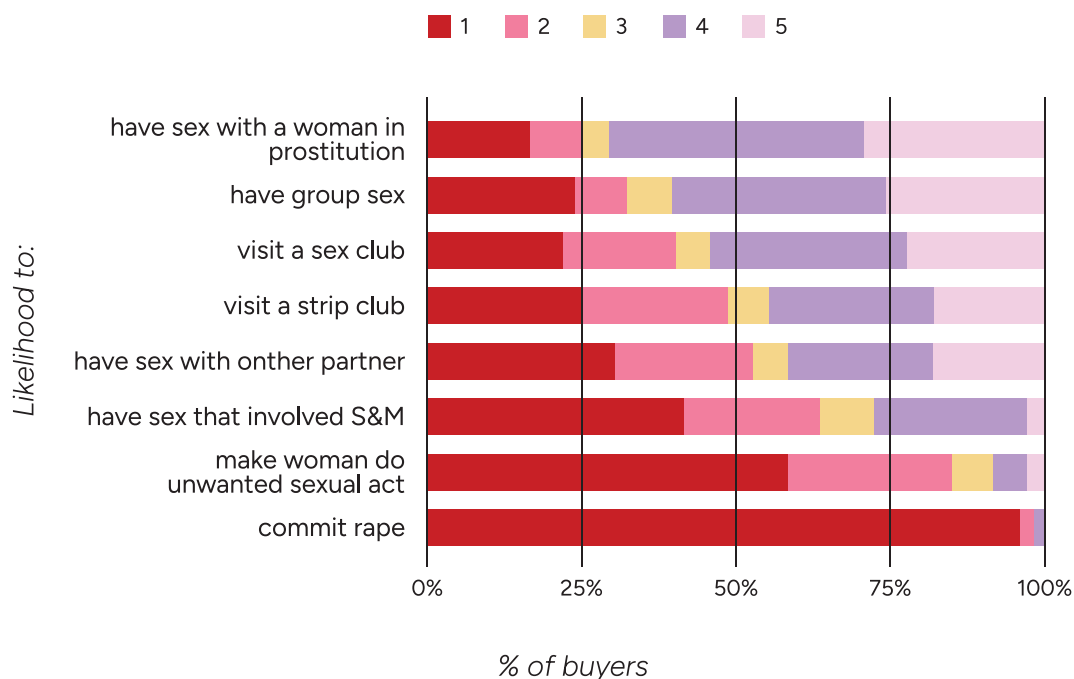


Figure 1. Percentage of buyers who reported being likely to engage in different acts if they could be assured that it would remain secret and unpunishable, ranked by how far respondents lean towards ‘very likely’ (n=72, 1= not at all likely, 5 = very likely).

These acts were grouped together based on similarities in buyers’ replies, with two groupings emerging as per Table 8. The second grouping’s reliability is borderline rather than solid, so it should be treated with more caution than the first, its content is mixed: two consensual-variety items sit alongside one describing an unwanted act happening to a partner.

Table 8. Grouping by likelihood of the buyers engaging in different acts if they could be assured that it would remain secret and unpunishable, as reported by buyers (n=72, 1= not at all likely, 5 = very likely)

Grouping	Likelihood of engaging in/with:	Mean (1-5 scale)	Reliability (Cronbach’s alpha)	Average agreement between the questions in the cluster (1 = questions always move together, 0 = no relationship between them)
Venue/partner variety	Sex club, woman in prostitution, strip club, sex with another partner	3.09	0.85	0.585
Group/kink, incl. an unwanted act	Group sex, S&M, an unwanted act (towards her)	2.42	0.66, borderline	0.4

Rape did not cluster with anything, not because it is conceptually unrelated, but because almost the entire sample rated it “not at all likely” (98.6%), leaving essentially no variation to correlate with anything.

National identity was shown to relate to the group/kink & unwanted act grouping ($p = 0.031$ after correction). Buyers identifying with an African national identity reported the highest score on this theme (median 3.5), buyers identifying as Asian the lowest (median 1.5), with European and Maltese buyers in between (2.67, 2.33). These findings are based on very small subgroups ($n = 6$ each for African and Asian buyers) and should be interpreted as sample-specific patterns, not evidence of broader national-identity differences.

Cross-survey. Both groupings were strongly associated with an attitude measured in a separate module: acceptance of paying for sex (see quantitative measurements for Normalisation & permissiveness, client willingness, and sexual variety in Theme 2). The venue/partner-variety theme showed the strongest association identified in the cross-survey analysis ($\rho = -.68$), while the mixed group/kink theme was also strongly associated ($\rho = -.46$). Both correlations remained significant after correction. Given that the attitude scale ranges from agreement to disagreement, the negative correlations indicate that greater permissiveness toward paying for sex was associated with higher self-reported likelihood across both groupings.

These demographic characteristics provide an initial profile of the participants and are important when considering the findings presented in the remainder of the analysis. However, demographic characteristics alone provide limited insight into how participants became involved in sex buying or how they understood their behaviour. For this reason, the next section presents the sex buyers’ profile that extends beyond the demographic data on specific characteristics and attitudes towards sex buying.

CONDOM USE WITH PARTNERS VS. DURING PAID SEX

This section examines sex buyers’ condom-use patterns across two contexts: with a regular partner and when paying for sex. Six items assessed how frequently condoms were used for vaginal, oral, and anal sex in each context, enabling comparison of condom use by sexual act and context.

A consistent within-respondent difference emerged by context. Across all sexual act types, buyers reported significantly more frequent condom use when paying for sex than with a regular partner (Table 9). This pattern was also reflected in the qualitative data, with M38 describing less consistent condom use with a long-term partner: “If it’s with my long-term partner no, if the anal sex is on me, yes.”

Table 9. Condom use by type of sexual activity and partner, as reported by buyers (n=72).

Sexual act type	% of buyers who said they "Always" use a condom for sex with partner:	% of buyers who said they "Always" use a condom during paid sex:	How consistently condom use shifted between a partner and paid sex (1=full consistency across buyers, 0=no consistent pattern)	p-value, adjusted (p<0.05 suggests the pattern is unlikely to be due to chance)
Vaginal	24.60%	81.70%	0.97	<0.001
Oral	8.80%	38.60%	0.91	<0.001
Anal	32.60%	82.80%	0.88	0.005

Looking at the percentages in Table 9, oral sex stands out as the only act for which "always" using a condom was reported by a minority of buyers, even when paying for sex. In contrast, more than 80% of buyers reported always using condoms for both vaginal and anal sex when paying for sex. Further examination of condom-use patterns (Figure 2) suggests that "sometimes" was relatively uncommon: buyers tended to report either consistent condom use or no use, although this pattern varied by sexual act.

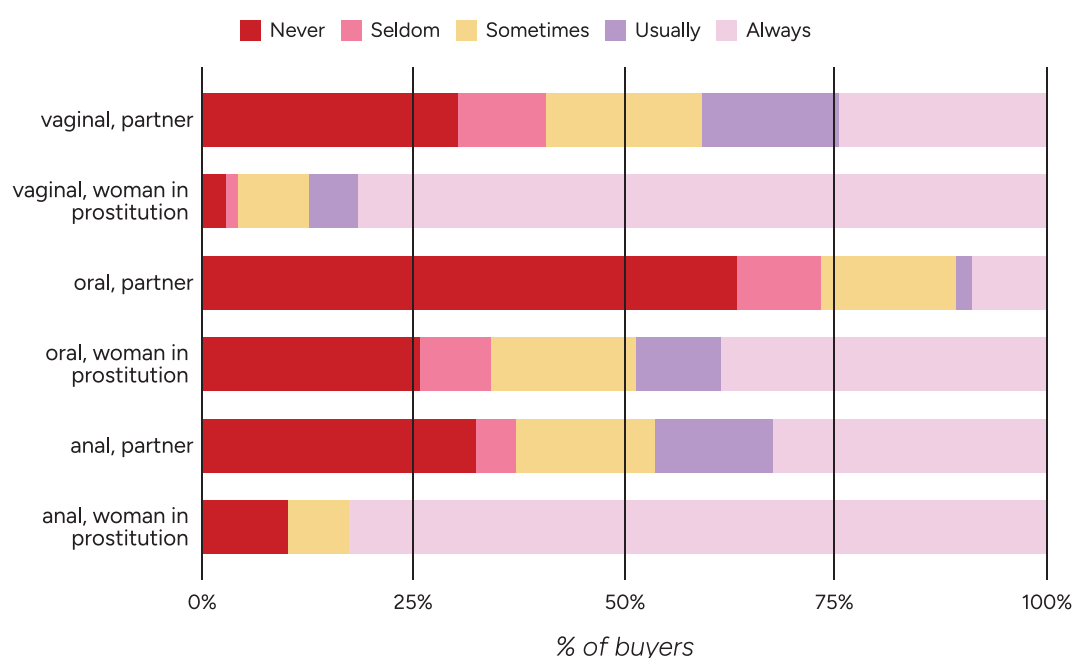


Figure 2. 100% stacked bar showing condom use by act type and type of partner. Excludes 'does not apply' responses (n=varies).

Literature also shows relatively high levels of condom use among sex buyers (Manieri et al., 2013; Rastogi et al., 2014). Qualitative analysis indicated some flexibility around condom use. M65, referring to oral sex, recalled: "Once or twice [referring to the number of times he used condoms to do oral sex] it was taken off. They took it off...and it's a vague memory". Rastogi et al. (2014) similarly point out that factors such as alcohol and drug use can affect condom use.

M45 described repeatedly seeking the same woman in prostitution and not using a condom with her: "Last year's one was always the same. [...] I kept returning to her, and I didn't use a condom." ["Tas-sena l-oħra dejjem kienet l-istess waħda. [...] U bqajt immur għandha u ma kontx nuza condom."]

Although our findings indicate relatively high levels of condom use, this was not universal. The qualitative accounts illustrate varying degrees of condom use across sexual acts and encounters, with use sometimes negotiated, reduced, or absent depending on the circumstances. Thus, high reported levels of condom use should not be interpreted as indicating an absence of sexual health risks within prostitution. The accounts of M65 and M45 demonstrate how condom use may vary in relation to repeated encounters, substance use, and the nature of the sexual act. This highlights the importance of considering not only the frequency of condom use, but also the circumstances in which condoms are not used.

THEMES AND SUB-THEMES THAT EMERGED FROM THE STUDY

MASTER THEME 1: THE BUYERS' PROFILE

M58: *Il-prostituzzjoni teżisti minħabba n-natura bażika tal-irġiel. L-irġiel huma hunters. Fin-natura tiegħu li jrid jehles mil-isperma tiegħu li jekk mhux ħa jsibha fir-relazzjoni tiegħu, anke temporanju, ħa jkollu jfittex mod ieħor. U għalhekk ikollu bzonn is-servizz*

Prostitution exists because of the basic nature of men. Men are hunters. It is in their nature to want to release their sperm, and if they don't find that within their relationship, even temporarily, they will have to find another way. And therefore, they need the service.

This theme is concerned with several sub-themes that include the buyers' history of substance abuse, alcohol and mental wellbeing; the buyers' emotional state; child sexual abuse and sex buying; the sex buyers' access to prostitution and the sex buyers' belief that prostitution is necessary to protect women from rape. Although some of this content explains the buyers' choices, it may also act as a way of rationalising and justifying sex buying in an attempt to refrain from shouldering responsibility (Prior & Peled, 2025; Raymond, 2013).

Sub-theme 1: The Buyers' History of Substance Abuse, Alcohol and Mental Wellbeing

Participants in the study mentioned a history of substance abuse, alcohol abuse and mental health difficulties.

M63: “Back in the day, take a bag of cocaine, if they [women in prostitution] did it. If they didn't do it, I wouldn't. I would always find that out first. Because I wouldn't force myself. I would be on coke myself and a bit drunk.”

Participants mentioned conditions such as borderline personality disorder and depression (M23), autism, ADHD and others (M27), bipolar disorder (M29), ADHD and bipolar (M59), and chronic depression and suicide (M64). This coincides with the work of Farley et al. (2011), who also found a correlation between the use of substances, alcohol and mental wellbeing challenges among sex buyers.

While these accounts locate sex buying within broader histories of substance use, alcohol use and mental wellbeing, participants also described more immediate emotional experiences that they associated with their decisions to purchase sex. Among these, loneliness and the desire for connection were particularly prominent.

Sub-theme 2: The Buyers' Emotional State

The emotional state of the buyer is another theme that emerged from this study, with a majority reporting that they sought prostitution because of issues related to loneliness. M25 reported low self-esteem; M27, M30, M36, M37 and others mentioned that it was loneliness that pushed them towards buying sex. M49 explicitly said, “ix-xewqa li nitkellem ma' xi hadd” [“the wish to have someone to talk to”]. Apart from loneliness, some of the participants were unable to emotionally connect; for example, M52 said, “I don't know, I couldn't step in their shoes”, in response to the question asking how he thought women in prostitution felt.

These findings are also consistent with literature linking sex buying, pornography use and sexual compulsivity with loneliness and emotional disconnection (Farley et al., 2011; Mestre-Bach & Potenza, 2023). In a study of 597 men, 19.4% reported that loneliness was the reason they first visited a prostitute, while 5.4% identified feeling stressed as a reason, suggesting that emotional states can form part of the motivation for paying for sex (Kennedy & Yuille, 2004). Similarly, participants in Dominguez & Roe-Sepowitz (2026) described emotional isolation, loneliness, and strained relationships as influences on their decision to purchase sex.

The findings raise questions about the relationship between the desire for connection and the nature of the encounter being purchased. For some participants, prostitution appeared to offer more than sexual gratification, providing companionship, attention, or a sense of connection (M49). Yet this desire for connection existed alongside difficulties in recognising the emotional experiences of women in prostitution (M52).

This suggests a tension between wanting emotional connection and recognising the person from whom it is being sought. While loneliness may contribute to sex buying, it may also be linked to the expectation that companionship, intimacy, or sexual availability can be obtained through payment. The emotional accounts therefore illustrate how participants understood sex buying in relation to their own needs and experiences. However, some participants also situated their adult sexual behaviour within much earlier experiences, including reported experiences of sexual abuse during childhood.

Sub-theme 3: Child Sexual Abuse and Sex Buying

Some of the participants reported being sexually abused as children. Although not all of the accounts clearly described experiences that would constitute sexual abuse, the buyers themselves referred to these experiences as sexual abuse.

M28: “ *At age 14 years my basketball coach touched my private parts many times in different ways. He was arrested after some years because he did it with many young boys;* ”

M40: “ *Darba meta kont zgħir kien hemm wieħed anzjan - illum mejjet u kien jipprova jagħmel is-sess orali miegħi.* ”

[Once, when I was a child, there was an older adult - he is no longer alive; he had tried to engage me in oral sex.]. ;

M55: “ *Kien is-superjur tal-mużew u l-ieħor kien eks pulizija.* ”

[Once there was the catechism leader and the other one was an ex-police officer.].

M58: “ *A teacher did it, and I kept it to myself. I was still young; I had 10/11, and I understood that if I had to speak about it there would have been negative consequences.* ”

This correlation emerged in other research, including Diamond-Welch & Kosloski (2020) and Stoltz et al.,(2007), who found that adverse childhood experiences are linked to participation in prostitution. These accounts indicate that experiences of sexual victimisation formed part of the life histories of some participants. However, the participants did not indicate any relationship between childhood sexual abuse and subsequent sex buying.

Whereas the preceding sub-themes focus primarily on participants' personal histories and emotional experiences, the following sub-themes shift towards the wider context in which sex buying takes place, particularly participants' perceptions of the availability and accessibility of prostitution.

Sub-theme 4: The Sex Buyers' Access to Prostitution

The subsequent sub-theme focuses on the access to prostitution that exists everywhere in the world and which, according to the participants, has been taken over by the web. Participants argued that access to prostitution is necessary because, as M58 explained: "Il-prostituzzjoni teżisti minħabba n-natura bażika tal-irġiel. L-irġiel huma hunters. Fin-natura tiegħu li jrid jehles mil-isperma tiegħu li jekk mhux ha jsibha fir-relazzjoni tiegħu, anke temporanju, ħa jkollu jfittex mod ieħor. U għalhekk ikollu bzonn is-servizz". ["Prostitution exists because of men's basic nature. Men are hunters. It is in his nature to ejaculate, so if he does not find it in his relationship, even if temporary, he must find another way. That is why the service is needed."] M23 emphasised that access to sex in prostitution has "no limits..... You can cross the line with no repercussions". M25 emphasised that we can never stop prostitution as the "sexual urge in men is too strong". These accounts reflect not only perceptions of prostitution as readily available, but also a belief that men are entitled to continued access to it.

This perceived entitlement to access is closely related to the sense of entitlement, misogyny and patriarchy as discussed above through the work of Manne (2018, 2020) and Schulz & Herrberg (2026). The availability of prostitution can persist despite the legal framework within which it operates. In 1999, Sweden adopted an abolitionist approach that includes the criminalisation of buyers. Nonetheless, Grönvall (2022) noted the occurrence of prostitution, in particular, among more experienced and wealthy buyers who feel entitled to sex buying even when legal sanctions are imposed. Within the present sample, this sense of entitlement was also reflected in buyers' expectations of sexual access across different commercial settings.

Participants also described accessing sexual services through massage parlours and gentlemen's clubs, suggesting that access extended beyond venues explicitly identified as prostitution establishments. They noted frustration when access was not provided readily. Some buyers described strip clubs as spaces centred on visual and sometimes limited sexual interaction. M48, for example, described the experience as "a show. A tease", while M72 expressed dissatisfaction when encounters involved stripping without further sexual activity: "They don't care about anything. They promise, but then when you get to the room they do nothing but only strip".

M32 described contacting a police officer he knew to investigate a massage parlour following a disagreement with a woman when she did not go through with the acts they had agreed on before meeting. M32: "Ċempilt pulizija ħabiba tiegħi, biex jaraw x'inhuma jagħmlu f'dak il-massage parlour. Għax fottietni". ["I contacted a friend of mine, a police officer, to investigate a massage parlour. Because she screwed me over."] M42 described attending a massage parlour where women were topless and provided massage and hand-based sexual services. He also noted that he concealed the full nature of these visits from his long-term partner:

M42: “*Tal-massaġġi. [...] Jinżaw topless u hekk. Tagħmel massage. U idejn biss. Inħoss rilassament fl-istess ħin. Jien kont tajjeb mal-partner. Għaddej minn żmien... Qisek tibred mal-partner. Ili 8 years magħha. Taf li mmur massage imma ma ngħidiliex kollox.*

[Massage parlours. [...] They strip topless and stuff. She does the massage. Hands only. At the same time, I feel relaxed. I was good with my partner. I was going through a time of... It starts becoming stale with your partner. I've been with her for 8 years. She knows I go for massages, but I don't tell her everything.]

M52, meanwhile, drew attention to the advertising of gentlemen's clubs to tourists in Malta, questioning the prominence of such advertising:

M52: “*I was prepared for this question. [Produces a magazine from his bag and shows an advert for a strip club. The magazine, he explained, is distributed to all tourists who arrive at Malta International Airport] First and foremost, they should stop advertising it! In Malta they give you this magazine as soon as you land. They advertise Gentlemen's Clubs [He provided the name of the magazine and the prominent publishing house that issues the magazine].*

M63 provided a more explicit account of sexual services available within gentlemen's clubs, describing different forms of paid sexual activity and separate, dedicated rooms within the venues:

M63: “*There's loads there. [...]Then yeah different ones you can pay a 100 and a little longer and a bit of foreplay. And I know one if you pay 150 you can have sex for 30 min. It happens in the club. This has a separate room for dance. And separate rooms for.... Strip rooms there's a chair. In the others there's a bed/mattress.*

Taken together, these accounts suggest that some buyers understood massage parlours and gentlemen's clubs as connected to a broader commercial sexual marketplace and as avenues through which sex could be purchased, although they do not establish that such venues uniformly provide prostitution. This overlap between venues is also reflected in research examining the relationship between massage parlours, strip clubs and prostitution within the wider sex industry (Holt et al., 2020; Jovanovski & Tyler, 2018).

Overall, participants' accounts depict prostitution as readily accessible through a range of physical venues and commercial settings, with some describing access as a persistent response to perceived male sexual needs. Massage parlours and gentlemen's clubs also emerged as potential avenues through which sexual services could be accessed. The following sub-theme considers how digital platforms have altered how buyers locate, contact and access women in prostitution.

Sub-theme 5: The Changing Accessibility of Prostitution

The way prostitution is accessed has also changed over time, with a significant shift towards online platforms. During the interviews, there were two instances where the interviewees logged into the sites and demonstrated to the interviewer how to purchase sex online. Women who solicit online largely represent growth in the overall prostitution market, rather than simply a displacement of the offline. Whereas accessing prostitution traditionally required knowledge of particular locations or direct engagement with street- or venue-based prostitution, online platforms have reduced the search and transaction costs associated with purchasing sex (Cunningham & Kendall, 2011).

As a result, prostitution may become less visible in public spaces while becoming more accessible privately through digital platforms (Cunningham et al., 2018). This shift is particularly relevant to the Maltese context. While street-based prostitution appears less visible and massage parlours remain more publicly identifiable, online platforms provide buyers with access to a large number of women through a few clicks. Thus, the reduced visibility of prostitution does not necessarily indicate reduced access; rather, access may have become less visible, more private and easier to navigate.

The possibility of accessing prostitution through private settings was also reflected in participants' accounts. M39, for example, described being aware of private parties held at a villa in Wardija, where attendees paid for access to a weekend-long event:

M39: “ *Jien naf nies imorru hemm li huma high in class. Nies tal-parlament u hekk. [...] Hemm villa il-Wardija u every 6 months there's an orgy party. You pay, back then it was 200 euros u għandek Friday, Saturday, Sunday party.*

[“I know people who go there who are high class. People in parliament and stuff. [...] There's a villa in Wardija and every 6 months there's an orgy party. You pay, back then it was 200 euros and you have Friday, Saturday, Sunday party.”]

This changing form of accessibility provides an important context for participants' descriptions of prostitution as readily available. The perceived ease of access is therefore shaped not only by the existence of prostitution but also by the changing mechanisms through which buyers can locate and contact women.

Sub-theme 6: The Sex Buyers' Belief that Prostitution is Necessary to Protect Women from Rape.

Some participants went beyond describing prostitution as accessible or necessary for men's sexual needs and presented it as necessary to protect women from rape. As M52 explains:

M52: “Without prostitution, men are showing more brutality towards women... If prostitution is forbidden, there would be more problems in society. I mean, there would be more rape, as there is a huge need for sex among men. They would do anything to get it, especially those who don't have a partner.”

M49: “Hekk jiġi evitat ċertu ammont ta' rape - jekk hemm il-prostituti, il-bżonn li jkollu r-raġel għas-sess se jhallas għalih, u jkun sodisfatt - allura jekk m'hemmx is-servizz dan jista' jkun li jsir rape fuq mara biex jilhaq il-bżonn tiegħu - allura huwa bżonn li jkun hawn nisa li jagħmlu l-prostituzzjoni biex jiġi evitat ir-rape.”

[Like this, rape would be avoided - if there are prostitutes, the sexual urges a man has could be satisfied by paying a prostitute and he gets satisfied - if prostitution is not available rape may happen to women so that men can fulfil his sexual urges. So there needs to be women who do prostitution, so rape is avoided.]

These accounts frame prostitution as a mechanism for managing men's sexual urges and, in doing so, position women's sexual availability as a means of preventing men from sexually violating other women. Such reasoning shifts attention away from men's responsibility to regulate their own sexual behaviour and instead constructs prostitution as a necessary outlet for male sexual demand. Farley et al. (2011) similarly identified how men rationalise and justify the purchase of sex, including through narratives that normalise male sexual entitlement.

This can be understood in terms of male privilege and entitlement (Manne, 2018, 2020; Schulz & Herrberg, 2026), whereby men's sexual needs are treated as requiring accommodation, while women's bodies become positioned as a resource through which those needs can be managed. In this sense, presenting prostitution as necessary to prevent rape not only normalises sex buying but also obscures men's responsibility for preventing sexual violence.

Jovanovski and Tyler (2018) provide a relevant counterpoint to the narrative that prostitution is needed to avoid rape. In their analysis of 148 sex-buyer reviews of women in licensed brothels and 2,424 reply posts, buyers constructed and normalised narratives of sexual violation, including references to rape. The findings therefore illustrate that access to commercial sex does not necessarily preclude the expression of rape-related and sexually violent attitudes, challenging the assumption that prostitution serves as a safeguard against rape.

Therefore, these accounts also raise important questions about the forms of violence that women in prostitution are expected to endure within this logic. By presenting prostitution as a necessary outlet for men who might otherwise rape women, participants implicitly position women in prostitution as the ones who are expected to absorb and satisfy men's sexual urges, including violent ones. This framing reveals the gendered nature of the violence involved: the protection of women from rape is imagined as dependent upon the sexual availability of other women. As such, these accounts not only normalise male sexual entitlement but also expose the extent to which women in prostitution may be expected to endure unwanted, coercive, or potentially violent sexual encounters in order to satisfy men's perceived sexual needs.

MASTER THEME 2: THE BUYER'S ENTITLEMENT TO SEXUAL ACCESS AND CONTROL

M32: "I am a man, I have high testosterone."

This theme comprises several sub-themes that include the normalisation and legalisation of prostitution as perceived by the buyers; the sense of entitlement to sexual access; and racialised entitlement, racism and discrimination. The analysis of the empirical findings demonstrates how sex buyers understand and justify their paid sexual encounters through ideas of male privilege and buyers' entitlement. Bringing together buyers' accounts with the quantitative findings suggests that sex buying not only extends far beyond the physical act, but also reinforces patriarchal authority, objectification and control over women. The findings further suggest that although men who buy sex do not initially label sex buying as a mutual interpersonal engagement, they describe the act of sex buying in a way in which male sexual desires are prioritised while women's agency is diminished.

Sub-theme 1: Normalisation and Legalisation of Prostitution

Some buyers referred to prostitution as a normalised activity, with one buyer claiming that prostitution is “L-izjed professjoni antika tad-dinja.” [“The oldest profession in the world”], further explaining that he wanted to speak to the minister to legalise it, “Infatti ridt inkellem ministru biex tigi legalizzata.” [“In fact, I wanted to speak to the minister to have it legalised.”]. Even though participants referred to prostitution as a “profession,” they did not understand it in the same way as other professions, such as medicine or social work, but instead compared it to the act of just having “bought something” (M58). Instead, their accounts reduced the interaction to a transaction, “I mean, if you pay, they should do everything” (M52). This perception suggests that the woman is treated less as a professional with boundaries and more as an object or service that can be purchased. This framing can be seen as a way of justifying sex buying, a discourse that is consistent with research showing that sex buyers construct narratives that justify their behaviour and reinforce perceptions of male entitlement (Jabbour, 2014; Radford, 2021).

Some participants questioned the legitimacy of the research itself by challenging the researcher’s background, with one participant arguing that the researcher could not fully understand the realities of commercial sex, as the research comes from “someone [who has] never been a prostitute. It means she does not understand.” This can also be understood as an assertion of ownership over the subject: despite the researcher’s expertise, her knowledge is dismissed because she has not personally experienced prostitution, while the participant positions himself as someone who understands “how this world works.” His response therefore reflects more than a rejection of the research; it privileges the perspective of the sex buyer as an authority on prostitution and reinforces a sense of entitlement to define and normalise a system from which he benefits.

Other participants, such as M47, described their participation as necessary for prostitution to continue, referring to it as a “natural interaction between humans.” These participants defended sex buying because it continues to allow them the privilege and entitlement to access sex the way they want and when they want. For these participants, sex buying was presented as a normal way for men to obtain sex when they wanted it. This is consistent with research showing that male buyers may describe sexual desire as a biological need to justify purchasing sex (Jabbour, 2014; Shumka et al., 2017). Shumka et al. (2017) further link these accounts to beliefs about male sexual drive and men’s entitlement to women’s bodies. These narratives are consistent with male privilege, sense of entitlement and misogyny that prevail in our society and onto which the participants’ idea of prostitution has been constructed. They are also reflected in other literature, namely, Davis et al. (2020), Manne (2018, 2020) and Schulz and Herrberg (2026). This sense of entitlement is also evident in the ways buyers talk about women and commercial sex (Alves & Cavallieri, 2021).

The quantitative results within this master theme focus on normalisation and permissiveness, client willingness, and sexual variety. This quantitative measure combines support by sex buyers for legalising or decriminalising prostitution and treating it as an ordinary business, personal willingness to use women in prostitution or have a son do so, and a general preference for sexual variety and low emotional involvement in sex. One item goes as far as asserting that occasionally having sex with a “pro” can help make the man a better lover. An item which appears to sit at odds with the remainder concerns the belief that prostitution exists because of the subordination of

women to men in most societies. The inclusion of this item within the wider theme appears to indicate that this belief is accepted as fact and does not influence the respondents' opinions adversely. In other words, just because participants recognise the inequality, it does not mean that they let it affect their decision-making process, highlighting the contradiction between recognising women's inequality and benefiting from a system shaped by that inequality to obtain sexual access.

Three strands run through this theme: broad policy-level acceptance of prostitution, personal willingness to act as or condone a client, and a general sexual-variety-seeking disposition unrelated to prostitution specifically. That these items cluster together reliably and hold up under numerical scrutiny suggests a link in this sample between general sexual permissiveness and permissive attitudes toward the sex trade.

The composite mean score of 2.16 and median 2.06 (out of a maximum of 4.0, which is equivalent to strong disagreement), both below the 2.5 centre, indicate a lean toward agreement with the theme's items. Although the quartile spacing is indicative of asymmetry (0.17 from the 25th percentile to the median versus 0.40 from the median to the 75th percentile), a histogram of the composite scores (Figure 3) indicates this is the result of a unimodal distribution with a very small group of 4 respondents (out of the 72) who lean towards disagreement.

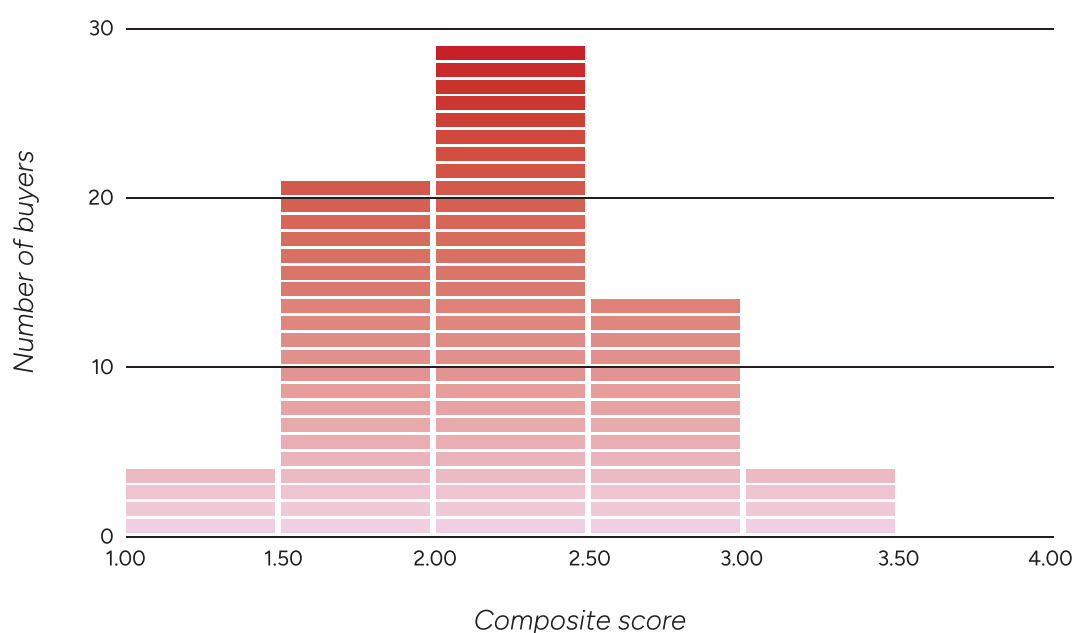


Figure 3. Histogram of composite scores for items in Sub-theme 1: Normalisation and legalisation of prostitution. Max score = 4, Strong Disagreement.

The quantitative findings therefore establish a broader pattern of normalisation and permissiveness towards prostitution and sexual access, while the qualitative accounts provide insight into how these attitudes are expressed through expectations of availability, choice, compliance and control.

Sub-theme 2: Entitlement to Sexual Access

Several participants expressed a sense of entitlement to sexual access, describing prostitution as a means of obtaining sexual acts and availability that they believed they were entitled to receive when these were not provided by their partners. This entitlement was underpinned by a sense of dominance, with buyers expecting women to accommodate their sexual desires and demands.

M35 stated that “with a prostitute, it is accessible whenever you want,” in contrast to a partner, where sex depends on “her will, her mood, or whether she feels like it.” This sentiment was further demonstrated by M55, who detailed how he had purchased sex during a period when his wife’s sex drive had declined. He described the woman as someone who “knew what she had to do,” contrasting this with his wife, who he felt had become distant following her hysterectomy.

M35: “*Dik [ta’ Norway] kienet emotional. Qisha dratni. Mhux qed ngħid li kien hemm spark jew love bejnietna. Imma kienet taf x’għandha tagħmel. Kienet saret toghgobni. Ma kont nibdilha ma’ xejn. Kien f’dak iż-żmien li l-mara qisha warbitni. Is-sex drive tagħha kien spiċċa. Sentejn jew tlett snin wara l-hysterectomy”.*

[“That one [who came from Norway] was emotional. It seems like she got used to me. I am not saying that there was a spark or love between us. But she knew what she had to do. I wouldn’t have changed her. It was that time when my wife grew distant. Her sex drive ended. It was two or three years after she had a hysterectomy.]

M35’s comparison between a prostitute and a partner is particularly significant. He recognises that his partner has her own “will” and “mood” and may not want sex, while describing a prostitute as “accessible whenever you want.” His partner’s refusal is recognised as her choice, but the woman in prostitution is described as available according to his wishes.

According to M58,

M58: “*Li ma ttinix il-mara ttini hi. Jekk nista’ normali qas haqq ma’ haddiehor. M’hemmx għalfejn infittex.*

[The prostitute gives me what my wife does not give me. If I can get it normally, I do not need to do it with anyone else. I do not need to look for it.]

For these participants, prostitution provided access to sexual acts that they could not, or did not want to, obtain from their wives. These included anal sex, which was mentioned by most participants, sex during menstruation, and other practices that partners or wives refuse to engage in, or that men feel they should not ask their partners to perform. In these accounts, payment is treated as a form of entitlement, allowing the buyer to bypass a woman's refusal and frame sexual acts as something he is entitled to obtain elsewhere when his desires are not met by his partner.

Participants described using prostitution to obtain the sex they wanted because they had paid for it, according to their own preferences, while expecting the woman in prostitution to satisfy their sexual demands. This suggests that payment was understood as giving buyers a degree of control over the sexual encounter. They expected to exercise choice over the women they purchased sex from, while women's autonomy could be viewed negatively when it limited what the buyer believed his payment entitled him to receive.

M21 mentioned,

M21: “*Ultimately this is a transaction - she might not want to do it, but she has to say yes to me, and she has to accept it as I paid for it.*”

M52 mentioned that “The woman needs to have a certain openness and try not to act as if she is being forced”. M54 explained that “most men go to prostitutes because they don't get as much sex as they want”, presenting prostitution as a way for men to obtain the amount of sex they believe they should have. M51 similarly described his experience, stating, “u ukoll hi għaġġlitni u kienet picky” [“and she also rushed me, and she was picky”]. Describing her as “picky” and noting that she “rushed” him suggests dissatisfaction when the encounter did not proceed according to his expectations.

This sense of entitlement is also evident in M23, who explained that “Then the agency will send you the photos on WhatsApp of the available girls and you can choose.” M52 described being able to get what he wanted “quick[ly]”, while M17 mentioned, “Jien ikolli aptit għas-sess u fi kwarta inkun qed ninqeda - ma jkollix ċans u moħħ nippjana”. [“When I get horny, within fifteen minutes I'll be getting what I need — I would not have time to think or plan.”]. M5 described his preferred woman as “Slim, sportiva, imbaċċa, b'sormha mimli, u li għandha l-hips curvy.” [“Slim, sports type, roundish ass and curvy hips.”]. M9 stated that she “Should be beautiful, gives me pleasure and makes me satisfied”. This can be considered in relation to the work of Jabbour (2014), Manne (2018, 2020), and Radford (2021) on male entitlement. Manne argues that patriarchal expectations can position women as providers of sex, care and other forms of labour that men may come to regard as something they are owed. The distinction provided by the sex buyers in the study suggests different expectations of women depending on whether the relationship is intimate or commercial, placing a woman in prostitution as readily available to meet the buyer's sexual needs, on demand.

Davis et al. (2020) similarly discuss domination and control in relation to male sex buyers, particularly where women are viewed as subordinate or vulnerable. More recently, Schulz and Herrberg (2026) found that discussions among men who buy sex can reproduce ideas of male entitlement and diminish women's autonomy. Their findings are relevant to the accounts presented here, where sexual access is discussed primarily in terms of what the man wants and when he wants it.

Prior and Peled (2024) show how consumerism shapes the way some men understand sex buying, with participants describing the purchase of sex in terms of choice, selection, consumption and obtaining experiences they desire. This is relevant to the present findings, where some participants described prostitution as a means of obtaining sexual access according to their own needs, preferences and expectations. The buyer is positioned as a consumer who chooses what he wants and expects the woman to provide it, turning payment into a basis for claiming sexual access.

Huysamen and Boonzaier (2015) found that men who buy sex draw on sexual scripts when explaining their participation in prostitution. These ideas also reinforce forms of masculinity that support male privilege and entitlement (Bertone & Ferrero Camoletto, 2009; Flood, 2008). In the present study, this can be seen in the way participants described women according to their physical characteristics, sexual appeal and ability to satisfy the buyer.

Pornography also influenced some participants' expectations. M52 described pornography as "the biggest school of sex. You learn something you probably wouldn't know otherwise, so you spice up your life." Other participants said that they copied sexual practices they had seen in pornography with women in prostitution. This material is relevant here because pornography appears to have informed some participants' expectations of what women in prostitution should provide during the encounter.

The expectation for access was not always limited to the sexual act itself. M29 expected the prostitute to "feel love after sex" with him, while M33 expected her to "feel grateful" after sex. M67 similarly expected that after a session, "[the women in prostitution] would wish for me to come back and not pay for it," expecting the woman to develop an interest in him and want him to return. These accounts extend entitlement beyond sexual access to expectations of affection, gratitude and continued interest from the woman.

The strongest and most coercive form of male entitlement appeared in the expectation that paying for sex gave the buyer the authority to control what the woman did with her body, including using force to obtain sexual acts she might not otherwise agree to. M32 stated, "You tell her what to do, and she does it." M54 similarly explained:

M54 “ Forced blow jobs, some rough intercourse... anything forced and rough you can only do with a prostitute. ”

M66 added: "What I ask them to do for me. No comment on what this would include." M57 described: "ċertu salvaġiżmu. Taħxiha ġo ħalqha, u ċertu pożizzjoni li tpoġġiha mara." ["a certain savagery. Fuck her in her mouth and, certain positions you put a woman in."] . M45 said that he liked to force women in prostitution to masturbate to see them getting pleasure out of it, "naraha tieġu pjaċir", ["I see that she is finding pleasure"], while M53 said, "għamlet minn kollox, kulma għidtilha" ["she did everything, all I told her to do"].

When the expected sexual access or satisfaction was not provided, male entitlement could also appear through anger, hostility and extreme reactions. The intensity varied from relatively mild dissatisfaction to extreme reactions, but they show how strongly some participants expected the encounter to meet their demands. M5 explains that the woman sprawls herself out like a lump of dough, "tintefagħlek bħal għaġina", while M71 stated that he "wanted to shoot her". These responses show how disappointment could become hostile when the encounter did not meet the buyer's expectations. These extracts imply that for these participants, paying for sex appeared to mean that they could decide what they wanted, ask for particular sexual acts and expect the woman to provide them.

These accounts move beyond an expectation of sexual availability to an expectation of compliance with the buyer's instructions and the justification of violence. In them, the woman's role is described mainly in terms of doing what the buyer demands. The expectation is not simply that sex will be available, but that the buyer can determine what happens during the encounter, with violence being justified if his demands are not met.

This sense of entitlement was also evident in buyer participants' interactions with the researchers. One sex buyer arrived at the interview with a gift, seemingly expecting the female researcher to be receptive to his attention and willing to accept the gift. Buyer participants sometimes crossed professional boundaries through unsolicited compliments, prolonged or intrusive looks, comments that the researcher resembled the type of woman they were attracted to, and attempts to take control of the interaction by offering or insisting on drinks, including alcohol. Some kept researchers waiting, remained after the interview had ended, or appeared reluctant to leave. These behaviours reflect an expectation of access to the researchers' attention, time and personal space, illustrating how a sense of entitlement could extend beyond the commercial sexual encounter itself. Some buyers also appeared particularly self-satisfied once the interview had concluded, seemingly viewing their participation as a contribution to research that they believed would ultimately support greater access to prostitution, including its legalisation or decriminalisation. This suggested that they perceived their participation as contributing to a cause they supported and appeared to reinforce their sense of entitlement beyond the immediate interaction with the researcher to the broader social and legal context which could provide easier access to sex buying.

Farley et al. (2017) also found higher levels of hostile masculinity and impersonal sex, as well as lower empathy towards women, among men who bought sex. Their findings are relevant to the accounts in this study, particularly where participants described women as expected to comply with their demands. In the accounts, the woman's role is described mainly in terms of doing what the buyer demands. The men describe the woman as someone who is expected to follow their instructions. Farley (2018) similarly discusses prostitution in terms of the treatment of the person as a commodity.

Sub-theme 3: Racialised Entitlement, Racism and Discrimination

The quantitative findings provide evidence that preferences for women from particular countries or regions were present within the sample. Overall 63.9% of respondents indicated a preference for women in prostitution from certain countries/ regions. Respondents were also asked which specific groups they selected, from a checklist mixing individual countries and broader regions, with answers seen in Table 10 indicating a clear preference for South American, Ukrainian and Colombian women, and fewer respondents showing a preference for Thai, Moroccan and Libyan women.

Table 10. Percentage of buyers who prefer particular races when choosing a woman in prostitution to buy services from, as reported by buyers (n=72).

Group	% buyers indicating preference for women in prostitution from:
South American	50.0%
Ukrainian	48.6%
Colombian	47.2%
Romanian	43.1%
North American	40.3%
Former Yugoslavian	37.5%
Thai	29.2%
Moroccan	27.8%
Libyan	25.0%

The quantitative findings indicate that preferences for women from particular countries or regions were present among a substantial proportion of respondents. However, the quantitative data do not explain the reasons for these preferences. The qualitative accounts provide some insight into how participants understood and justified their choices, including through assumptions about attractiveness, sexual behaviour, safety and health.

Racism and discrimination are evident in the qualitative findings through participants' descriptions of women from different countries, regions, and racial or ethnic groups. The accounts show that women were sometimes judged not only according to their individual characteristics, but also according to assumptions about their race, nationality and culture.

When referring to Thailand, M65 stated:

M65: “ *It is part of their culture, not prostitution. Most women behave like prostitutes in the presence of Westerners. I don’t find them attractive at all. Mostly their race.* ”

M68 similarly stated:

M68: “ *Their culture. The way they speak and communicate. The way they carry themselves, how they present themselves, how they dress.* ”

These comments show how perceptions of women were connected to assumptions about their culture, behaviour, appearance and race. Rather than describing individual women, participants sometimes referred to characteristics they associated with particular national or racial groups.

Some participants expressed more direct forms of racial discrimination. M18 stated: “Not with blacks, Indians, or Pakistanis. No way with those people, no way. With regards to Libya and Morocco, they are Muslims, and they are not safe. Steer away”, while M42 stated: “Suwed idejquni. Għax is-suwed għandhom riħa ddejjaqni”. [“Black people bother me. Because black people have a certain smell that bothers me.”] These accounts contain direct negative judgements about particular racial, ethnic and national groups. In both cases, characteristics such as smell, religion and perceived safety were attributed to groups rather than considered at the individual level. These accounts can also be considered alongside Coşkun’s (2018) research on Ugandan migrant women involved in prostitution in Turkey, because it demonstrates that race and migration status can shape women’s experiences within prostitution, extending beyond individual attitudes to wider forms of inequality and vulnerability.

M58 emphasised that he preferred Eastern European women because they tend to give more sex than they should and added: “Jekk tkun ġejja minn xi razza li hemm xi mard nevita. Mill-Africa fejn hemm ċertu diseases ma tantx niħajjar.” [“If they belong to a race that carries diseases, I avoid them. I am not interested in those coming from Africa, because there are certain illnesses.”] His account is relevant to both the quantitative and qualitative findings because his preference was not presented simply as a matter of physical attraction. It was also connected to assumptions about the amount of sex women from a particular region would provide and to a perceived health risk associated with women from Africa.

The health assumption expressed by M58 is not supported by evidence that treats Africa as a distinct source of tuberculosis risk. Tuberculosis is a global disease, and the World Health Organization (2025) reports substantial levels of tuberculosis, including drug-resistant tuberculosis, in parts of Eastern Europe as well as in African countries. The statement made by M58 can therefore be viewed as a racialised assumption about health rather than an assessment of an individual woman's health. The use of disease as a reason for avoiding women from a particular region shows how racial stereotypes can influence perceptions of who is considered acceptable or desirable.

This relates to Thompson's (2022) discussion of discrimination, ethnicity and racism. In the present findings, discrimination was expressed through individual attitudes towards race and nationality, but these attitudes were also connected to wider assumptions about culture, behaviour, safety and health. Such views may further disadvantage women in prostitution, as they can experience discrimination not only because of their involvement in prostitution but also because of their racial or national identity.

The racialised preferences expressed by participants can also be considered in relation to entitlement, although racism itself should not be equated with entitlement. The connection lies in the position from which some buyers made these judgements. Participants described themselves as having the ability to decide which women they found attractive, which groups they would avoid and, in some cases, what they expected women from particular groups to provide sexually. In this sense, racialised beliefs became part of the buyer's evaluation of women and influenced how they were viewed as potential sexual partners.

The previous sub-themes, Normalisation and Legalisation of Prostitution and Entitlement to Sexual Access, showed how entitlement was expressed through the normalisation of sex buying, access to women's bodies, expectations of sexual satisfaction, and control and coercion. In this sub-theme, Racism, Discrimination and Racialised Entitlement, entitlement is also evident in the perceived right to judge women based on racialised ideas about their bodies, sexuality, behaviour, and perceived risks. CAP International (2022) highlights the over-representation of migrant women and women from racial, ethnic and other marginalised communities in prostitution, linking their position within the prostitution system to wider forms of poverty, violence and systemic discrimination.

MASTER THEME 3: DEHUMANISATION AND DEMONISATION OF WOMEN IN PROSTITUTION

M52: "In Malta, yes, this is the case. The stock is really below level."

This master theme generated five distinct sub-themes which include, the buyers' views on women; the dehumanisation of women in prostitution; the demonisation of women in prostitution; the buyers getting what they want and then helping the women out of prostitution; and the stereotype of a trafficked person and participation in an exploitative system. These sub-themes put all responsibility on the women in prostitution for any consequences that might occur and ignore the buyers' demand, without which prostitution cannot exist, as argued in Grönvall (2022).

Sub-theme 1: The Buyers' Views on Women

The quantitative measurement within this sub-theme focused on the buyers' views of women and is characterised by generalised distrust and adversarial beliefs. It is composed of 8 items and shows a Cronbach's alpha of 0.782, with an average inter-item correlation of 0.333, indicating a reliable and reasonably cohesive grouping. This section reflects broader adversarial beliefs about women's character and intentions, including distrust, a belief that women take advantage in relationships or are dishonest, and a view that women will only respect a man who firmly controls her. It also includes a single self-focused belief in prioritising one's own interests above others. This is important to note as it suggests a possible link between generalised hostility towards women and self-prioritising/self-preserving beliefs

Composite scores for this theme show a mean of 3.69 (max = 7, strongly agree) and a median of 3.62, indicating that respondents leaned, on balance, toward disagreement with these adversarial beliefs about women rather than endorsement. However, a real subset of respondents endorsed these beliefs to a meaningful degree as shown by a relatively wide interquartile range of 1.78 and a bimodal distribution of the composite scores, with peaks both in the disagreement range (below 4) and agreement range (above 4) (Figure 4).

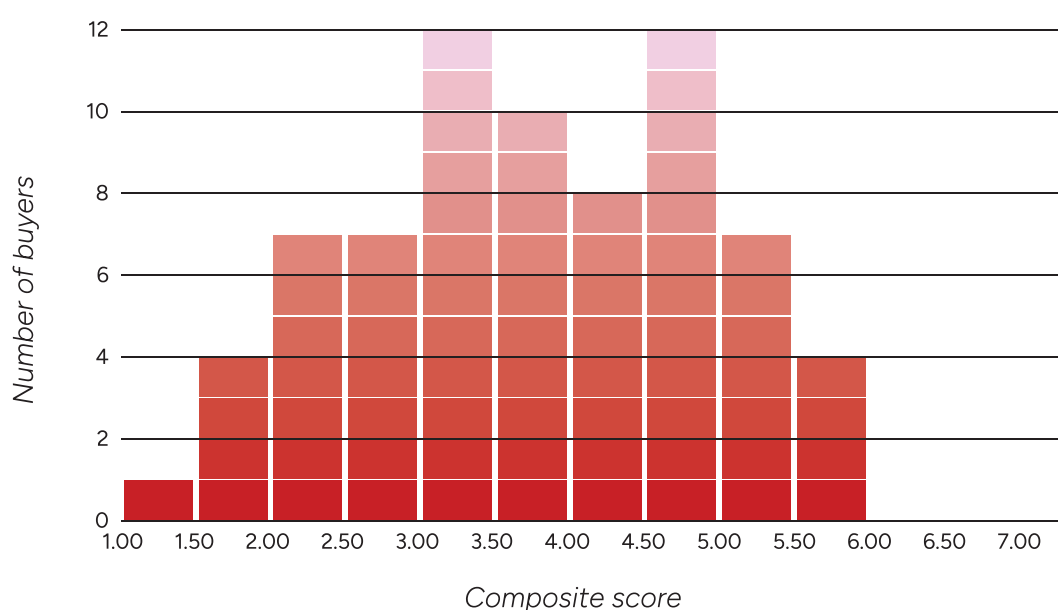


Figure 4. Histogram of composite scores for items in Sub-theme 1: The buyers' views on women. Max score = 7, Strong Agreement.

The quantitative findings provide further context for the attitudes towards women identified in the qualitative accounts. While the qualitative findings included strong expressions of distrust, adversarial attitudes and entitlement towards women, the quantitative results indicate that these views were not strongly endorsed by the sample as a whole. However, the bimodal distribution of scores indicates that there was a subgroup of participants who endorsed these beliefs more strongly.

However, the qualitative results that emerged from a narrative by the sex buyers indicated otherwise. In fact, sub-theme 1, the buyers' views on women, provides insight into how the buyers regard women in general. M59:

M35: “*Minn 10 irġiel ma nibżax imma minn mara nibża'. Tista' takkużak b'ħafna affarijiet f'għex sekondi mara.*

[I am not afraid of 10 men, but I am afraid of one single woman. A woman can accuse you of a lot of allegations within two seconds.]

Another buyer recounts that when he does not get what he wants from the partner, he seeks prostitution.

M61: “*It happened we were playing and getting in the mood [but she said no] so I left her and went to get a prostitute [after]”.*

M70: “They lead you on and then say, ‘ohhh what you did to me’.” These attitudes also emerged from the study by Farley et al. (2017) that reports how sex buyers tend to have a negative view of women in general and not only of those involved in prostitution.

In fact, the self-focused item relating to prioritising one's own interests above others also clustered with the other items in the quantitative section. Although this item does not directly refer to women, its association with the other items suggests that, within this sample, distrust and adversarial beliefs about women may occur alongside a tendency to place one's own interests first. This is therefore consistent with the qualitative accounts, particularly where participants' own expectations and experiences were given greater importance than women's responses or boundaries.

Sub-theme 2: Dehumanisation of Women in Prostitution

Sub-theme 2 explores the dehumanisation of women in prostitution. The quantitative measurement within this sub-theme is composed of 13 items, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.808 and an average inter-item correlation of 0.252, indicating a reliable grouping. The theme combines beliefs that deny or minimise sexual violence towards women in prostitution, including denying that rape applies to them, dismissing their claims of being raped, and holding that a paying client is entitled to whatever he wants. It also includes beliefs blaming women in prostitution for the spread of disease, a permissive attitude towards secretly using women in prostitution without a spouse's knowledge, and beliefs that women in prostitution enjoy their work and participate in it of their own free will.

It is important to point out that these results show that dehumanising beliefs about women in prostitution are linked to the fact that paying for sex is not considered cheating. Moreover, the clustering of these dehumanising beliefs and a positive, agentic image of women in prostitution might seem to pull in different directions, as one denies these women's humanity while the other affirms their enjoyment and choice. Together, though, they form a coherent view: believing women in prostitution are willing and enthusiastic participants can function to further justify and/or minimise the more dehumanising beliefs in the same cluster. This is an interpretation of why these items empirically hang together, rather than something the statistics establish on their own.

A composite mean of 2.96 (max = 4, strong disagreement) and median of 3.0 indicate results are slightly skewed, as confirmed by a histogram of the composite scores (Figure 5), which displays a unimodal distribution. This indicates that, on paper, most respondents are rejecting this narrative and disagreeing with the items in the cluster.

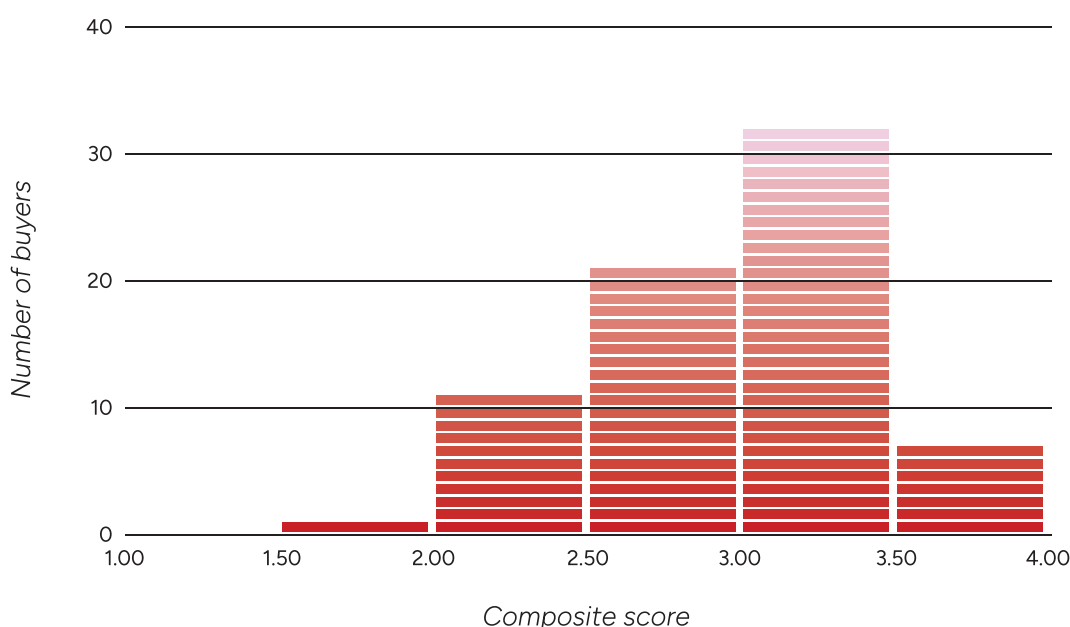


Figure 5. Histogram of composite scores for items in Sub-theme 2: Dehumanisation of Women in Prostitution. Max score = 4, Strong Disagreement.

When asked elsewhere in the survey about the extent to which they agree with the statement that women in prostitution are different from other women, 55.6% of respondents leaned towards disagreement (specifically, they said they agree 40% or less with the statement). This aligns with the theme findings above. However, it is important to note that 34.7% of respondents leaned towards agreement (they agreed 60% or more with the statement).

One item explicitly asked about the extent to which respondents agree that when they are with a woman in prostitution, they are basically entitled to do anything they want. While 63.9% leaned towards disagreement (they agreed with 40% or less with the statement), almost a quarter (23.6%) still leaned towards agreement (they agreed with 60% or more with the statement). It is interesting to note that this item correlates with the above theme ($\rho = 0.457$, $p = 0.017$), indicating that higher personal agreement with entitlement correlates with higher agreement across the above narrative.

However, the qualitative data present a more complex picture. While the quantitative responses suggest that most participants rejected the idea of entitlement, the interview accounts reveal language and descriptions that can nevertheless reflect an underlying sense of entitlement and objectification. In other words, participants did not always explicitly endorse entitlement when asked directly, but this was more visible in how they spoke about women in prostitution, their bodies, and the purpose of the encounter. The qualitative data therefore expand the quantitative findings by revealing attitudes that may be less readily captured through direct survey questions.

In the qualitative interview data, the explicit content presented a narrative that expands on the quantitative findings. Some sex buyers used explicit and dehumanising language when describing women in prostitution and their encounters with them. M24 referred to “il-bżonn li tbattal” [“the need to empty”], while he also described the effect of condom use in terms of the man’s sexual sensation: “Inħoss li l-kondom joqtol kompletament is-sensazzjoni vaginal li jħoss ir-raġel waqt l-att sesswali” [“I feel that the condom completely kills the vaginal sensation that the man feels during sexual intercourse”]. M33 used the expression “empty my balls” when referring to encounters with women in prostitution. Other participants reduced women to their bodies or described them as something that could be consumed or used. M14 stated “patata u sider kbar” [“big ass and big tits”]; M18 said “I wanted to sample the local dishes”, referring to women in prostitution; M29 described them as “Easy to use. Easy to get.”; and M32 referred to women in prostitution as a “commodity, [something which I could] own for that time”. Similar forms of dehumanising language have been identified by Farley et al. (2017) and Keegan and Yonkova (2018).

The qualitative accounts provide examples of how the attitudes being examined were expressed in participants’ own words, while the quantitative findings show how related beliefs were distributed across a scale from 0 % to 100%. The descriptions of women as something to “empty”, “use”, “sample” or temporarily “own” provide clear examples of how some participants viewed women primarily in terms of their bodies or sexual functions. Keegan and Yonkova (2018) similarly found that sex buyers were more likely to view women in prostitution as different from other women while also describing prostitution as a transaction between consenting adults. Moreover, the language used by some participants is relevant to research on dehumanisation and sexual violence. Rudman and Mescher (2012) found that men who implicitly dehumanised women were more willing to engage in rape and sexual harassment and reported more negative attitudes towards female rape victims. This provides relevant context for the present findings, where some participants described women in prostitution in terms of their bodies, what they could provide, or as something that could be used or owned.

The relationship between entitlement and dehumanisation is also important. The positive correlation between agreement with the entitlement item and the dehumanisation theme ($\rho = 0.457, p = 0.017$) indicates that respondents who agreed more with the idea of sexual entitlement also tended to agree more with the dehumanising beliefs in the theme. M32’s description of a woman as a “commodity” that he could “own for that time” provides a qualitative example of this relationship. Although the quantitative findings show that these beliefs were not shared by all respondents, the qualitative accounts revealed clear and explicit examples of dehumanising attitudes among some participants. The findings therefore show that, within this sample of sex buyers, dehumanisation was expressed both through the language used to describe women and through beliefs concerning sexual entitlement and the minimisation of sexual violence.

Sub-theme 3: Demonisation of Women in Prostitution

Sub-theme 3 demonstrates the ways that the sex buyers demonise women in prostitution.

M32: “*[I carry a] Swiss knife that looks like a key. It is always with me. My mindset: I’m getting into danger; I’m always alert that something bad is going to happen.*”

M37: “they really like their money”; M45: “[I am afraid I’ll get] scammed - maybe they will take my money - sometimes the photo is different to what she looks like in real life”; M49: “[Women in prostitution are] part of the HIV/AIDS problem”. M62: “They are destroying regular relationships - men will look for prostitutes to get what they want sexually.” In conclusion to this theme, the sex buyers shifted all immorality onto the women in prostitution and none on themselves, as M14 puts it: “I do not degrade them, but their work does.” The sex buyers did not take responsibility for their choices and instead demonised women in prostitution by portraying them as immoral or dangerous. In doing so, buyers protect their self-image and avoid acknowledging the harm done by themselves (Prior & Peled, 2025; Raymond, 2013).

Sub-theme 4: The Buyers Getting What They Want and Then Helping the Woman Out of Prostitution

The subsequent sub-theme focused on the buyers getting what they want and then ‘helping’ the woman out of prostitution. As M23 explained,

M23: “*Men like me, who are well-off, we try to support her to get out of that job. Some men are willing to support.*”

M71 married a woman in prostitution to save her. These experiences are consistent with those reported in other studies where some men who purchased sex describe themselves as wanting to support, protect, or even “save” the women they encounter in prostitution. Scholars, however, question whether these claims reflect genuine concern, a paternalistic desire to control women, or simply a way for buyers to rationalise their involvement in and perpetuation of an exploitative system (Keegan & Yonkova, N., 2018; Keighley & Sanders, 2024).

Although these accounts are presented as caring or supportive, they may also reflect a paternalistic understanding of women in prostitution as vulnerable individuals who require male intervention. This apparent concern can be understood in relation to the gendered power relations that structure prostitution, whereby the buyer is positioned as the active subject while the woman is constructed as the recipient of his actions (Pateman, 1988). More recent analyses of sex buyers’ discourse similarly demonstrate how buyers can construct and justify their position in ways that minimise or obscure the gendered inequalities underlying the transaction (Alves & Cavallieri, 2021; Senent, 2019). In this sense, women may be denied agency differently: rather than being reduced to sexual objects, they are positioned as women who need to be rescued. This creates a contrast with the previous sub-theme, where women in prostitution are represented either as objects of sexual consumption or as vulnerable women requiring protection, assistance or rescue from the very man who occupies the position of buyer. Both representations can minimise women’s autonomy, although they do so in different ways.

Sub-theme 5: The Stereotype of a Trafficked Person and Participation in an Exploitative System

This sub-theme explores a related but distinct issue: the stereotype created by sex buyers for a person who is trafficked, and how they respond to that recognition. Items in the survey covered whether respondents had encountered a woman they believed was forced into prostitution, and whether they reported it. As per Table 11, a majority (60%) reported encountering a woman they believed was forced into prostitution, and nearly half (48.6%) reported encountering a woman they believed was in it against her will. Reporting such suspicions to authorities is rare: under 3% of respondents (equivalent to 2 people) said they had ever done so, a stark drop-off from the 60% who said they had encountered the situation in the first place.

Table 11. Buyers reporting encounters with women forced into prostitution (n=70)

Have you:	% buyers who said 'Yes'
Encountered a woman thought to be forced into a brothel, massage parlour, or other prostitution	60.0%
Encountered a woman thought to be in it against her will	48.6%
Reported the suspicion to police or authorities	2.9%

Keighley and Sanders (2024) found that some sex buyers reported encountering situations in which they suspected that a woman in prostitution was being exploited. Their findings also showed that reporting such concerns to the authorities was uncommon. This provides relevant context for the present findings, where respondents frequently reported encountering women whom they believed were being forced into prostitution, while very few reported these suspicions to the authorities.

The gap between recognising possible exploitation and taking action can also be seen in the qualitative interviews. M62, for example, said that he “didn’t think that it is necessary to report” because “after all the pimps are connected with the police”. While several sex buyers mentioned this connection, they did not provide evidence that such connections existed.

M63 also referred to wider criminality when discussing prostitution. He described it as “dirty” and stated that the money “goes into the hands of organised crime”. This indicates that he was aware of a possible connection between prostitution and organised crime. However, this awareness did not necessarily mean that he reported concerns about individual women or stopped participating in prostitution.

These interview accounts are relevant to the quantitative findings. While 60.0% of respondents said that they had encountered a woman whom they believed was forced into prostitution, and 48.6% said that they had encountered a woman whom they believed was in prostitution against her will, only 2.9% reported having raised such a concern with the police or other authorities. The findings suggest that recognising possible exploitation did not necessarily lead to reporting or intervention. Some buyers may therefore have been aware of possible exploitation or criminality within prostitution while continuing to participate in it.

These accounts are relevant to wider research examining the relationship between demand, prostitution and organised criminal activity. Literature argues that sex-buyer demand is criminogenic because it sustains trafficking and organised crime. Demand-reduction approaches like the Nordic model are presented as effective in disrupting these criminal markets (Clark, 2026; Hopkins et al., 2024).

The sex buyer participants created a stereotype of a trafficked prostitute. M27 mentioned that in the case of trafficked women “the vibe is off”. M65 reported that with women who are not trafficked “[the encounter] looks natural”. M69 explained that a trafficked prostitute could be identified by her level of confidence. The buyers believed that those who are confident and able to get into it chose to be in it. This way of thinking is associated with patriarchy, as buyers get to decide who is a victim of trafficking, hence exercising women’s subordination to their ideas, a concept discussed in Manne (2018).

These accounts imply that the buyer’s own experience of the encounter may influence how he judges whether a woman is trafficked. References to whether the encounter “looks natural”, whether she appears confident, and whether she can “get into it” suggest that these factors may shape how buyers interpret a woman’s circumstances. The findings may therefore suggest that buyers use a woman’s apparent willingness and behaviour during the encounter as indicators of whether she is being trafficked. This may mean that buyers’ perceptions of trafficking are influenced by their own expectations of the sexual encounter, rather than necessarily reflecting the woman’s actual circumstances.

This is consistent with Tranchese (2026), who found that when buyers described women showing signs that could indicate a lack of choice, buyers sometimes focused on their own dissatisfaction, describing the encounter as poor service or complaining that the woman was not responsive. The analysis argues that the buyer’s experience can become the centre of attention even where there are possible signs of exploitation.

MASTER THEME 4: CONFLICTED RATIONALISATIONS

M63: “*Prostitution is dirty.... This money doesn’t go into the economy. It goes into the hands of organised crime.*”

The fourth master theme is concerned with the conflicted rationalisations presented by the sex buyers, from which five sub-themes emerged. These include: prostitution: a job or exploitation? displacing responsibility through victim blaming and circumstantial explanations; the woman’s choice in abusive circumstances; the girlfriend experience; and buying sex despite feelings of disgust and shame. Though prima facie these appear as conflicted rationalisations, they may actually act as justification that enables men to continue buying sex (Dominguez & Roe-Sepowitz, 2026).

Sub-theme 1: Prostitution: A Job or Exploitation?

Concerning the query of whether prostitution is a job or exploitation, it is interesting to note that some participants referred to prostitution as a profession and then, as in the case of M64 and many other participants, they also referred to it as a process where “you just paid-like you are buying an ice-tea”. Although they used the term “profession”, none of the participants compared prostitution to professions like a medical doctor or a social worker, but they only compared it to the act of just having “bought something” (M58). Framing it as a “profession” has a moral function for the buyer, as in this way, his behaviour is merely participation in a consensual market transaction rather than exploitation (Lahav-Raz et al., 2024). Buyers might even recognise signs that the woman does not want this encounter, but they reinterpret her lack of enthusiasm as signs of poor service (Tranchese, 2026). Having said this, M2 clearly stated that: “if the women have good jobs and good results [education] they will not go into prostitution”. This contradiction exists in academic literature, through two primary positions: a society that legitimises sexual exploitation of women by men, or a form of labour where intersecting social inequalities produce exploitation (Benoit et al., 2019; Farley et al., 2017; Keegan & Yonkova, 2018).

Sub-theme 2: Displacing Responsibility Through Victim Blaming and Circumstantial Explanations

This sub-theme concerns beliefs that shift responsibility for women’s negative experiences away from men, either through victim blaming or by attributing these experiences to external circumstances and situations perceived to be beyond men’s control.

The quantitative findings draw on nine questionnaire items and demonstrate good internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.791$; average inter-item correlation = 0.35), supporting the treatment of these items as a coherent grouping. The items capture broader attitudes towards women, using circumstantial or situational details to deny, excuse, or minimise sexual violence and, ultimately, shift responsibility away from men.

Several mechanisms through which responsibility was displaced emerged from the findings. One involved victim blaming, including references to the way women dress, drinking or drunkenness, and an alleged failure to communicate refusal clearly. Responsibility was also shifted through questioning whether particular acts qualified as rape, based on the absence of a weapon or physical resistance. A further mechanism involved excusing male behaviour by framing forced sex as unintended or beyond men’s control, “getting carried away” or having a sex drive that “gets out of control”.

The quantitative findings suggest that these beliefs were not broadly endorsed across the sample. The composite mean was 3.54 on a five-point scale, where 5 represented strong disagreement, while the median was 3.56. The proximity of the mean and median suggests that the composite scores were not substantially skewed. However, the histogram (Figure 6) indicates an apparently bimodal distribution, with peaks around the 3 - 3.5 and 4 - 4.5 ranges. This suggests some variation in the strength of respondents’ disagreement, with one apparent cluster expressing moderate disagreement and another stronger disagreement. Both peaks fall towards the disagreement end of the scale, indicating an overall tendency to reject beliefs that shift responsibility for sexual assault away from men.

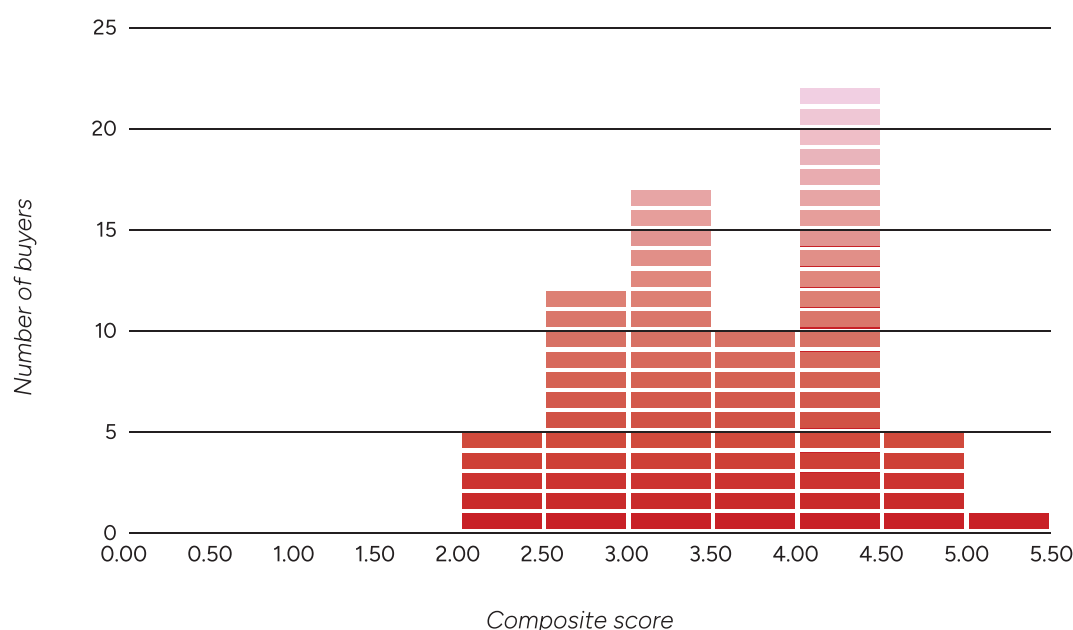


Figure 6. Histogram of composite scores for items in Sub-theme 2: Displacing responsibility through victim blaming and circumstantial explanations. Max score = 5, Strong Disagreement.

National identity showed the strongest association with the theme (effect size = 0.119; corrected $p = 0.032$). European respondents had a higher mean score (4.00; $p = 0.032$), indicating stronger rejection of responsibility-shifting beliefs, compared with Maltese respondents (3.11; $p = 0.015$). African and Asian respondents did not differ significantly from either group.

Education level was also significant (effect size = 0.081; corrected $p = 0.045$), with tertiary-educated respondents showing stronger rejection (3.78) than those with secondary education (2.78).

The finding that men with higher levels of education were less likely to endorse statements that shifted responsibility away from men may suggest that education is associated with greater recognition of men's responsibility for their actions. Prina and Schatz-Stevens (2020) suggest that education may expose individuals to new ideas and experiences that challenge traditional gender norms, while Taschler and West (2017) found that contact with women who challenge gender stereotypes was associated with lower rape myth acceptance among men. This may reflect greater exposure to alternative perspectives and ideas that challenge traditional gender norms and encourage critical reflection on assumptions about women and men's responsibility for sexual violence.

Nevertheless, the qualitative findings revealed a more nuanced and sometimes contradictory pattern, with participants who were less likely to endorse responsibility-displacing beliefs in the quantitative findings at times expressing views in their qualitative accounts that nevertheless shifted responsibility away from men. M54, for example, stated: "Mostly they are victims of their life choices. Their lifestyle also puts them in this position. Some are trafficked; they are victims of pimps." Similarly, M39 stated: "There are many women who dress provocatively, and then they ask, 'Why did you touch me?'" In these accounts, women's circumstances, behaviour, or perceived choices are invoked to explain or contextualise the violence they experience, thereby diverting attention from the actions of the man. These findings are consistent with literature documenting victim blaming and the attribution of responsibility to women in the context of prostitution (Farley et al., 2017; Menaker & Franklin, 2018). As discussed above, victim blaming and rape myths can contribute to the further victimisation of women by shifting responsibility for sexual violence away from perpetrators (Tidmarsh & Hamilton, 2020; Trudeau & Carmi, 2026). This is particularly consequential for women in prostitution, whose circumstances may be interpreted as evidence of sexual availability, potentially further undermining the perceived legitimacy of their refusal and reinforcing victim-blaming responses to sexual violence (Tidmarsh & Hamilton, 2020).

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings present a more nuanced picture. Although participants generally rejected explicit responsibility-shifting statements in the questionnaire, responsibility-shifting narratives nevertheless emerged in some qualitative accounts, particularly when participants were asked to contextualise or explain specific situations. This may suggest that such beliefs are less readily expressed as explicit, general attitudes but can emerge through more conditional or situational reasoning. It is also worth noting that some participants expressed seemingly contradictory thoughts and beliefs, which may reflect attempts to reconcile and justify their involvement in prostitution. The divergence between the two forms of data may therefore indicate that the qualitative discussions captured nuances and contradictions in participants' reasoning that were less apparent in the direct questionnaire measures.

Sub-theme 3: The Woman's Choice in Abusive Circumstances

A contradiction which arose in the buyers' accounts was that the women have a choice in abusive circumstances. This was contrasted with the fact that 70% of respondents (n=71) indicated they were with a woman in prostitution who had a 'manager' or a 'pimp'. Of those who provided further information, 82% (n=50) said they had been with a woman who had a male pimp, and 32.7% (n=49) said they had been with a woman who had a female pimp. In addition, 38.0% of respondents (n=71) said they had interacted with a pimp, and 17.1% (n=70) said they had met a pimp who was in organised crime.

Individual accounts normalised the presence of pimps.

M14:  *She told me: 'He took my passport.' Most of the foreigners are tricked. They were supposed to come here for work but then they take their passports and put them into prostitution- this happens often* 

Others like M61 declared “my friend is a pimp” while some of the participants referred to themselves as past pimps.

The buyers shed light on the prostitute-pimp relationship. The pimp was often regarded as an exploiter, and in a few accounts, he was regarded as a business partner. Several buyers identified signs that suggested the involvement of a third party in managing multiple women. For instance, M72 noted that when communicating with different women, “the pattern how they write it [the text messages] would be the same”, leading him to conclude that “it’s the same person managing multiple girls.” Similarly, M69 described recognising that the person communicating with him was not the same person providing the service:

M69: “*I realised because of their communication. The person on the phone was not the same person doing the service. Because over text they speak in English, but when you meet them, they do not speak English.*”

Participants also commonly associated pimps with financial exploitation and the commodification of women. M63 described the relationship as “Quite bad”, explaining that “Pimps are selling the girls; all they care about is money. They don’t care how it makes the girl feel.” Although he acknowledged that some pimps might protect the women, he emphasised that

M63: “*at the end of the day the goal is to get the girls working fast fast fast.*”

Similarly, M59 described the woman as “Jittrattaha zibel. She is just a money machine.” [“He treats her like garbage. She is just a money machine.”] This perception of pimps as primarily motivated by financial gain was also reflected in M62’s observation that “[The pimp] take[s] a lot of money... therefore it is difficult for the exploitation of women and girls to stop through this industry.” At the same time, some buyers reported making enquiries about pimps and trafficking before purchasing sex but acknowledged the limits of what they could establish. As M19 put it, “you are never sure”.

Research on pimps in prostitution places the pimp-prostitute relationship on a continuum from coercive exploitation to collaborative business partnerships. The basic consensus definition of a pimp is an individual who lives off the earnings of, and exercises at least some control over, a prostituted woman, but the degree and nature of that control is heavily debated (Morselli & Savoie-Gargiso, 2014).

Pimps’ violent behaviour towards women has been noted to include economic exploitation, coercive control, violence, prostitution, and limited control over sexual practices. Pimps may also recruit women by exploiting existing social vulnerabilities and, in some cases, expose them to violence and forced sex with multiple sex buyers (Decker et al., 2013). These dynamics indicate that pimp involvement can substantially constrain women’s ability to exercise independent choice.

Sub-theme 4: The Girlfriend Experience

It emerged from findings that sometimes prostitution, for buyers, is not merely the act of buying sex.

The quantitative analysis is based on 8 questionnaire items and shows a Cronbach's alpha of 0.787, with an average inter-item correlation of 0.319, indicating an internally reliable and moderately cohesive grouping. The items addressed respondents' attitudes towards women more broadly, providing an indication of their general orientations towards women.

This was one of the stronger clusters to emerge and reflects respondents' orientation toward intimacy, emotional closeness, vulnerability, and surrendering control to a sexual partner to the point of feeling overwhelmed during sex. Respondents who scored highly on this theme tended to associate sex with feeling cared for, being emotionally open and vulnerable with a partner, and a willingness to give in or be led by a partner, rather than reasons connected to control or dominance.

The clustering of these items may suggest that respondents sometimes associate being cared for with being overwhelmed by a partner. This goes both ways: they associate experiencing vulnerability with both witnessing vulnerability in the partner and receiving it from a partner.

The mean composite score was 4.53 out of a maximum score of 7 (where 7 indicates strong agreement). The spread of scores (the gap from the 25th percentile to the median being 0.97, and the gap from the median to the 75th percentile being 0.69) was wide enough to suggest an element of heterogeneity and skew in how strongly respondents identified with this theme, rather than a shared, uniform response, as further evidenced by the median value of 4.81 sitting above the 4.53 mean value. A histogram (Figure 7) of the respondents' composite scores reflects these findings and shows a distribution where to the left of the centre, there is a wide spread of composite scores which goes down to the absolute minimum of 1 (i.e. one of the respondents disagreed strongly with all items). To the right, there is a narrower spread with the maximum composite score at 6.62, sitting below the absolute maximum of 7. Overall, the distribution suggests that this theme was generally endorsed by respondents, although the strength of identification varied across the sample.

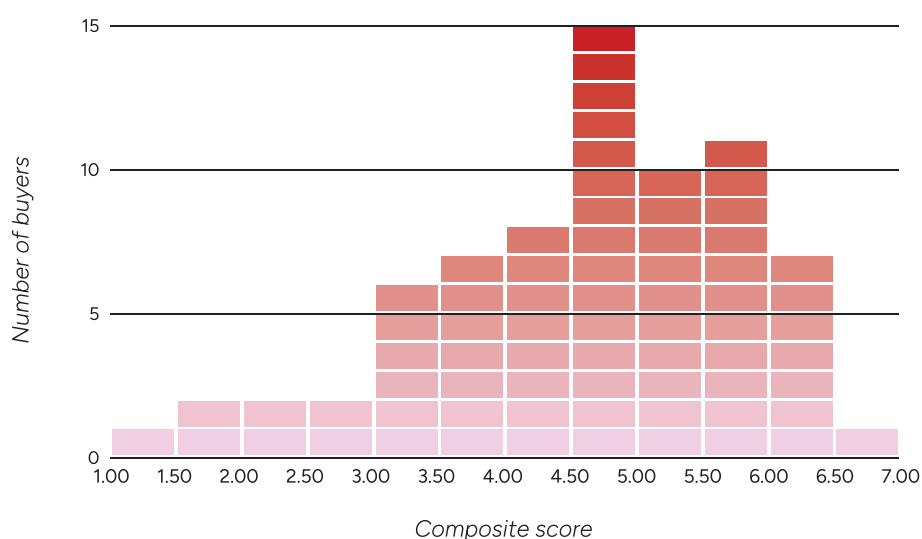


Figure 7. Histogram of composite scores for items in Sub-theme 4: The girlfriend experience. Max score = 7, Strong Agreement.

Most buyers described their ideal encounter with a woman in prostitution as involving some degree of emotional or interpersonal connection, rather than being limited to the sexual act itself. M19, for example, described wanting a slower and more affectionate beginning:

M19: “*[inkun nixtieq] li tilqani u taqbad tbusni mal-ewwel. Ghax issoltu jaqbd u blowjob mal-ewwel. Kieku jibdew iktar bil-mod, iktar normali.*”

[I'd like for her] to greet me and start kissing me immediately. Because usually they start immediately with a blowjob. If they start slower, it's more normal”].

For some, physical affection was particularly important. M30 explained, “And after sex the most important thing is hugging. If there is no hugging it's awful”, while M63 emphasised the importance of feeling desired: “You feel like they're attracted to you.” Others described encounters that extended beyond the immediate transaction and resembled an intimate relationship. M45 recalled an experience in which he spent two days with a woman, explaining:

M45: “*I had an experience where we went to a hotel, and I paid for everything myself. I spent two days with her, not just helped myself, paid, and that's it.... Treat me like a big love. Like a partner, something like that. I like to imagine she is my girlfriend.*”

The awareness that they cannot actually buy the woman's affection, at times, generated feelings of emptiness or discomfort. M59 described how this awareness affects him:

M35: “*qas nibda niffunzjona [jirreferi għall-parti tiegħu]. Ghax inkun imdejjaq. Nahseb iktar il-fanatasija li nfittex. Jew inkella nibda u ma nispiččax. Tinduna meta persuna ma tkunx tħobbok. Qisek mort ġol-ħajt. You feel she's only faking.*”

[I won't be able to function [maintain an erection]. Because I'd be sad. I think it's more the fantasy that I'd be seeking. Or else I'd start and won't be able to finish. You notice when a person doesn't love you. It's like having sex with a wall. You feel she's only faking.]

In contrast, some buyers explicitly framed the encounter as a straightforward transaction, with M1 describing it as “No strings attached”.

The phenomenon of seeking intimacy from prostitution is referred to as the “girlfriend experience”. Although the concept appears contradictory within the context of prostitution, research suggests that seeking intimacy alongside sex is a common aspect of men's demand (Chu, 2023; Dominguez & Roe-Sepowitz, 2026; Hammond & van Hooff, 2019; Meneses et al., 2018). Our findings similarly suggest that, for a substantial proportion of male buyers, purchasing sex extends beyond sexual gratification to include intimacy, emotional closeness, and experiences associated with romantic or relational connection. The girlfriend experience illustrates how prostitution can commodify not only sex but also aspects of emotional and relational life (Carbonero & Garrido, 2018).

However, the intimacy sought by buyers does not reflect a mutual emotional connection. O'Connor (2017) argues that women may be expected to perform affection and enjoyment to fulfil the buyer's expectations, regardless of their actual feelings. From the woman's perspective, this requires additional effort, that of 'boundary work', to separate the performance of intimacy from her private emotional life (Carbonero & Garrido, 2018). The emotional connection experienced by the buyer becomes part of the commercial transaction (Milrod & Weitzer, 2012). Thus, our findings suggest that male demand for prostitution may involve not only the purchase of sexual acts, but also the purchase of an experience of intimacy.

Sub-theme 5: Buying Sex Despite Feelings of Disgust and Shame

The final sub-theme concerns the tension between participants' behaviour and their moral self-image, with some reporting feelings of sadness, shame, and self-disgust, both on their own behalf and on behalf of women in prostitution, despite continuing to seek them. M22 described feeling "shameful"; M27 reported "disgust", while M24 stated: "disgusted with myself, regretful, resentful, wrong". Additionally, M61 stated that the prostitute feels "ashamed" after the act. This contradiction is consistent with Farley et al. (2017) and Prior and Peled (2025), who found that men may recognise sex buying as morally problematic and experience shame, guilt, regret and moral conflict, while nevertheless continuing to purchase sex. Prior and Peled (2025) conceptualise this tension as moral reflexivity, whereby men recognise the moral implications of their behaviour but negotiate and reconstruct their moral self-image in ways that make continued participation psychologically manageable. Once these feelings emerge, rationalisation may therefore follow through explanations such as loneliness or other male-privileged stereotypes, enabling men to continue buying sex (Dominguez & Roe-Sepowitz, 2026). Thus, feelings of shame or moral discomfort do not necessarily translate into cessation of the behaviour but may instead coexist with its continuation.

MASTER THEME 5: THE SEX BUYERS' ENTRY AND EXIT ROUTES

M21: “ *I just leave - it's not my business- when you learn she is in trouble.* ”

This theme is concerned with the sex buyers' entry and exit routes. The findings demonstrated that this process is rooted in the buyer's self-interest rather than consideration for the women involved. Four sub-themes emerged from the study, and these include referring others to a prostitute; the worst experience; the cessation of sex buying and indifference to the wellbeing of women in prostitution.

Sub-theme 1: Referring Others to a Prostitute

Where the first sub-theme is concerned, some felt comfortable recommending other men to buy sex whilst others did not. Reluctance to refer to other men stemmed from self-interested motivations and not concern or interest in the woman in prostitution. This is reflected in the following extracts: M9 “It’s a waste of time, and you can have serious consequences if she says she has been raped”; M54: “ I would say that it is something you regret at one point, so I would tell him not to do it” and M59 “Għax fiha side effects. Ma ssibx kuntentezza. It’s temporary.” [“Because it has side effects. You do not find happiness. It’s temporary.”] This reasoning is also consistent with other studies, namely, Grönvall (2022, 2024), who found that sex buyers abstain from recommending prostitution due to self-interested concerns, such as personal safety, rather than out of respect or care for the women involved.

Sub-theme 2: The Worst Experience

Sub-theme 2 is concerned with the worst experience; this too sheds light on the self-interest of the buyers. Among others, these include: M11: “Meta waħda ħarget il-ktieb tal-iskola u qaltli niffirma. Eżempju, fit-Tajlandja tiltaqa’ ma’ mara ikollha 50 u ma jidhrux. U kultant other way round. Ma tindunax li taħt l-eta’. Din kienet zgħira ħafna u ma kelliex l-iċken idea” [“When one [the prostitute] took out a school book and asked me to sign. For example, in Thailand you meet women in their 50s, and they do not look like 50s. And at times the other way round. They do not look underage. She was very young, and I did not have, I did not have the slightest idea”], and M23: “Ġo strip club. Tajtha xi ħaga extra biex terdġu u wegġajt. L-agħar esperjenza”. [“In a strip club. I gave her some extra cash so she can suck my dick and I was hurt. The worst experience.”]- Once again, the negative experiences were driven by self-interest rather than concern for the prostitute. In addition, situations like the one presented by M11 are consistent with the work of Montgomery (2008), who found that in Thailand, the boundaries between tourists who engage in sexual exploitation of children and those who purchase sex from adults are highly permeable, with individuals often moving fluidly between the two markets, adopting an age-blind approach to sex buying. Such situations continue to emphasise the male privilege and the rationalisations and justifications that perpetuate male dominance over those who are vulnerable within society.

Sub-theme 3: The Cessation of Sex Buying

Sub-theme 3, cessation of sex buying is expressed through various extracts, namely, M63: “I had some problems with my heart and I said it’s time to stop”; M69: “I stopped, I got bored of it”; M72 stated that he is cutting down “because I kinda have a girlfriend now and I am not going to prostitutes anymore. I go to the massage parlour. She gets me a massage. And oral most of the time” and M51: “I am now on a spiritual journey therefore now I am not engaging in prostitution”. These narratives are consistent with other studies that report how self-interest determines cessation from prostitution (Shively et al., 2008; Ward & Hussey, 2013).

When asked which legal sanctions would deter them from buying sex, more than 75% of respondents indicated that being placed on a sex offenders’ register, having their identity publicly disclosed, and receiving a prison sentence would deter them from purchasing sex (Table 12). Of those who responded ‘Other’, respondents mentioned corporal punishment, being shot, chemical castration, being separated from their children, and having one’s visa status removed. Others said that they would buy sex abroad and that “The more government tells you what to do, the more they fail. None of these would work”.

For those who answered that a fine would act as a deterrent, fines ranged from € 5,000 to € 10,000. A fine of € 1,000 would deter 50% of respondents.

For those who said they would be deterred by time spent in jail, 17% said that any time would act as a deterrent, as “that will leave something on your record. Anything that leaves something on my record.” A further 26% of respondents said that a day would be a sufficient deterrent. The remainder of respondents gave answers between 2 days and 5 years.

Table 12. Deterrents to prevent buyers from buying sex, as reported by buyers (n=72)

Deterrents to prevent respondents from using women in prostitution	% of buyers
Added to the “sex offender” registry along with rapists and paedophiles	85%
Your photo and/or name posted on the Internet	78%
Spend time in jail	78%
Your photo and/or name in the local newspaper	76%
Your photo and/or name on a poster	75%
Greater criminal penalty	74%
Larger amount of money paid for the fine	71%
A letter sent to your family saying you were arrested for soliciting a woman in prostitution	69%
Your bicycle/car taken away by police	61%
Having your driver’s license revoked	61%
Having to do community service	47%
Being required to attend an educational program for men who buy women in prostitution	38%
Other	18%

Sub-theme 4: The Indifference Toward the Wellbeing of Women in Prostitution

Indifference towards the wellbeing of women in prostitution was reflected across several extracts. For example, M21 reflected on encouraging younger women to use drugs during sexual encounters, while acknowledging that they may have felt unable to refuse:

M21: “*I’m afraid that I might have introduced drugs to younger girls because they had to get along – I asked them to take drugs during the sexual act of prostitution (as mentioned earlier, this would improve the experience as things get out of control) and they might have said yes just to make me happy, as they might not have had the option to say no – they might have not wanted to take drugs.*”

In this account, the participant recognised the possibility that the women did not genuinely consent to taking drugs, yet his concern emerged retrospectively rather than preventing the behaviour at the time.

Similarly, M51 described hearing multiple men in an apartment and identifying them as pimps: “Darba nisma’ rġiel fl-appartament u kien hemm iktar minn wieħed, u naf li kienu pimps”. [“Once I heard men in the apartment and there was more than one, and I know they were pimps.”] Despite recognising circumstances that could indicate exploitation or coercion, the participant did not report withdrawing from the encounter. This pattern is further illustrated when he stated: “Qiegħed nisma’ l-għajjat u smajtu jsawwatha – xorta kont mort magħha dakinhar”. [“I heard shouting and I heard him beating her – I still went with her on that day.”] A similar awareness was expressed by M17 who described the experience of women as,

M17: *xejn pożittivi, imma anzi din hija trawma għan-nisa. Trawma għax dawn ikollhom jagħmlu sess ma’ kull tip ta’ raġel u ma jkunux jistgħu jirrifjutaw għax huma jkunu vulnerabbli. Uħud kienu qed jiġu mheddha. Għax dawn ikunu foqra u jkunu ddisprati għall-flus - ma jkollhom ebda opportunita’ oħra u ġieli jkunu vittmi ta’ vizzji. Ħafna mid-drabi diffiċli joħorgu mill-prostituzzjoni minħabba li ħafna drabi jkunu qed jiġu kkontrollati minn pimps u jkunu qed jiġu riktattati.*

[nothing positive, but rather this is trauma for women. Trauma because they have to have sex with all kinds of men and they cannot refuse because they are vulnerable. Some of them were being threatened. Because they are poor and desperate for money – they have no other opportunities and sometimes they are victims of addictions. Many times, it is difficult for them to leave prostitution because they are often being controlled by pimps and are being blackmailed.]

These accounts are particularly indicative of a recognition of women’s vulnerability and exposure to harm that does not necessarily translate into a concern for their wellbeing or a change in the men’s behaviour. M51 described directly hearing what he understood to be physical violence and nevertheless proceeded with the sexual encounter, while M17 articulated an awareness of the coercive and exploitative circumstances in which some women may find themselves, including poverty, addiction, threats, control by pimps and blackmail. A similar pattern emerged in M63’s description of the potential psychological consequences for women in prostitution:

M63: *It affects her mental health for sure. Because she is selling her body. She is having a lot of penises in her a day.*

Although this statement acknowledges that prostitution may negatively affect women’s mental health, the language used simultaneously reduces the woman to her sexual function and describes her body in objectifying terms. Thus, awareness of potential harm does not necessarily translate into empathy or a reconsideration of the buyer’s own participation.

M51 provided another example in which the participant appeared to notice troubling conditions surrounding the encounter. He described entering an apartment where there was a bin filled with used condoms and reported feeling disturbed by what he saw:

M51: “*Dhajt ġo appartament u kien hemm trash can – u kelli x’naqsam magħha u narah mimli condoms u hassejtni ħażin u rajthom maħmuġin – u din diżgustanti għaliha.*

[I entered an apartment, and there was a trash can, and I had sex with her and saw it full of condoms, and I felt bad and saw them dirty, and this was disgusting for her.]

This suggests that the participant was capable of recognising that the circumstances surrounding the encounter were troubling and potentially degrading for the woman. However, this recognition did not prevent him from continuing with the sexual encounter. His response can therefore be understood as demonstrating a separation between recognising troubling or harmful circumstances and acting upon that recognition. The woman’s wellbeing remained secondary to the continuation of the sexual encounter.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that indifference did not necessarily involve an absence of awareness. Rather, participants sometimes appeared to recognise signs of distress, exploitation, violence, or degrading conditions but did not allow this recognition to alter their behaviour or decision to engage in or continue with the sexual encounter. This distinction is important because it points towards low levels of empathy in practice: awareness of a woman’s potentially harmful circumstances coexisted with continued sexual participation. Similar forms of indifference towards the wellbeing of women in prostitution have been identified in previous research (Farley et al., 2016; Malamuth & Huppert, 2017). This finding also reinforces the broader themes of entitlement, misogyny, and patriarchal attitudes identified in the preceding themes and sub-themes (Davis et al., 2020; Manne, 2018, 2020; Schulz & Herrberg, 2026). Rather than viewing the woman’s circumstances as a reason to reconsider or withdraw from the encounter, the accounts suggest that her availability for sexual use could remain intact even in the presence of indicators that her wellbeing was compromised.

Buyers’ awareness of the harm caused by prostitution was also reflected in the quantitative findings. Respondents were asked to rate the negative and positive effects of prostitution on a scale of 0 - 3 on the woman and on the community, as per Table 13. All four items land on the same median (1.0), but the means tell a clearer story: negative ratings run noticeably higher than positive ratings for both topics, most sharply for the woman herself (mean 1.60 above the midpoint of 1.5 vs 0.82).

Table 13. The perceived impact of prostitution on the woman in prostitution and the community, as reported by buyers (n=72, 0 = No impact at all, 3=Extreme impact)

Impact of prostitution	Mean	Median	% of buyers who reported a very strong/extreme impact
Negative impact on the woman in prostitution	1.60	1.0	1.0
Positive impact on the woman in prostitution	0.82	1.0	1.0
Negative impact on the community	1.15	1.0	1.0
Positive impact on the community	0.82	1.0	1.0

A paired test comparing each respondent's own negative and positive ratings tells a more precise story. For the effect of prostitution on the woman, this difference is large and statistically robust (effect size 0.81, $p_{fdr} < 0.001$): a clear majority of respondents rate the negative impact on the woman herself higher than the positive impact, and almost no one rates it the other way round. As for the effect on the community, the same direction holds but more moderately (effect size 0.36, $p_{fdr} = 0.029$). This is still significant, but with a less lopsided split. Interestingly, nearly a fifth of respondents actually rate the positive community impact higher, as per Table 14.

Table 14. Effect of prostitution on women and the community, with respondents' replies aggregated by whether they rated negative impact larger than/equal to/smaller than the positive impact. Each row adds up to 100% (n=72)

Impact on:	% of buyers who rated negative > positive	Rated equally	Rated positive > negative
Woman in prostitution	54.20%	37.50%	8.30%
Community	44.40%	37.50%	18.10%

RECOMMENDATIONS

This part presents a summary of the main findings and the recommendations that emerge from the study. It ends with recommendations for future research that will ensure that laws, policies and services continue meeting the needs of the most vulnerable in the context of women in prostitution.

SUMMARY OF THE MAIN FINDINGS

The study concludes that sex buying is rooted in a complex structural and cultural system that reinforces male privilege, promotes toxic forms of masculinity, and normalises the notion that men are entitled to purchase women's bodies. The findings also revealed the existence of underlying discourses about women in prostitution that implicitly justify and rationalise the practice of sex buying. It is therefore essential for policymakers to develop a critical understanding of these discourses and their broader implications, rather than accepting at face value narratives that may be presented as neutral, objective, or representative of individual choice.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates the extent to which sex buyers shift responsibility for the consequences associated with the sex trade, including sexually transmitted infections and other harms, onto women in prostitution. This tendency was evident even in cases where women were clearly identified as victims of trafficking and exploitation.

Given the findings of this study, there is an urgent need for government action that prioritises the prevention of exploitation, the reduction of demand, and the protection of vulnerable individuals. Policymakers should therefore consider implementing measures consistent with the Abolitionist Model and informed by the evidence presented by the research team. Such an approach offers a pathway towards addressing the structural inequalities, exploitation, and gendered power relations that underpin the prostitution system.

RECOMMENDATIONS MADE DIRECTLY BY SEX BUYERS

Some recommendations were made directly by sex buyers during their interviews. These recommendations are significant because they demonstrate that some participants themselves identified economic, social, educational, legal and technological measures that could contribute to reducing prostitution, exploitation and demand. Their recommendations included:

M30: Improved economic satisfaction [to stop prostitution]

M44: If there are more [financial] opportunities, people would be less inclined to go into prostitution.

M54: Giving some privileges - giving them more power to work- finding a way to earn money other than prostitution.

M54: Abolish [prostitution] for both men and women

M63: Get these websites banned. It's easy access if you know the sites, and there are hundreds and hundreds. It shows you 10 images per girl. There's thick, oral, kisses, blow jobs without condoms. Well-illustrated to seek exactly what you want. If you ban them, people can't... yeah.

M68: What I can say is that more research should be done about the use of heavy pornography in Malta. In Malta, a lot of people struggle with pornography. Some want to stop, and they need help. Porn can be connected to this research.

RECOMMENDATIONS COMING FROM THIS STUDY

STRENGTHEN THE LEGAL PROTECTION OF WOMEN IN PROSTITUTION

Malta's current legal framework should be reviewed to ensure that women in prostitution are adequately protected from exploitation, violence and coercion. Women should not be criminalised or penalised for their involvement in prostitution.

Any provisions in Maltese law that penalise women for soliciting, selling sexual services or related activities should be reviewed to determine whether they place women at further risk, and amended accordingly. The focus of the law should be shifted towards those who purchase sex and those who organise, facilitate or profit from prostitution.

Instead, the law should recognise the vulnerability and risks associated with prostitution and place greater responsibility on those who create and sustain the demand for sexual exploitation.

CRIMINALISE THE PURCHASE OF SEX

Men who purchase sex should be held accountable for their role in sustaining the demand for prostitution. A legal framework based on an abolitionist approach could shift the focus of the law from women in prostitution to sex buyers, pimps and traffickers.

For Malta, this would require the introduction or strengthening of specific legal provisions so that the purchase of sexual services is an offence, while ensuring that the person being prostituted is not criminalised. This would represent a significant shift from focusing on the conduct of women in prostitution to addressing the demand that sustains the sex trade.

Such an approach recognises that the person purchasing sex has the power to walk away, while women in prostitution may be experiencing poverty, coercion, violence, addiction, previous abuse or other forms of vulnerability.

HOLD PIMPS AND TRAFFICKERS ACCOUNTABLE

Greater attention should be given to the role of pimps, traffickers and other individuals who profit from prostitution. Law enforcement should strengthen investigations into coercion, trafficking, organised crime and financial exploitation connected to prostitution.

In Malta, this should include a review of whether existing laws and enforcement mechanisms are sufficiently effective in addressing individuals who recruit, control, transport, advertise, facilitate or financially benefit from the prostitution of women. Particular attention should be given to situations involving threats, violence, debt, economic dependency and other forms of control.

The findings also suggest the need to make greater use of information obtained from sex buyers. Men who purchase sex may know pimps, trafficking networks and other forms of exploitation. Where sex buyers are investigated or prosecuted, law enforcement should consider their potential knowledge of the people controlling women, locations where prostitution takes place and possible trafficking networks, rather than relying predominantly on women who may themselves be under threat or control.

ESTABLISH COMPREHENSIVE EXIT SERVICES

Legal reform must be accompanied by properly funded exit programmes. Women cannot be expected to leave prostitution if they have no safe alternative for housing, income or employment, especially considering the dependency they may have on their abuser for financial support, accommodation, protection or other basic needs.

Malta should establish a properly funded exit programme for women who want to leave prostitution. This should include safe and stable housing, financial assistance, access to healthcare and psychological support, employment and vocational training, education opportunities and legal assistance.

A national exit programme should provide, at minimum:

- safe and stable housing;
- financial and emergency assistance;
- access to healthcare and psychological support;
- employment and vocational training;
- education opportunities;
- legal assistance;
- support for women experiencing addiction or other vulnerabilities; and
- long-term assistance to support successful transition out of prostitution.

Access to these services should not depend on a woman's willingness or ability to testify against a pimp, trafficker or sex buyer. Support should be available based on need and vulnerability.

ENSURE SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE BEFORE ENFORCEMENT ACTION

Protection and support services should be established alongside, and where possible before, increased enforcement against pimps, traffickers and sex buyers. Women need to know that leaving prostitution will not result in homelessness, poverty or further vulnerability.

This is particularly important in Malta, where women may remain economically or otherwise dependent on pimps or others for housing, income or protection. Exit support should therefore be available before women are expected to leave the sex trade, ensuring that leaving prostitution does not result in homelessness, poverty or further exploitation.

IMPROVE IDENTIFICATION OF TRAFFICKING AND EXPLOITATION

Law enforcement, social workers, healthcare professionals and other frontline services should receive specialised training to identify signs of trafficking, coercion and exploitation.

Malta should ensure that police and other frontline professionals receive specific training on identifying women who may be under pimp control or experiencing trafficking and exploitation.

Particular care should be taken when engaging with women who may still be under the control of pimps or traffickers. Women should be approached primarily as potential victims requiring protection and support, rather than as offenders.

STRENGTHEN PREVENTION AND AWARENESS AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

Prevention should form an important part of Malta's response to prostitution and sexual exploitation.

Malta should expand prevention work with young people, building on prevention sessions that have already been carried out. Further programmes should address gender equality, healthy relationships, sexual consent, exploitation, pornography, trafficking and the realities of prostitution.

Young people should also be encouraged to critically examine the demand for prostitution and the power inequalities that can exist between buyers and women in prostitution.

ENSURE THAT SURVIVORS' VOICES INFORM POLICY

The perspectives of women who have exited prostitution should be central to the development and evaluation of Malta's policies.

The experiences of women who have exited prostitution should be incorporated into the development and review of Malta's legislation and policies. Their perspectives provide important evidence about pimp control, violence, trafficking, economic dependence and the barriers women face when attempting to leave prostitution.

Malta should therefore involve exited survivors in the development, implementation and evaluation of future legislative and policy reforms.

Their experiences should therefore inform legislation, prevention programmes, law enforcement strategies and the design of exit services.

ADOPT A HUMAN-RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH

Malta should consider moving towards a human-rights-based approach that recognises prostitution as an issue of gender inequality, exploitation and violence against women.

For Malta, legal reform should also be accompanied by measures addressing the social and economic conditions that can make women vulnerable to entering prostitution. This should include access to employment, housing, social protection, healthcare and other forms of support for women experiencing poverty or other vulnerabilities.

International examples, including Sweden, Iceland, Norway, Canada, Northern Ireland, France, Ireland and Israel, demonstrate different ways in which legislation can shift responsibility towards sex buyers, pimps and traffickers while protecting and supporting people in prostitution.

ENSURE ADEQUATE SOCIAL PROTECTION AND ECONOMIC SECURITY

The government has a responsibility to support a decent standard of living for all members of society. No woman should be placed in a position where she must contemplate entering prostitution to survive. Adequate social protection, economic stability and accessible support services are essential for safeguarding dignity and wellbeing.

STRENGTHEN INSTITUTIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Several of the quotes indicated a concerning lack of boundaries between individuals involved in pimping and those entrusted with the protection of all citizens, including women in prostitution. Robust policies, laws and regulations, together with regular review mechanisms and appropriate sanctions, should be in place to ensure accountability, safeguard vulnerable individuals and uphold public trust in state institutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could benefit from a quantitative study to further investigate the issues examined in the present research. A quantitative approach may encourage the participation of men who may have been unwilling to participate in the study or openly disclose their experiences, attitudes, or involvement due to the sensitive nature of the subject. The use of an anonymous quantitative approach may therefore provide participants with a greater sense of privacy and encourage more honest disclosure. This could contribute to a broader understanding of men's perspectives and allow for the identification of patterns and associations that may not have been captured in the present study.

Further research could also explore the experiences of women involved in prostitution who have been incarcerated and have experienced coercion, exploitation, or control by pimps or other individuals. Such a study could examine how experiences of manipulation, coercion, and exploitation may intersect with incarceration and contribute to negative effects on women's emotional wellbeing, identity, relationships, and reintegration into society. Exploring these experiences from the women's perspectives would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the gender-specific dimensions of incarceration, while also recognising how some women involved in prostitution may have experienced victimisation and limited agency within exploitative circumstances.

CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that Malta requires more than minor adjustments to its existing approach. A comprehensive reform should decriminalise women in prostitution, criminalise the purchase of sex, strengthen measures against pimps and traffickers, and create properly funded exit services.

Therefore, the purpose of legal reform should be to reduce the demand that sustains the sex trade, prevent exploitation, protect women from violence and coercion, and provide realistic alternatives for women who wish to leave.

Malta can draw on the experiences of countries that have adopted different versions of the Abolitionist Model, while developing a framework appropriate to the Maltese context. Most importantly, any reform should be informed by the experiences of women who have exited prostitution and should recognise that legal protection must be accompanied by genuine social and economic alternatives.

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