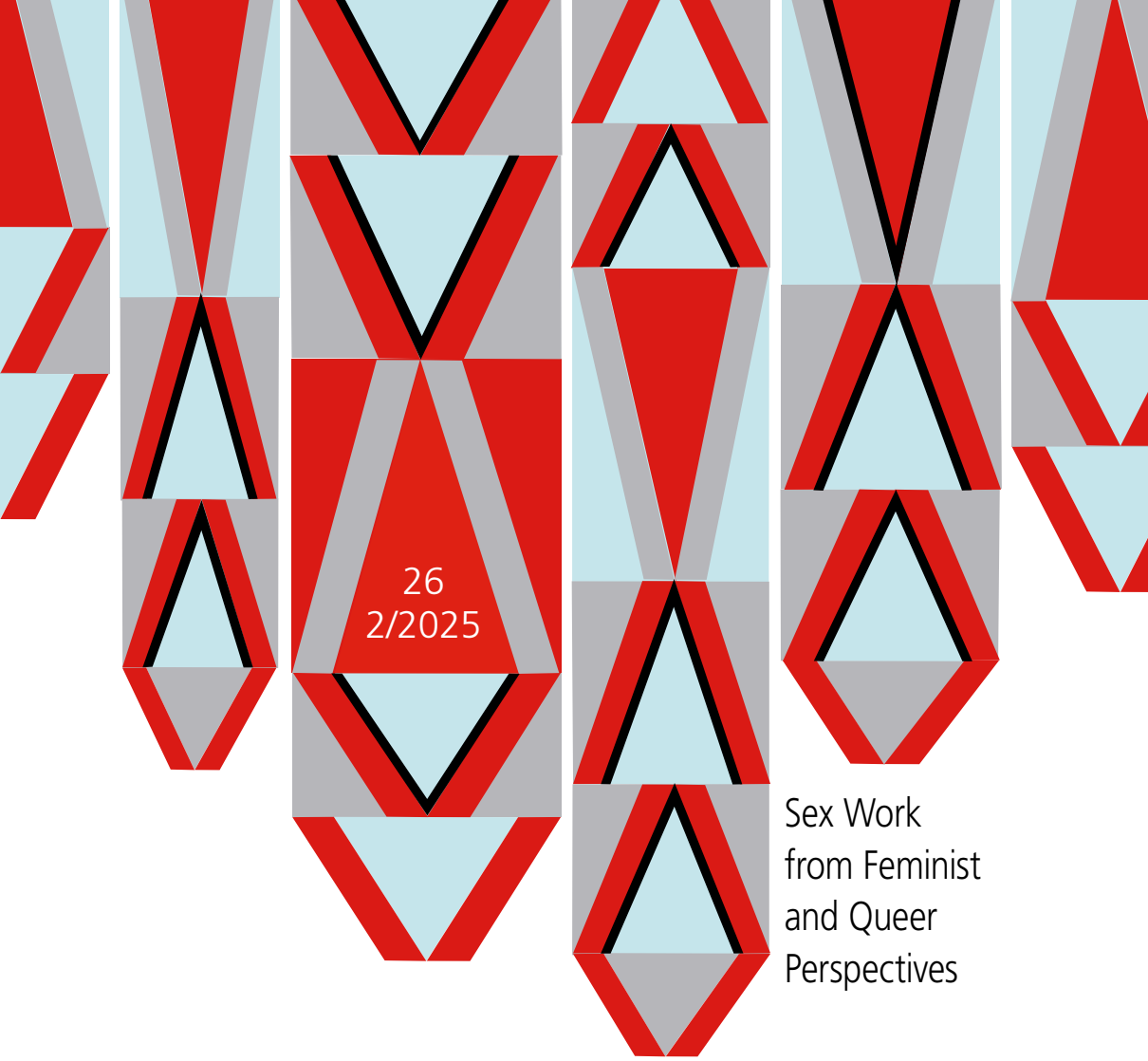

Sex Work
from Feminist
and Queer
Perspectives

GENDER A VÝZKUM

GENDER AND RESEARCH

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Sex Work from Feminist and Queer Perspectives

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Work, Rights, and Resistance: Queer and Feminist Views on Sex Work in Europe

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When *Anora*, a film depicting the life of a Brooklyn sex worker, was awarded the Palme d'Or at Cannes and subsequently an Academy Award in 2025, sex work – simultaneously commodified and celebrated through mainstream artistic acclaim – attracted the attention of global audiences. Lauded for its emotional complexity and apparent realism, the film nonetheless reignited longstanding debates about representation, authorship, and exclusion. Whose story was being told, by whom, and to what end? While *Anora* was praised for offering an empathic reading of sex work, sex workers themselves were largely absent from the public discourse surrounding a cultural product that claimed to speak for them, as they so often are, even when the topic is their own lives (Karandikar et al. 2024). Moreover, the film's Western gaze, which portrays not only Eastern European sex workers but also third parties as naive, boorish, or primitive, helped perpetuate existing hierarchical divisions between East and West (Krivonos, Diatlova 2020; O'Brien 2018).

This wave of visibility took place against the backdrop of a rapidly changing global landscape. The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated a boom in online erotic labour, diversifying the field and making it more accessible to new social groups, while simultaneously introducing new forms of precarisation, exploitation, and marginalisation (Yu, Nelson, McBride 2020; Pezzutto 2024; Benoit, Unsworth 2022). The platformisation of sex work opened up new income streams via subscription-based services and streaming platforms, yet it also intensified dependence on opaque algorithms,

corporate gatekeeping, and emerging forms of exploitation. This contradiction between increased visibility and persistent marginalisation defines much of the current discourse on sex work, which, in turn, impacts sex workers' lived experiences. Popular culture increasingly draws on stereotyped sex worker aesthetics and narratives (Cojocaru 2016), but often fails to address the structural inequalities and stigma that continue to affect the most precarious workers – particularly migrants, racialised individuals, and trans and disabled sex workers (Rosati et al. 2024). While sex work has re-entered the mainstream, the participation of sex workers in public discussion themselves remains limited. Even when porn stars or OnlyFans creators achieve visibility as influencers, they are rarely seen beyond their association with sex work and are often reduced to one-dimensional figures.

Unlike those in conventional jobs, sex workers are rarely portrayed as complex individuals. At the same time, the public conversation around sex work often revolves around narratives of personal choice and motivation and questions of why or how someone begins sex work, rather than focusing on the broader social and economic conditions that shape these decisions. This emphasis reflects a neoliberal logic that isolates individual agency from structures of precarity and inequality, treating sex work as an exceptional case rather than part of wider labour dynamics (Benoit et al. 2021). Such a framing obscures systemic factors and ultimately reinforces stigma, as it disconnects sex work from collective struggles over labour rights, economic justice, and social recognition. In this sense, the renewed cultural visibility of sex work often operates within a limited framework of personal stories and marketable aesthetics, rather than as a platform for addressing the intersecting hierarchies of class, race, gender, and citizenship that shape who is seen, who is heard, and who remains marginalised.

This logic of visibility also extends to visual and aesthetic representations, where the same neoliberal frameworks of individuality and desirability intersect with longstanding social stigma. Sex workers continue to be represented through narrow, stereotyped tropes that conflate sexuality with moral worth and reproduce different hierarchies. The concept of whiteness plays a central role here: white women are frequently depicted as victims of prostitution (Brooks 2021), deserving of sympathy and rescue, whereas women of colour are rarely afforded the same perception (Kempadoo 2004). Instead, they are often viewed through a double lens of racialised bias – considered less attractive according to dominant white beauty standards, yet simultaneously hypersexualised and portrayed as inherently promiscuous. Even within sex worker rights movements, whiteness often remains the default, shaping which narratives are amplified and whose experiences are centred (Ham 2024). At the same time, racialised women, while facing multiple axes of discrimination and harm, can also navigate and strategically employ these very stereotypes to generate forms of erotic capital and

agency (Ham 2024). Within predominantly white Western contexts, hypersexuality and the figure of the illicit other can become resources through which some racialized sex workers negotiate visibility, mobility, erotic autonomy, and self-care. This does not erase structural inequalities but highlights the complexity and ambivalence of erotic labour as a site of both constraint and resistance.

The persistent stereotyping of sex work and sex workers is mirrored in policy and legislative developments across Europe. Within the European Union and at the national level, we are witnessing a growing wave of legal and regulatory shifts that, under the banner of protection, increasingly criminalise or control sex work and sex workers. These developments are often driven by moral panic, conservative ideologies, and carceral feminism, and they disproportionately impact the most marginalised sex workers. At the EU level, anti-trafficking and migration legislation and policy have helped bolster punitive approaches to sex work, which are rooted in stereotypical representations of 'vulnerability' and narrow understandings of the sector as a whole (Rossoni, de Massol de Rebetz 2025). While some states have pursued more worker-centred reforms, such as Belgium's 2022 move towards decriminalisation, which was later coupled with labour protections (e.g. pensions, healthcare, parental leave) for sex workers working under contract (IPPF 2024), these remain exceptions in a broader landscape dominated by criminalisation and securitisation.

One of the most influential – and controversial – policy frameworks remains the Swedish model/Nordic model, which criminalises clients while claiming to protect sex workers (Vanwesenbeeck 2017). This model has been adopted in countries such as France and Ireland, was recently proposed in Spain, Scotland, and Germany, and was endorsed by a 2023 European Parliament report under the name of the equality model (Rossoni, de Massol de Rebetz 2025). However, despite its stated aims, the model has often led to increased police harassment, social isolation, loss of income, and reduced access to healthcare and justice, especially for migrant sex workers (Smith, Mac 2018). For these reasons, it is often referred to as punitivist (Vuolajärvi 2019) or sexual humanitarianism (Mai et al. 2021). In France, for instance, a 2016 law penalising clients has pushed sex work further underground, increasing workers' vulnerability to violence (Giametta, Bail 2023). Additionally, large-scale international events, such as the Olympics (dos Santos, de Sá, Condessa 2025), have intensified these dynamics, often leading to policies of social cleansing (Finkelstein 2024) aimed at removing marginalised populations, including unhoused people and sex workers, from public spaces.

In this evolving context, sex worker-led activism – often rooted in queer, migrant, and feminist movements – has become more organised, visible, and transnational (Cruz, Herrmann 2024). Sex workers are no longer merely the 'studied subjects' of

policy and research but increasingly act as researchers, educators, and organizers, bringing critical, experience-based perspectives to debates long shaped by paternalistic and abolitionist frameworks. This issue might serve as an example that this collaboration between academics, practitioners, and activists is fruitful and produces rigorous and transformative results.

Accordingly, in recent years, research on sex work has grown substantially, increasingly shaped by sex workers themselves, activist scholars, and participatory and community-based approaches that centre lived experience. However, despite the growing academic interest, sex work remains a contested and under-researched field, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). In this region, publications examining sex work under state socialism have only recently begun to appear (Dobeš 2022; Dolinsek, Saryusz-Wolska 2023; Dušková 2023), and analyses of post-1989 developments remain notably scarce. Feminist, intersectional, and decolonial frameworks are still largely absent from regional scholarship. Only a small number of scholars have approached sex work from explicitly feminist perspectives (Havelková, Bellak-Hančilová 2014; Dudová 2015; Dobrowolska 2020), while the dominant discourses continue to be shaped by criminology, medicine, and legal regulation, with sex work frequently framed as deviance or social pathology rather than labour (Novotný, Zapletal 2001; Chmelík 2003; Kraus, Hroncová 2010).

It is also important to note that feminist interpretations of sex work vary significantly – ranging from a recognition of sex work as legitimate labour (Leigh 1997) to its framing as inevitably patriarchal violence (MacKinnon 1991; Dworkin 1981), sometimes with transphobic ideology (Raymond 1980). Among the most vocal critics are some radical feminists, often referred to as SWERFs (Sex Worker-Exclusionary Radical Feminists). Meanwhile, feminist and queer perspectives may at times range between glamorisation and moral condemnation, limiting the space for more nuanced understandings of sex work as a complex social and economic practice. In this special issue, we position ourselves within an understanding of sex work as legitimate labour, while rejecting both its idealisation and its blanket condemnation. We recognise that sex work, like other forms of labour under capitalism, is shaped by structural inequalities and material conditions, and is therefore neither inherently liberating nor inherently violent (Berg 2021; Weeks 2011). Decriminalisation is, for us, the first necessary systemic step toward ensuring safety, rights, and economic justice for sex workers.

While issues such as consent, autonomy, and sexual violence are examined from a variety of perspectives and particularly in feminist discourse, the labour dimension of sex work is frequently overshadowed by the focus on sex and sexuality. Key anthologies on sex work often uncritically accept the position of labour in capitalism and ignore the violence in wage work (Berg 2014). While recognising sex work as work is essential

for framing sex workers as legitimate participants in the labour market (Pitcher 2015), without redistributive measures, such as access to social protections and strong labour rights, recognition risks remaining purely symbolic.

Neoliberalism frames labour flexibility as a sphere of freedom; for many workers, including those engaged in sex work, flexibility is also tied to financial insecurity and anxiety about meeting basic needs. Austerity policies and financial crises disproportionately affect the less privileged segments of the population (Jarvis-King 2023). Precarious conditions in the labour market force people to combine multiple jobs, one of which may be selling sexual services. This sector is further negatively affected by factors such as the absence of a clear legal framework or the presence of punitive legislation, discrimination in the labour market, and stigma (Benoit et al. 2021). These dynamics contribute to a persistent lack of awareness regarding working conditions, the problems of employment contracts, access to training, and opportunities for collective organising (Gall 2012). Moreover, amplifying critical voices or acknowledging that sex work is not inherently empowering, and may in fact be exploitative, is often co-opted by some radical or Marxist feminists to support arguments for the abolition of sex work itself, rather than prompting a broader critique of capitalism or labour structures more generally, which would arguably be a more appropriate and productive point of departure.

The challenge of organising and gaining recognition, such as being part of a union, confronts a deeper issue: the very definition of work and, more specifically, the recognition of sex work as legitimate labour by external decision-makers. As Gregor Gall (2012: 1) writes in his book *An Agency of Their Own*, 'professions, like law and medicine, not only control entry into their own ranks and internally regulate themselves – making themselves into powerful collectives – but they are also accorded large measures of respect and worth by society in general'. The limited participation in collectives is therefore not solely a result of internal dynamics within sex work communities, but also of external conditions that hinder such organising, conditions that instead perpetuate ostracisation and reinforce hierarchies between work and non-work and between productive and reproductive labour.

Polarised feminist debates around sex work, as well as reflections on sex work as labour are still largely absent from Central and Eastern European literature and legislation. The field remains comparatively underdeveloped and dominated by moral, religious, and post-socialist narratives – a trend that editors and authors hope to begin countering via this special issue.

The contribution of this thematic issue

In this issue, we critically engage with these evolving dynamics of sex work across different cultural, legal, and historical contexts and from diverse perspectives, while centring the agency of sex workers. The intersection of sex work with gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, migrant status or citizenship, and disability raises urgent questions that can no longer be answered through black-and-white, outdated, or moralising frameworks. This issue seeks to create space for contributions that challenge persistent stereotypes and resist the framing of sex work as inherently pathological, while remaining critical of narratives about the 'happy hooker', white feminism, or saviourism (Smith, Mac 2018). Our aim is also to amplify the voices of sex workers, which remain largely excluded from mainstream and academic debates, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. Some of the editors and contributors to this issue are sex workers themselves, and the issue draws on queer, intersectional, feminist, and anti-carceral theories that emphasise lived experience, structural critique, and political agency. By reflecting the complex and changing realities of sex work today and situating them within broader feminist, queer, and anti-carceral frameworks, we hope to open up new questions, unsettle old binaries, and contribute to more nuanced and inclusive understandings of sex work and its place in society, both globally and locally.

This collection brings together four articles and two essays that explore sex work from a range of perspectives and across different disciplines, lived experiences, and geographical contexts. Soloviova opens the issue by offering a historical perspective on the study of sex work in CEE in which she examines currency prostitution in Soviet Ukraine. Drawing on declassified Soviet archival materials, media reports, legal decrees, and Soviet-era films, she delves deeper into the framings and representations of currency prostitution in Soviet moral discourses. The analysis demonstrates that currency prostitution posed a significant challenge to official narratives of economic equality and justice in Soviet Ukraine. Its regulation functioned not only as a means of controlling the illicit economy but also, importantly, as a tool for reinforcing the ideological legitimacy of socialism.

While the Soviet case highlights how sex work was framed within socialist moral and economic discourses, more recent contexts reveal new challenges and contradictions. Drawing on Marxist feminist theories of social reproduction and humanitarianism, del Vita presents a case study of a non-profit organisation that provides socio-health support to sex workers in France, a country that applies a neo-abolitionist approach to sex work. Through ethnographic research, the article demonstrates how the organisation drifted away from the peer-led principles on which it was founded, increasingly adopting a victimising stance towards sex workers. This shift is reflected in the absence of

sex worker representation among the organisation's staff, a reluctance to advocate for legislative reform, and hesitancy to collaborate with the broader sex work movement, often out of concerns about jeopardising funding. Del Vita highlights the critical importance of non-hierarchical, sex worker-led community models that challenge the structural conditions that produce precarity, and that promote meaningful and sustainable social transformation.

Engaging with this call, Martini focuses on the experience of sex worker trade unionism in Germany. Through qualitative interviews with sex workers who have experience with union organising, she explores the challenges and opportunities of organising sex workers in Germany, a country where discussions around the potential criminalisation of clients of sex workers are ongoing. While identifying stigmatisation, isolation, segregation, and power relations are pressing challenges, the research argues that sex worker unionisation plays an essential role in representing the interests of sex workers and is essential to advocate for fairer working conditions.

Recognising the growing importance of technology in sex work, Hombach and Ivanova's paper examines sex workers' use of Reddit forums and specifically focuses on three prominent queer and trans-centred NSFW ('not safe for work') Reddit communities (subreddits): r/transporn, r/FtMPorn, and r/EnbyLewds. Through observation of these communities, coupled with qualitative interviews with online sex workers, the authors examine how these digital spaces function simultaneously as sites of identity validation, affirmation, and commerce, further underscoring the ways in which queer content creators strategically adjust their presentation across platforms with different norms and audiences. The research highlights the complex interplay between identity negotiation and commerce, as well as the mediating role of technology, as a tool for affirmation and sexual agency within marginalised online communities.

The two essays address key issues relevant to a range of professionals working on (and in) sex work. Echoing the contributions on sex worker activism by other authors in this issue, Bledsoe turns the spotlight on the experience of the Berlin Strippers Collective, tracing its history, wins, and challenges, and emphasising the crucial role played by artistic performances in contrasting stigma. Walter's philosophical reflection offers a thoughtful epilogue on the issue. Centring the argument on three much-needed shifts in approach and mindset relevant to academics, journalists, and activists alike, they argue for moving away from reductionism towards acknowledging the complexity of sex worker identities and experiences; from moral ethics towards pragmatic ethics; and finally from a reading of sex work as an isolated phenomenon towards understanding it as an interconnected reality.

The collection closes with two contributions – a congress report and a book review. Samek's account of the Congress on Media, Gender and Sexualities: Representations, Literacies and Audiences, organised by the Benasque Science Center, discusses key

presentations on topics such as queer art practices, dating apps, the manosphere, and porn, shedding light on the deep interconnections between the media, gender, and sexuality. The concluding book review, penned by del Vita, further expands the collection's scope by engaging with Gallant and Lam's recent book *Not Your Rescue Project*, a critical account of NGO work in the anti-trafficking space, which combines a lucid analysis of the anti-trafficking industrial complex in different national contexts with attention to the importance of sex worker activism.

With its rich and diverse contributions, this issue does not seek to provide definitive answers but to expand the scope of inquiry. By gathering diverse perspectives and centring voices too often marginalised, it aims to enrich existing debates and to encourage further research attentive to complexity, context, and lived experience. Above all, it underscores the importance of listening to sex workers as knowledge producers, experts, and political actors in their own right. We hope that the contributions in this issue will serve as a foundation for more sustained, interdisciplinary engagement with sex work in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond.

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GENDER A VÝZKUM
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Currency, Control, and Stigma: The Complex Lives of Soviet Ukraine's Currency Prostitutes

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Abstract: This article discusses the phenomenon of currency prostitution in Soviet Ukraine in the late 1980s, a period marked by glasnost – a policy of wider dissemination of information initiated under Mikhail Gorbachev – and increased public discourse on sexuality. The growing visibility of currency prostitutes in the mass media – predominantly women who engaged in relationships with foreigners in exchange for hard currency – challenged the state's narrative of economic equality and justice. Drawing on declassified Soviet archival materials, media reports, legal decrees, and Soviet-era films, this study examines how hard currency prostitution was framed in Soviet moral discourses. The analysis shows that the regulation of hard currency prostitution was aimed not only at controlling the illicit economy but also at preserving socialist ideological stability. Both the Soviet authorities and the press sought to portray sex workers engaged in hard currency prostitution as morally corrupt figures who threatened public morality and undermined the image of the Soviet people. The study also demonstrates how single mothers were subject to special state control and policing under suspicion of prostitution. The study contributes to the existing literature on prostitution in socialist societies by demonstrating how prostitution functioned as an ideological battleground that reflected Soviet ideological anxieties.

Keywords: currency prostitution, Soviet Ukraine, socialist morality, state surveillance, ideological control

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In 1986, TV presenters Vladimir Pozner and Phil Donahue organised one of the first Soviet American teleconferences of the glasnost era. During the conversation, an American participant in the teleconference asked the question: 'In our TV advertising, everything revolves around sex. Do you have such TV advertising?' The Soviet participant, Lyudmila Nikolaevna Ivanova, who was the administrator of the Leningrad Hotel and a representative of the public organisation Committee of Soviet Women, replied: 'Well, we don't have sex, and we are completely against it!' Her comment, partially drowned out by audience laughter, was soon paraphrased, and circulated out of context: 'There is no sex in the USSR' (Sovetskie filmy, spektakli i teleperedachi 1986). This phrase was often mentioned by Soviet citizens in various contexts, ridiculing the sanctimony of Soviet morality. Although often seen as humorous, this moment also reflected deeper anxieties surrounding sexuality in Soviet public discourse. In Soviet society, open discussion of sex was widely considered inappropriate or indecent. While sexuality was certainly an undeniable part of everyday life, it was largely absent from public conversation or the media.

By the mid-1980s, however, the discourse on sexuality began to shift. On 25 February 1986, Mikhail Gorbachev delivered his report at the 27th Congress of the CPSU declaring the policy of glasnost. For Soviet media, the introduction of glasnost opened up the opportunity to explore a greater number of previously censored or taboo topics, including those related to intimate life. Although Gorbachev's call for glasnost did not immediately dismantle the multi-layered system of censorship and self-censorship that had been established over seven decades of Soviet rule, the absence of regular directives from above allowed for the first signs of diversity in the Soviet media (Gessen 2020: 197). This shift allowed sexually provocative subjects to enter the public domain through newspapers, magazines, and television. Soviet magazines began to explore sexual topics beyond the traditional concept of sex as a part of heterosexual marriage.

The topics discussed on the pages of Soviet magazines were designed to strongly resonate with readers and often focused on controversial topics relating to sexuality, including monetized intimacy. In this context, prostitution[1]—long presented as non-existent in the Soviet Union—re-emerged as a subject of public discussion.

This article discusses how currency prostitution in Soviet Ukraine was framed within broader Soviet discourses of socialist morality and economic inequality. The central questions explore how the Soviet state and state institutions sought to regulate cur-

[1] The terms 'currency prostitution' and 'currency prostitute' were used in a variety of Soviet contexts, including official documents and media publications in the late 1980s. This article retains the original terminology to reflect how the phenomenon was discussed at the time. The terms 'prostitution' and 'sex work' are used interchangeably throughout the text.

rency prostitution, how Soviet media shaped narratives surrounding it, and what these measures reveal about Soviet anxieties related to gender and ideological stability?

Notably, in both Russian and Ukrainian,[2] the word prostitute (prostitutka, prostytutka, poviya) is a feminised noun that, in the late 1980s, had no widely recognised masculine equivalent. This linguistic pattern reflected – and reinforced – the gendered framing of prostitution as an exclusively female phenomenon, which is why this article focuses specifically on women.

The article draws upon previously declassified archival documents of the Soviet government in Ukraine, as well as on the Soviet-era documentaries, magazine and journal articles, and a satirical feuilleton that played an important role in influencing societal perceptions. It also explores the Soviet cinematic and literary depictions of sex work to analyse the cultural construction of these women as economic deviants and moral transgressors.

While previous studies have explored the regulation of prostitution in different socialist contexts—including Soviet state policies towards women engaged in sex work (Hearne 2022), state-sanctioned responses to 'hotel prostitutes' in Hungary (Komáromi 2023), and commercial sex and citizenship in post-war Poland (Dobrowolska 2025)—other scholars have addressed broader patterns of state control and stigma in socialist societies (Marcinkevičienė, Praspaliauskienė 2003; Simić 2022; Dolinsek, Hetherington 2019). This article builds on that scholarship by focusing specifically on currency prostitution in Soviet Ukraine, with particular attention to how women engaged in this form of sex work were perceived and regulated within the framework of late Soviet gender ideology. Drawing on materials from Ukrainian central and regional archives, this article examines the Ukrainian context of currency prostitution in the late 1980s, including how union-wide policies were interpreted and implemented in local contexts and how regional institutions participated in broader Soviet discourses on morality, deviance, and gender.

Forbidden luxuries

In November 1986, the Russian-language newspaper *Moskovsky Komsomolets* published two sensational essays, 'Belyy Tanets' (White Dance) and 'Nochnyye okhotnitsy' (Night Hunters), written by Yevgeny Dodolev. The articles were among the first to provide a glimpse into the world of currency prostitution—referring to women who engaged in relationships with foreigners in exchange for hard currency. Through these

[2] I use both Russian and Ukrainian terms to reflect the linguistic context established by the Soviet authorities. Many official documents from the period were written in both languages, and the press circulated in Soviet Ukraine in the late 1980s was likewise published in both Ukrainian and Russian.

interactions, these women gained access to foreign currency that was otherwise not accessible to ordinary Soviet citizens.

The basis of this phenomenon was the rigid monetary policy of the Soviet Union. The Soviet ruble was not a freely convertible currency; it could be legally exchanged only at fixed exchange rates set by the Soviet government and was subject to significant restrictions (Conway 1995). Since the ruble was not tied to international trade, the official exchange rate set by the state did not correspond to its real value (Chudnov 2003). In 1980, for instance, the official dollar exchange rate in the USSR was around 64 kopecks. However, this fixed exchange rate was largely disconnected from economic realities (Alexashenko 1992). On the black market, the demand for foreign currency exceeded the official rate, with the dollar trading for 4, 6, or even more rubles, depending on the year and the economic situation (Okunev 2020).

Certain individuals were legally permitted to possess foreign currency. This group included diplomats, sailors, artists, tourists, and Soviet citizens who received transactions from abroad, such as writers earning royalties or individuals receiving money from relatives for some type of legal work. These people, however, were required to exchange the currency for special cheques. These cheques were a special means of payment in the USSR, which could be used to pay in the *Beryozka* ('Little Birch') stores—state-run outlets that sold only imported goods and did not accept ordinary rubles as payment (Ivanova 2017). Similar stores existed in other republics of the USSR, often named after the national tree or another symbol of the republic (Kashtan Media 2024). In the Ukrainian SSR, the equivalent store was called *Kashtan* (Chestnut).

At a time of chronic shortages in the regular stores of the Soviet Union, *Beryozka* provided goods of the highest quality, creating a huge gap between individuals with and without foreign currency. This disparity contributed to the widespread popularity of currency speculation on the black market, where illegal traders – *fartsovshiki* – bought and resold currencies or acquired cheques from those who had them legally (Romanov, Yarskaya-Smirnova 2005). Exchanging money for other currencies at a free rate not established by the State Bank of the USSR was considered a criminal offense. Strict penalties for unauthorised currency transactions had been established back in 1961 by a decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR 'On Strengthening Criminal Liability for Violating Rules on Currency Transactions'. According to this decree, engaging in currency speculation as a trade or on a large scale could entail punishment in the form of imprisonment for a term of five to fifteen years with the confiscation of property or, in some cases, the death penalty with the confiscation of property.

In this climate of economic scarcity and financial disparity, currency prostitution was increasingly portrayed as a means for women to gain access to luxuries mostly unat-

tainable for Soviet citizens. These representations, which repeatedly stressed a desire for easy money and material comfort, were intended to provoke public debate and condemnation. At the same time, they exposed deeper ideological anxieties: women engaging in currency prostitution appeared to benefit from the shadow economy in ways that undermined official narratives of equality and socialist morality. In his article 'Belyy Tanets', Dodolev detailed the luxurious life these women could afford, such as being able to buy boots, blouses, and high-end clothes and even being able to make international phone calls—a privilege in the Soviet Union. He also gave examples of their huge earnings, which could reach or exceed 100,000 rubles:

> The courtesans partly sell the multi-coloured banknotes obtained through monotonous 'love' and partly spend them on buying food at Beryozka and, frankly, on rather expensive things. They buy from each other – boots for 20,000 Japanese yen, sandals for 100 dollars, a swimsuit for 500 francs … (Dodolev 1987)

As well as describing the wealth of sex workers engaged in currency prostitution, Dodolev also criticised the insufficient punishment of prostitution. He argued that although the law defined crime as a socially dangerous action that violated the existing legal order, the dictionary of the Russian language applied a broader definition of a 'crime' as harmful behaviour or a bad or reprehensible act. In this regard, Dodolev, referring to prostitution as 'considerable and not particularly hard-earned source of income from body trade', called for stricter regulation of prostitution within the framework of the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR *On Strengthening the Fight against the Extraction of Unearned Income*.

In 1986, prostitution as such was not explicitly considered an illegal act. Instead, it was often prosecuted under the article on parasitism, like in other states under Soviet rule. On 4 May 1961, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR issued a decree *On Strengthening the Fight against Persons Evading Socially Useful Work and Leading an Antisocial Parasitic Lifestyle*. The decree established that able-bodied (*trudosposobnye*) adults who 'do not wish to fulfil the most important constitutional duty – to work honestly according to their abilities – and who avoid socially useful work, and lead an antisocial parasitic lifestyle are to be recruited for socially useful work at enterprises (construction sites)' (Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR 1961). This law was used to persecute various groups of people who were not officially employed and, accordingly, were not socially useful (Fitzpatrick 2006). Among those targeted were individuals struggling with alcoholism, those receiving income from property, representatives of creative professions, sex workers, and, in some cases, political dissenters. As in other socialist states – such as Czechoslovakia, where prostitution

was framed as 'avoidance of honest work' (Dudová 2015: 37) – the use of parasitism charges served to align legal prosecution with socialist labour ideology rather than moral or sexual transgression.

Although prostitution was not classified as a separate legal offence, it was heavily stigmatised in the Soviet Union (Hearne 2022: 291). Prostitution was not perceived as a societal issue, but rather the moral failing of an individual woman, a deviant who had somehow emerged in well-structured Soviet society. This perspective was articulated in 1957 at a meeting of the Subcommittee of the Commissions of Legislative Proposals of the Council of the Union and the Council of Nationalities of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, which was preparing a conclusion of the draft law *On Strengthening the Fight against Antisocial, Parasitic Elements*:

> We don't have prostitution, but we do have women with negative behaviour, and many of them do this not so much out of a desire to acquire a source of livelihood, but out of a love of it or a desire for an easier life.' (Subcommittee of the Commissions of Legislative Proposals of the Council of the Union and the Council of Nationalities of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR 1957)

Soviet legislation reflected this ideological belief, affirming that prostitution did not exist and, therefore, did not require separate legal prosecution. Scholars Dalia Marcinkevičienė and Rima Praspaliauskienė (2003: 658), analysing prostitution in post-war Lithuania, argue that prostitution was officially non-existent in the USSR, as to establish legal liability for prostitution in the Criminal Code would have been an ideological contradiction because under socialism such issues had supposedly been eradicated. Given that in state-socialist societies prostitution was often presented as something that only existed under capitalism, it was challenging to advocate for the eradication of prostitution and the rehabilitation of sex workers (Simic 2022). However, with the rise of glasnost and the increasing appearance of essays about prostitution as a fairly widespread phenomenon – particularly currency prostitution the Soviet authorities shifted this approach.

In 1987, the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Ukrainian SSR *On Amendments and Additions to the Legislation of the Ukrainian SSR on Liability for Administrative Offences* introduced administrative liability for engaging in prostitution. When committing this offence for the first time, the prescribed sanction was a warning or a fine of up to one hundred rubles. Following the introduction of administrative liability, in 1987, the Central Committee of the CPSU issued a resolution *On Serious Shortcomings in the Organisation of the Fight against Prostitution and Violations of the Rules on Currency Transactions*.

The work on implementing the resolution in the fight against prostitution was entrusted to various authorities, such as the Prosecutor's Office, the ministries of internal affairs, justice, health, and housing and communal services of the Ukrainian SSR, the Main Tourism Directorate, the Ukrainian Office of the State Bank of the USSR, the Ukrainian Trade Union, and the Central Committee of the Komsomol of Ukraine (Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukrainian SSR 1988: 1). Even though the decree mostly targeted currency prostitutes, it also occasionally mentioned other individuals engaged in illegal currency-related activities, such as illegal currency transactions, purchasing goods from foreign tourists, and speculation.

Both the title of the decree and its text make it evident that the central problem for the authorities was currency prostitution. However, as sociologist Igor Kon (1997: 329) emphasised, currency prostitution was not the 'tip of the iceberg', as access to this sphere required good looks, relevant skills, such as basic English proficiency, and external connections. The much more numerous categories of sex workers were those who worked for Soviet rubles, carrying more risk and earning substantially less.

Why, then, did Soviet authorities pay particular attention to currency prostitution? The Soviet state's focus certainly reflected a broader Soviet concern with the development of illicit markets. However, women who engaged in prostitution were not only perceived as contributors to economic crime; they also experienced a certain degree of financial autonomy, which was not accessible for most Soviet citizens. Their earnings sparked discussions about the unfairness of earnings from such 'unearned income', fuelling concerns about social inequality and anxieties over prostitution as a potential ideological subversion. Women working in currency prostitution gained access to benefits normally reserved for members of the privileged elite, including foreign goods, high-status accessories, and sometimes the ability to exercise monetary power in personal interactions. For Soviet ideology, this phenomenon was undesirable not only because it exposed the persistence of the shadow economy, but, most importantly, because it further revealed the existence of social inequality, which contradicted the state's official narrative that it had been eradicated. Translator Lilianna Lungina (Dorman 2010: 340), in her memoirs, described how a growing trend of demonstrating material well-being began to emerge in the late 1970s: 'Social inequality came out onto the street. Wealth was no longer hidden, it became demonstrative. (…) Girls showed off in silver fox fur coats - either daughters of nomenklatura officials, or hard currency prostitutes servicing foreign tourists.'

By the late 1980s the Soviet press was constantly highlighting the luxurious lifestyles of these women. For instance, Taranov (1988) ridiculed the insignificance of a fine for prostitution, as daily income from currency prostitution could be much greater than the amount of the fine. The luxuries associated with currency prostitution became

the subject of discussions in the documentaries *Gruppa riska* (Risk Group 1987) and *Khau du yu du* (How Do You Do, 1988). In *Gruppa riska,* the interviewed women emphasised the contrast between official wages and their daily earnings, stating that while an official salary could be no more than 150 rubles a month, prostitution could bring in a much larger sum in just one day. Similarly, in *Khau du yu du*, one interviewee shared that she could afford to go on vacation by herself, and if some man harassed her, she had the means to pay him to leave her alone.

This difference in the material situation of ordinary Soviet workers and women engaging in prostitution underscored the shortcomings of the state-socialist system. In such conditions, the attitude towards prostitution and its causes also shifted. Whereas previously prostitution was considered a social evil born of capitalist influence, it was now seen as a moral failure for which the bulk of the blame fell on women (Waters 1989: 4)

The fictional feature film *Interdevochka* (Intergirl 1989) shone even more public attention ono the luxurious lifestyle of women who were engaged in currency prostitution. The film tells the story of Tatyana Zaytseva, who is portrayed as living a double life – as a nurse and as a 'currency prostitute'. *Interdevochka* depicts Tatyana as solely driven by a cynical attitude towards marriage and a desire to marry a wealthy foreigner. In pursuit of profit, she accepts a marriage proposal from a regular client, despite the lack of emotional connection. However, after moving to Sweden, Tatyana doesn't find the happiness she expected and feels isolated. She renounces her luxurious lifestyle and dies while attempting to return home to the Soviet Union. The moral crisis in *Interdevochka* reflects the uncertainty surrounding the influx of capitalism during perestroika – not portraying Tatyana as a wholly negative character, yet not giving her a chance for redemption either (Ter-Grigoryan 2017). Capitalism, therefore, is still depicted as a factor of negative influence, but a large part of Tatyana's downfall is blamed on her cynicism towards love and marriage and on her economic motivation for engaging in sex work.

Interdevochka also highlights the phenomenon of marriages with foreigners – one of the ways women could legally emigrate, improve their economic situation, or quit prostitution altogether. The desire to marry a foreigner was also explored in the documentary *Adam, Eva, i Zagranpropiska* (Adam, Eve, and the Foreign Residence Registration, 1987). The film tells the story of a woman involved in currency prostitution who wants to marry her foreign client. In an interview with her, she expresses her love for the man and her belief that her feelings are reciprocated. However, the film's voiceover highlights that the woman's diaries reveal that she is looking for someone who will buy her a fur coat and then diamonds. Regardless of the authenticity of the interview and its participants, like in *Interdevochka,* the documentary depicts

the women engaged in currency prostitution as willing to start a family in pursuit of profit but unable to truly form an emotional connection.

Adam, Eva, i Zagranpropiska also follows the story of a deceived foreigner who contacted the Leningrad police because his wife, after moving to Greece, left him for another man. In *Belyy Tanets*, Dodolev (1987) also tells the story of a betrayed Spaniard who was married to a sex worker who continued to work as a prostitute while married to him. In these narratives, women involved in currency prostitution were portrayed as calculating, unscrupulous people looking for profit in the form of hard currency or for the opportunity to leave the Soviet Union in search of a better life.

Priska Komáromi (2023: 11), who studied the perceptions of 'hotel prostitutes' under Hungarian socialism from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, also argues that the portrayal of women who had sex with foreign men as manipulative money hoarders was prevalent in both police reports and the press. In the Ukrainian context, while earlier socialist narratives framed prostitution as a relic of capitalism – or ignored it altogether – by the late 1980s, prostitution came to be viewed less as a structural or ideological issue and more as a symptom of women's personal moral failings, greed, or moral corruption.

'Shield tourists from the advances of women of easy virtue': policing morality and regulating tourist spaces

With the growing visibility of currency prostitution, Ukrainian Soviet authorities were swift to control tourist spaces and dormitories housing foreign students, which served as key sites of encounters between clients and sex workers. The Main Directorate of the Ukrainian SSR for Foreign Tourism intensified the work of Intourist departments with the police to ensure stricter control. To further combat currency prostitution and foreign currency speculation, the authorities also established specialised police units in the large cities of the republic – Donetsk, Zhdanov (now Mariupol), Kyiv, Lviv, Odesa, Kharkiv, Uzhhorod, Chernivtsi, Yalta, and along the South-Western Railway (Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Ukrainian SSR 1988: 4). Major port cities such as Odesa, Kherson, and Mykolaiv had long been centres of commercial exchange and foreign interaction and experienced the presence of prostitution even during the Stalin era (Osokina 2021). These cities and transit hubs continued to attract a high rate of international tourist activity, and the state therefore sought to ensure stricter surveillance over these spaces. As part of these initiatives, Intourist established a rigid passport control regime, while the police carried out raids to enforce compliance with these regulations. Employees who directly interacted with foreign tourists were required to undergo special training (Main Directorate of the Ukrainian SSR for Foreign Tourism 1988: 19).

Beyond administrative control, the authorities also strengthened public surveillance. Hotel workers were often complicit with sex workers and *fartsocvshiki* (black marketeers), facilitating clandestine interactions with tourists (*How Do You Do* 1988). The authorities sought to ensure that society reported cases of prostitution rather than enabling them. To achieve this, the state called for the personal responsibility of service personnel – such as doormen, cloakroom attendants, elevator operators, baggage handlers, and hotel and restaurant officials – to report any suspected cases of prostitution (Main Directorate of the Ukrainian SSR for Foreign Tourism 1988: 19). In addition to police raids, the Ukrainian SSR reported on intensifying the activities of squads of volunteers and Komsomol vigilantes in places visited by foreign citizens. The policy promoting public control mechanisms reflected a broader Soviet trend, characterised by the idea that each Soviet citizen was responsible for upholding socialist morality through surveillance and denunciations (See Weiner, Rahi-Tamm 2012). However, in the late 1980s this system was difficult to sustain, as in the conditions of deficit and poverty citizens often prioritised economic benefits over ideological loyalty.

Any cases of non-work-related contacts between Intourist employees and foreign guests were discussed at meetings of the work collective, while public control groups, prevention councils, and comradely courts conducted targeted educational efforts. In some cases, hotels used technical surveillance, such as video cameras in the Zakarpattia Hotel in Uzhgorod (Main Directorate of the Ukrainian SSR for Foreign Tourism 1988: 20).

As framed in the official report, the Directorate for Foreign Tourism took all these measures to protect the property of foreign guests and 'shield the tourists from the advances of women of easy virtue' (Main Directorate of the Ukrainian SSR for Foreign Tourism 1988: 20). The wording of the documents reflected the widespread attitude towards prostitution as a problem of the low moral character of the woman, and not of the clients who sought sexual services.

This gendered discourse was not limited to prostitution but echoed more broadly across late Soviet discussions on sexuality. During perestroika, asymmetrical sexual norms became more explicitly pronounced and articulated. Female sexuality was expected to embody restraint and purity, while male promiscuity was often viewed as natural or developmental. For instance, an article published in *Rabotnitsa* in 1990 opened with psychotherapist Alexander Ponizovsky's remark that 'a man is a polygamous creature', suggesting that male infidelity was a biological reality, not a moral transgression (Ponizovsky 1990: 28). Although Ponizovsky clarified that this statement was merely a fact, not a call for a polygamous lifestyle, this framing implied that monogamous relationships are natural only for women.

Moreover, concerns about improper sexual behaviour were almost exclusively directed at women and linked to a poor upbringing or failed moral education. G. Sutrina

(1990: 40), for example, argued that previously Ukrainian society had clear boundaries of acceptable sexual behaviour for women, and those who violated these norms were subject to universal contempt and condemnation, or even physical punishment in the western regions. Sutrina's references to national traditions in sexual education related to her general argument about the need to take national traditions into account when preparing young women for family life.

These concerns over women's morality and sexual behaviour were also shown in the 1988 documentary film *How Do You Do*, which explored the topic of currency prostitution. The hotel workers interviewed in the film expressed a sharply negative attitude towards prostitution, largely because it disgraced the honour of the Soviet people:

> They don't leave foreigners alone … looking at them, sometimes you think that they were brought up in the same school, read the same books, the same magazines, watched the same films, were brought up on the same examples. But where did women's honour go, the dignity of the Soviet people? (How Do You Do 1988).

Prostitution thus became widely perceived as disgracing Soviet society in the eyes of foreigners. It was associated with a poor upbringing and education, which led to the moral decay of women. Interestingly, foreign visitors seeking sexual services were not considered to be a corrupting influence on Soviet women, despite prostitution having previously been attributed to the moral decline of capitalism. Instead, the Soviet media conveyed the message that prostitution was an expression of moral degradation and social disgrace, while failing to acknowledge that it arose under socialism (Buckley 1992: 207).

Moral deviants and public threats

While the Main Directorate of Tourism was engaged in inspecting the places of residence and the recreational activities of foreign tourists, the Ministry of Health of the Ukrainian SSR, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Ukrainian SSR, and the executive committees of local Soviets were tasked with identifying women engaged in prostitution, conducting medical examinations for venereal diseases, and ensuring their treatment and employment. In 1987, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Ukrainian SSR reported the implementation of comprehensive operational and preventive measures. The authorities investigated 3500 women labelled as engaging in 'immoral behaviour', identifying and registering 2165 of them as prostitutes. All registered sex workers received an official warning to cease their 'antisocial behaviour', 174 were charged with an administrative offence, 10 were sent for compulsory treatment for

drug addiction, and 37 were charged with a criminal offence for infecting citizens with venereal disease and evading treatment for the disease (Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Ukrainian SSR 1988: 5).

The Ministry of Health of the Ukrainian SSR reported an increase in venereal diseases in the Zhytomyr, Ivano-Frankivsk, Zaporizhzhia, Odesa, and Chernivtsi regions, attributing their spread to prostitution, drug addiction, and alcoholism (Ministry of Health of the Ukrainian SSR 1988: 9). In response, Ukrainian health authorities ordered the heads of regional and city health departments to create a registry of individuals with socially-negative behaviour and those engaged in prostitution who had been discharged from closed-type hospitals after completing treatment for venereal disease (Ministry of Health of the Ukrainian SSR 1988: 10). To ensure further medical and police surveillance, the state fostered collaboration between healthcare institutions and the police. Police officers were responsible for transporting suspected sex workers and individuals with socially negative behaviour to medical institutions for compulsory examination and treatment (Ministry of Health of the Ukrainian SSR 1988: 10).

Official reports from state bodies consistently referred to prostitution as 'immoral', 'antisocial', or 'socially negative' behaviour. However, the report from the Ministry of Internal Affairs did not specify the criteria by which the 3500 women were considered 'immoral', which left room for accusations based on subjective moral judgement.

This ambiguity was also demonstrated in more specific cases, such as in a report from the Prosecutor's Office of the Ukrainian SSR. According to the report, Lutsk resident E. B. had previously studied at a medical institute but was expelled for her 'immoral lifestyle' (Prosecutor's Office of the Ukrainian SSR 1987: 22). She lived with her mother and their apartment was often visited by men. Although E. B. was not officially employed and her mother had a relatively modest salary, she appeared to be well off financially. The report criticised the Department of Internal Affairs for not having information about the woman's sources of income and for failing to take measures to stop her antisocial lifestyle (Prosecutor's Office of the Ukrainian SSR 1987: 23). The Prosecutor's Office, however, failed to specify whether it had been proven as a fact that the woman was engaged in prostitution.

In cases like that of E. B., the authorities determined 'immoral' behaviour without referring to specific evidence of criminal activity, relying only on vague signs such as unexplained wealth, frequent male visitors, or financial independence. In addition, the ambiguity of the concept of immoral behaviour allowed for the control of a wider group of women under the guise of moral regulation. The main reasons for the authorities' close attention included the lack of official employment, the lack of an officially registered marriage, and the status of a single mother.

Soviet law enforcement agencies specifically monitored single mothers, viewing them as morally and financially unstable. This gendered attitude towards single moth-

ers correlated with the negative stereotypes that existed in Soviet Ukraine in the 1970s and 1980s, according to which single mothers were portrayed as immoral women and feared as a possible threat to the family (Tyshchenko 2017: 198). In 1987, the Russian-language magazine *Pravda Ukrainy* (Truth of Ukraine), at the direction of Soviet authorities, published an article titled 'Ulybka Dzhozefiny' (Josephine's Smile), in which Yuriy Solyanik, the head of the Kyiv city criminal investigation department, argued that the majority of women engaged in prostitution were single mothers (Solyanik 1987).[3] Satirical magazines like the Ukrainian-language *Perets* (Pepper) (Figure 1) ridiculed women who engaged in currency prostitution and had a child, portraying them as greedy, irresponsible, and generally unsuitable for the role of a mother, and emphasised that they required state intervention.

In line with this belief, the State Committee of the Ukrainian SSR for Labour conducted extensive studies on the lifestyle, material support, and living arrangements of unemployed single mothers. The committee investigated the causes of their unemployment and registered those who remained jobless without 'valid reasons'. Acceptable reasons for unemployment included an ill child or a lack of available jobs in certain regions. For instance, the report specified that in Armiansk of the Crimea region and several towns in the region of Kyiv, suitable working places were limited owing to the 'specifically male' type of work in the area, hazardous working conditions, etc. (State Committee of the Ukrainian SSR for Labour 1987: 16).

Single mothers with no valid justification for unemployment were assigned a mandatory job. The primary task of this committee was to officially employ as many women as possible. As a result, during 1987, the authorities reported the employment of 2,840 women with many receiving support in enrolling their children in preschool institutions (State Committee of the Ukrainian SSR for Labour 1987: 15). Beyond these efforts, the State Committee for Labour also classified a separate group of single mothers that 'shirk work, lead an unworthy lifestyle, violate public order' (State Committee of the Ukrainian SSR for Labour 1987: 17). Single mothers who evaded official employment faced severe consequences, such as placement in medical and labour treatment centres, prosecution, deprivation of parental rights, or limitation of their legal capacity (State Committee of the Ukrainian SSR for Labour 1987: 17).

The state placed the responsibility on women to be employed, while providing places in a state childcare facility for the woman's children as though that were the only obstacle to employment. However, the woman's financial situation was largely disregarded. Instead, the Committee for Labour claimed that some single mothers avoided

[3] According to the 1988 Ministry of Justice of the Ukrainian SSR Report, the publication was classified as a law enforcement resource on combating prostitution (Ministry of Justice of the Ukrainian SSR Report 1988).

work even though they did not have any difficulties finding a place of employment or places for their children in preschool institutions. The report highlighted that out of 172 sex workers registered in the Odesa region, none required access to kindergartens, suggesting that some women willingly chose prostitution despite having official options of employment (State Committee of the Ukrainian SSR for Labour 1987: 17).

The idea that prostitution is a conscious choice prompted by a desire for wealth was also widely reflected in Soviet Ukrainian media. In 1988, the Ukrainian-language satirical magazine *Perets* (Pepper) published an article called 'Love with an appendix' which discussed various types of prostitution and police measures taken to combat the issue. The article told the stories of girls involved in prostitution, noting that some were as young as 15 years old and one who was still studying in the 8th grade (Naumov 1988: 3).

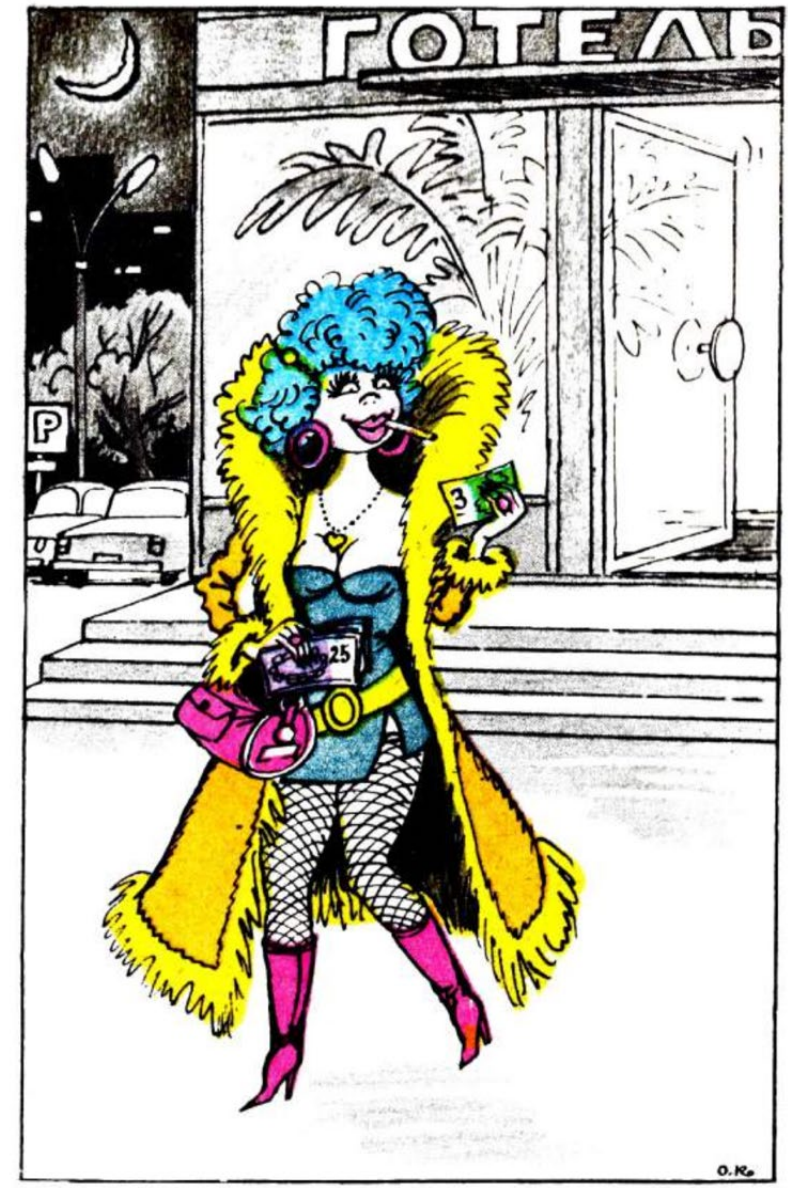
'Love with an appendix' concluded that no police force was capable of eliminating prostitution, since the problem, it argued, depended on the moral purity of society as a whole: 'Prostitution, as the pinnacle of depravity, does not emerge in a vacuum. It arises from the vices of idleness, a lack of spirituality, and drunkenness.' (Naumov 1988: 8) Prostitution was thus associated with an unwillingness to engage in honest labour and was often ranked alongside other Soviet 'pathologies' such as alcoholism, drug addiction, and parasitism in general.

The Soviet press frequently emphasised the desire for luxury rather than necessity, further emphasising that prostitution was associated with a decline in morals fuelled by consumerism. This narrative was further perpetuated in the 1990 magazine *Kalus'kyy khimik* (Kalush Chemist). In it, medical professional Chernyak devoted his article to the growing cases of AIDS, starting with the cautionary tale of a woman who also engaged in sexual relationships in pursuit of profit:

> Beauty and youth conquer everyone. This young woman knew this axiom well and knew how to use it. She was brought up in abundance, grew up without knowing worries. She recognised her power over men very early. Even in her school years, she entered into intimate relationships, because she immediately received some expensive new clothes for it. To her misfortune, as she said, she became involved with foreigners. And here is the payback. One of her friends, who came to study in our country, tested positive for AIDS. Her name was on the list of women who had had an intimate relationship with him. (Chernyak 1990: 4)

As a result, prostitution was categorized as a personal and a social vice, along with alcoholism and parasitism. Both the media and government agencies reinforced this moralistic position and perpetuated a narrative that punished and marginalised wom-

Figure 1: 'And I will donate this three-ruble note to the Children's Fund because somewhere out there, my own child is also being raised in an orphanage …' (Kokhan 1988: 12).



en. Rather than these women being recognised as needing economic or social support, they were labelled as immoral subjects requiring correction. As Soviet scholar Sergei Golod (1988: 23) asserted, the problem of prostitution stems from the culture of consumption and the alienation of feelings. He argued that combating this phenomenon is only possible through a moral transformation of sexuality in the society, with the transformation of material relations into personal ones.

In this regard, the Ukrainian Republican Council of Trade Unions also stepped up its efforts aimed at moral education and preventive work with girls. The main objective of this work was to improve the moral atmosphere. As part of this initiative, the authorities developed comprehensive programmes across regions, such as the Leisure and Youth, Culture and Education, Leisure of Workers, programmes etc. (Ukrainian Republican Council of Trade Unions 1988: 25). In addition, new amateur associations and clubs of interest for women, such as Homemaker, Girlfriends, You and I – a Young Family, were established in clubs and cultural centres (Ukrainian Republican Council of Trade Unions 1988: 26). Bringing about a change in the Soviet moral atmosphere was largely envisioned through channelling women into a family unit, instilling in them a sense of femininity and domesticity.

This idea that women who had deviated from Soviet moral norms could be rehabilitated by forming a family was also described in media narratives. A 1990 issue of the Ukrainian-language newspaper *Molod Ukrainy* (Youth of Ukraine) published an article titled 'A Mine for the Gene Pool? The Prosecutor Will Preserve Health', which discussed adolescent girls who were forcibly treated in a closed hospital for venereal disease (Shevchenko 1990). The author described them as 'women who were fifteen or sixteen years old, and who, although evoking some human sympathy, should not be met with hasty compassion'. The article portrayed these teenage girls as brazen, dissolute, and cruel, suggesting that their behaviour derived from personal moral failings. A photograph accompanied the text, and the author noted that the girls' eyes were intentionally covered, as they could still marry, have children, and improve their lives. This perspective demonstrated the Soviet belief that women who had engaged in extramarital sexual relations or sex work could be rehabilitated through reintegration into the family structure.

Closing thoughts

By the end of the 1980s, discussions about sexuality, including prostitution, had become increasingly widespread in Soviet discourse. Prostitution was no longer viewed as something confined only to capitalist societies; it was now acknowledged to exist within the Soviet Union. Both in the press and in legislative initiatives of the Ukrainian SSR, prostitution began to be discussed primarily as a problem of women's moral decline.

It is no coincidence that currency prostitution, although not the only form of sex work, became the focus of the Soviet authorities' enforcement efforts. Women engaged in currency prostitution embodied several Soviet anxieties at once: the development of the shadow economy, the exposure of persistent social inequality, and the subversion of Soviet ideology.

To combat this perceived threat, Soviet discourse portrayed women as morally fallen, unwilling to work, and driven by greed. The role of corrupting evil shifted from capitalism to women who, engaging in sex work, were seen as degrading societal norms and disgracing Soviet society in the eyes of foreign guests. Moreover, this attitude to prostitution was closely intertwined with the stigmatisation of single mothers, who also deviated from the ideal of the Soviet woman of the late 1980s, existing within the traditional family framework. This linkage allowed Soviet authorities to reinforce control over female private lives.

Ultimately, 1991 marked the end of the state's scrutiny over this phenomenon. However, the public interest in prostitution that emerged in the 1980s along with the surge in negative perceptions contributed to the significant stigmatisation of sex workers, which persisted in post-Soviet Ukraine. Moreover, the repeated depiction of currency prostitutes as women who sought material gain through relationships with foreigners helped create a cultural perception of the West as a pathway to economic escape. This narrative remained relevant in the late 1990s, when increasing numbers of women from the post-Soviet space, including Ukraine, migrated abroad and entered the sectors of informal labour and sex work across Western Europe and other regions.

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‘The Community Workers Don’t Need to Know’: The Impact of Criminalisation and the Humanitarian Approach in an Association That Supports Sex Workers in Paris

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Abstract: This article presents an ethnographic study of an association in Paris that supports sex workers. Drawing on literature on Marxist feminism of social reproduction and humanitarianism, this paper analyses how the association became economically dependent on government institutions after 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic and shows how this led the association to adopt sexual humanitarianism over community-led approaches. The author explores how the association’s relationship with sex workers operates in a top-down manner, as this relationship is framed not as one between workers, but rather as one between rescuers and those vulnerable individuals in need of rescue, whose precarity is understood as a product of their personal life circumstances. As a result, the association’s actions do not promote collective solidarity or mobilisation, nor do they address the structural dimensions of vulnerability. Moreover, the pathways proposed by the association may push sex workers towards low-paying jobs that reinforce traditional and racialised gender roles. As community-led and community-based approaches are increasingly recognised as the most effective at supporting marginalised groups, this paper denounces the impact of patronising humanitarianism and highlights the need for support services to be community-led and class informed in order to avoid the reinstating of oppressive practices.
Keywords: sex work, Marxist feminism, social reproduction, sexual humanitarianism, community-based approaches

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Sex work is a topic that often evokes sensationalism, poverty, and cruelty porn, and is frequently approached through a paternalistic lens. This tendency is also evident in the work of associations that support working-class sex workers, which, rather than understanding sex work as part of broader forms of structural poverty and class precarity, tend to construct sex work as an exceptional condition. Many of these associations rely on a 'saviour' narrative that overlooks sex workers' voices, experiences, and agency. The aim of this research is to challenge these narratives.

This article draws on ethnographic research conducted between November 2021 and March 2023 on the activities of an association in Paris, referred to here by the fictitious name 'La Lanterne', that provides support to sex workers within a neo-abolitionist legal framework (Le Bail, Giametta, Rassouw 2018). Neo-abolitionism refers to a policy orientation that sees sex work as a paradigmatic system of male power, and therefore as inherently violent, and seeks its elimination by criminalising clients (Mai 2016). However, sex work activists have criticised the portrayal of anti-sex work feminists as 'abolitionist', arguing that they are more accurately described as 'prohibitionists', because their approach reinforces criminalisation and state control rather than dismantling carceral systems and border controls (Gallant, Lam 2024).

This research was therefore driven by the question of how support is organised in contexts where sex work is not acknowledged as legitimate labour. In this article, I analyse the type of actions that can be promoted by an association that does not directly challenge the criminalisation of sex work. Following this, I will analyse the way the association operates, examining it in relation to the discourse it applies to sex work in order to observe how, over time, it has moved in the direction of 'sexual humanitarianism' (Mai 2016). Sexual humanitarianism refers to how humanitarian institutions support, 'help', and categorise migrants according to the aspects of vulnerability supposedly associated with their sexual orientation and behaviour (Mai 2016). The support provided by associations adopting this approach is characterised by victimising paternalism, which sees migrant groups not as social groups claiming rights but as a 'vulnerable population' (Fassin 2018). Moreover, it often serves to justify policies aimed at the repression of sex work and migration.

This type of approach is antithetical to approaches that not only consider it crucial to identify migrant sex worker groups as political subjects, but also believe that support services should primarily involve and be run by peer workers (also called 'community workers' in France). According to these approaches, people with direct and lived experience of sex work (and migration) are better able to reach and meet the needs of the community they belong to (Hoefinger et al. 2020).

To illustrate the concrete effects of adopting a victimising and paternalistic approach towards the work of an association targeting sex workers, I will first present the theoretical framework and then introduce the research case. I will then focus on

the decision-making mechanism within the association, pointing out how it is structured through a hierarchisation among the workers, where the relationship with the sex workers who use the association's services is not understood as a relationship with working people but only as a relationship with vulnerable people in need.

Building on that analysis, I will examine how the work of the association, although it provides sex workers with useful tools for their lives, is oriented towards an individualising type of support that does not promote the formation of solidarity processes. Finally, I will analyse how the pathways out of sex work promoted by the association tend to be oriented towards a labour market demand that is stratified by gender, race, and class. The main contribution of this article is therefore its critique of a tendency identified in activism and associationism concerning sex workers' rights – namely, the shift from political stances to humanitarianism.

Theoretical framework: between victimising humanitarianism and labour struggles

The critical analysis that informs this research is based on the consideration that sex work is work and sex workers should be respected as experts on their own lives and needs, rather than being seen as victims to be rescued. It relies on the idea that, instead of focusing on victim narratives, it is necessary to speak about the control of migration, the criminalisation of sex work, and the exploitation of labour in capitalism (Gallant, Lam 2024). In the context of the study of social support, prevention, access to health, and risk reduction services for sex workers, this stance reflects a broader trend towards a growing consensus on the value of peer-based approaches (which are structured by and for sex workers), as they prove to be significantly more effective (Benoit et al. 2017; De Jesus Moura et al. 2023) than victimising and infantilising forms of support (Hoefinger 2020). Indeed, it is increasingly documented, particularly in contexts of sex work decriminalisation, that services for sex workers with better outcomes are 'peer-led' or 'peer-only', which means they are run by people with direct experience in sex work (Mai et al. 2021).

The theoretical framework on which this article is based lies at the intersection of the existing literature on humanitarian politics (Fassin 2018; Ticktin 2022; Agustin 2017), drawing in particular on the ideas of sexual humanitarianism (Mai 2016) and social reproduction (Federici 1975; Fortunati 1981; Farris 2017; Bhattacharya 2017; Dalla Costa and James 1975), with a focus on the Marxist feminism of rupture (Curcio 2021). The literature on humanitarian politics, and specifically on sexual humanitarianism (Mai 2016), offers a key to understanding and situating the ways in which the association operates and the discourse it advocates.

Humanitarianism is an approach based on the moral imperative to alleviate the

suffering of people, presented as decontextualised, and as a response to problems of inequality, exploitation and discrimination (Ticktin 2006). Humanitarian interventions, structured as medico-legal responses, treat the problem to be answered as technical rather than political (Ticktin 2021). The solutions proposed therefore do not involve a 'redistribution of power, nor alterations in the social structure, but focus on the provision of services' (Della Porta, Diani 1998: 23), grounded in the principle of 'helping other people' to 'improve their lives' (Agustin 2007).

Sexual humanitarianism specifically refers to the way neoliberal constructions of vulnerability are implicated in humanitarian forms of support and control of racialised migrant populations (Mai et al. 2021). Indeed, through this concept, the pivotal role exerted by race and gender in processes of victimisation and the adoption of anti-migration and border closure rhetorics is emphasised (Fraser 2016). The 'logic of rescuing migrant women' (Agustin 2007), which underpins the neo-abolitionist paradigm, is often used to justify restrictive migration policies. In the approach of sexual humanitarianism, as well as in the prohibitionist paradigm, people are in fact not taken into account as a group that is making demands for social transformation but are viewed as populations intrinsically exposed to so-called risk behaviour (Merteuil et al. 2020), which must therefore be controlled. Sara Ahmed (2004) explores how the representation of others' pain in humanitarian discourse can reinforce power hierarchies, positioning suffering subjects, often migrants or racialised individuals, as objects of compassion rather than active agents.

As a study conducted in Turkey by Orbay and Küçükkaraca (2023) shows, institutions are much more supportive of funding social interventions that target women victims of violence than those that campaign for the rights of sex workers. Indeed, it is often associations that claim to fight 'against prostitution' that obtain funding (Schaffauser 2014; Agustin 2007). Thierry Schaffauser (2014), an activist and sex worker, analyses the relationship between funding and associations targeting sex workers in the French context. His work highlights how many associations, for fear of losing funding by taking an explicit stance on political issues, have reduced the degree of conflict with institutions and adopted positions of political neutrality, choosing to focus on issues that are less politically contentious such as health (Schaffauser 2014). In this sense, receiving funding can undermine the autonomy of associations. For example, it can make it difficult for them to campaign for the decriminalisation of sex work, a topic that often conflicts with the funders' political agenda (Cavallero, Gago 2021). Activist networks of sex workers therefore find it difficult to forge political alliances with associations, as they must struggle even to be recognised as political actors (Hofstetter 2022).

In opposition to the prohibitionist and humanitarian currents, there is pro-sex work feminism, which is politically committed to defending the rights of sex workers. This type of positioning believes that repressive actions and policies against sex work, such

as neo-abolitionist laws, negatively impact the lives of sex workers (Smith, Mac 2018; Bernstein 2007a; Kempadoo 2001). At the core of this position is a commitment to centring the voices of those directly involved in sex work and prioritising their autonomy and lived experiences in shaping their own needs and political perspectives.

Unlike the prohibitionist approach, this positioning does not equate prostitution with violence but distinguishes between exploitation and sex work, considering the latter a form of labour. Within this discourse, the issue of violence in trafficking is placed and understood in the context of broader structural violence resulting from inequalities generated by state, capitalist, patriarchal, and racial systems of power, rather than as an aspect intrinsic to sex work. Therefore, it argues that any form of sex work policy should consider the perspectives and legal rights of migrant people (Mai et al. 2021).

By reflecting on the concept of 'freedom' in sex work within its broader socio-economic context, this feminist perspective examines how, in certain cases, sex work can offer greater autonomy and empowerment compared to traditional, yet underpaid, forms of employment (Ticktin 2011). In fact, higher wages from sex work can provide low-income women with an economic alternative to economic dependence on a husband, fostering greater financial independence (Gallant, Lam 2024). Through this analytical lens, the devaluation of sexuality as 'non-work' can be understood as deeply tied to the broader issue of economic autonomy. As a form of social reproductive labour (Federici 1975; Fortunati 1981; Gallant, Lam 2024), the unpaid extraction of sexual labour is part of the wider mechanisms of control exerted by patriarchal racial capitalism.

Much like domestic work, social reproductive labour is often not recognised as legitimate labour and is thus exploited without compensation (Fortunati 1981), allowing capital to evade its costs. From this perspective, the provision of sexual services fits within an 'economic-sexual continuum' of social reproductive labour, both paid and unpaid, ranging from marriage to sex work (Tabet 2004).

By demanding payment for services that patriarchal capitalism seeks to appropriate for free (Bernstein 2007a), sex workers actively challenge the norms of unpaid reproductive labour. This labour-focused perspective establishes a crucial link between the broader struggle for recognising invisible reproductive work and the movement for the decriminalisation of sex work, advocating for its acknowledgement as labour.

The study about on the work of the association proves to be particularly interesting because it aims to fill a research gap concerning the critics of humanitarianism in sex work studies. To this end it studied the shift between these described approaches, that is, the shift from a community-led, political approach in a conflictual relationship with institutions to an approach that adheres to the logics of sexual humanitarianism (Mai 2016), where a top-down rhetoric of victimisation is adopted (Agustin 2017).

France and neo-abolitionism

In 2016, France adopted the neo-abolitionist law No. 2016-444, based on the End Demand Swedish model (Rubio Gundell 2022). This model, first introduced in Sweden in 1999, aims to reduce the demand for sexual services by criminalising clients and third parties (Gallant, Lam 2024), which means people or groups involved other than sex workers and clients. Consequently, the law includes a penal section that criminalises the purchase of sexual services (Le Bail, Giametta, Rassouw 2018), based on the principle that a client of a sex worker participates in the continuation of the prostitution system, which is seen as inherently violent and to be eradicated (Mai et al. 2021). In the neo-abolitionist paradigm, people who engage in sex work, which is not recognised as work, are conceived of solely as victims (Rubio Grundell 2022; Vuolajärvi, Svanström, Östergren 2019).

The law is purportedly aimed at combating human trafficking (Mai et al. 2021). To this end, it has set up the Parcours de Sortie de la Prostitution[1] (PSP), which are job placement pathways for sex workers, mainly migrants, managed in the assistance circuits of La Lanterne and other associations involved in similar work. Financial aid for social and professional reintegration amounts to 330 euros per month (Ministère de la Justice n.d.) and is combined with a temporary residence permit for six months that is renewable up to three times, for a total of eighteen months (Mai et al. 2021).

Recent research (Le Bail, Giametta, Rassouw 2018; Smith, Mac 2018; Mai et al. 2021; Gallant, Lam 2024; Calderaro and Giametta 2018) has shown how the introduction of the neo-abolitionist model has produced outcomes very different from those declared, leading to an increase in violence against sex workers. In fact, the negative impact of criminalising clients and third parties has emerged on several fronts, as it directly contributes to poor working conditions and exploitation (Gallant, Lam 2024). Third-party legislation also affects those who are not abusing sex workers but working in cooperation with them. By criminalising third parties, the law also criminalises the ability to establish safe and fair working environments, such as through solidarity between sex workers or partnerships with, for example, taxi drivers, landlords, or just helping friends. This exacerbates financial instability and reduces the control that the most vulnerable sex workers have over their working conditions.

The implementation of the law has also coincided with a tightening of migration policies, effectively constituting an 'obstacle to migration' (Merteuil et al. 2020: 65). Indeed, in the name of the fight against trafficking, police checks of migrants' documents have become more frequent, legitimising widespread racialised criminalisation

[1] 'Pathways Out of Prostitution'.

(Ticktin 2011; Mai et al. 2021) and racial profiling (Gallant, Lam 2024). This surveillance practice is another factor that increases the precariousness of the living and working conditions of migrant sex workers on the streets (Le Bail, Giametta, Rassouw 2018). In France, the Syndicat du Travail Sexuel[2] (STRASS), which has existed since 2009, works to combat criminalisation, repression, and other forms of discrimination faced by sex workers in the context of this criminalising law. Its self-definition as a syndicate is a form of provocation, as sex work is not formally recognised in France as a form of labour.

Case study: a French association

This article's case study is the La Lanterne association, which was founded in Paris in the 1980s. It emerged out of a mobilisation of sex workers during the AIDS epidemic that aimed to challenge the public authorities regarding the health and working conditions of sex workers. I had initially intended using the association as a case study in order to examine a concrete example of how political autonomy can be maintained while engaging with institutions. I therefore chose this association because it was founded by sex workers fighting for their rights. The name used here for the association is a pseudonym, as during the interview with the head of the service I was asked not to mention the association's real name. The need to anonymise also influenced the amount and type of data and information that I could provide about the association – for example, regarding its development and history.

Amalia Romerio (2022) contextualises the 1980s in France as a period marked by the intense institutionalisation of feminist causes, when certain strands of feminism developed closer relationships with the state. This process also led to the institutionalisation of some grassroots practices.

La Lanterne was founded on the principle of *santé communautaire* (community health). This approach, which emerged in France in the 1980s to fight the HIV epidemic, involves the inclusion and participation of the community the aid is directed at, in this case sex workers, in the organisation of the support work. The association was formed and has worked over the years to support street-based sex workers, initially focusing predominantly on French cisgender white sex workers and subsequently expanding its public.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the association experienced a period of severe indebtedness that led to the suspension of its activities. When my fieldwork began, La Lanterne had just restarted its work with new administrative staff. The process of

[2] 'Syndicate of Sex Work'.

indebtedness and the resulting need for external funding significantly changed the internal dynamics and priorities of the association, modifying its composition and prompting the development of a stronger relationship with institutions.

When I was conducting the fieldwork, the association offered a range of services, including assistance with legal and administrative processes (such as applying for social housing), condom distribution in areas of street-based sex work in Paris, and a health service that organised screening days for sexually transmitted diseases at the association's venue, which were also occasionally done during the distribution of condoms. These services were aimed at providing socio-health support, with the goal of fostering progressive autonomy within the French social and economic context. The association employed eight paid social workers, none of whom had direct experience in sex work, as well as three paid 'community workers', who, because of their experience in sex work, had a direct connection to the community served by the association .

In line with its original community-led principles, the association defines itself as non-abolitionist and states that its work is based on a principle of non-judgement. As Emilie, who was responsible for the field of health for about the first half of my fieldwork, told me:

> *We are not abolitionists, we just accompany people in their choices: for those who do not want to quit [sex work], we offer social and sanitary assistance, and for those who do want to quit we offer something else.*

On its official website, the association affirms that it engages in 'community health action aimed at prostitutes and sex workers'. This action is described as consisting of a practice of 'listening without judgement' together with work aimed at 'drawing the government's attention to the consequences of penalising clients'. A few lines further along on the website, it is claimed that the 2016 law, which introduced the criminalisation of clients, together with the advent of the pandemic, plunged many people 'into extreme precariousness'. This is why one of the association's priorities is 'to reach out to the most vulnerable people'.

The page dedicated to describing the association states that the main focus is 'working with and for people in prostitution in all its forms', using terminology that could align with a prohibitionist approach. As Morgane Merteuil, a sex worker and feminist activist, points out, prostitute is in fact a term that individualises and thus depoliticises (Merteuil et al 2020).

The term sex worker is therefore preferred to prostitution in pro-sex work academic and activist discourses. Regardless, some sex workers label themselves as prostitutes and I have respected and reported their self-definition in this article.

During my fieldwork, the organisation was predominantly staffed by social workers with no experience in sex work. This reflects a process similar to what Ana Alexandra (2024) described in her study on the NGO-isation of the feminist movement in Belgium. She noted how this shift has led to an increase in the number of people working in feminist organisations who come from a professional rather than a feminist background. This trend is often justified by the perceived need for specific skills or experience to effectively perform the work. It thus emerges that adherence to feminist principles or activist experience are no longer necessary requirements to find employment within associations. Similarly, Romerio (2022), studying the relationship between a form of feminist activism based on volunteer work and the increasing professionalisation of the association Planning Familial[3] in France, observed that around 20% of the association's members, mostly women, became involved with the association as part of a job search rather than through their own associative or political networks. This proportion is even higher among those who hold paid positions compared to those working as volunteers.

The social workers at La Lanterne are mainly white cisgender people, apart from two Arab individuals. The social workers have very different levels of experience: Concerning the socio-legal support field, Aicha has worked in several associations, while Sylvie is new to this work. Lola holds an internship at La Lanterne, where she performs various tasks, mainly bureaucratic ones. Emilie, a nurse who was in charge of the health field but left her job halfway through my fieldwork for personal reasons, had already worked in contexts where health is related to social aspects. Violette, who replaced Emilie, has previous experience volunteering at the Red Cross. The head of the service, Monica, is a clinical psychologist with a master's degree in management and business innovation. The peer workers are white. Lydia, a transgender woman, is in charge of organising the distribution of condoms and had previously worked as a sex worker. Gisèle, a cisgender woman, is close to retirement and is currently the person who has worked the longest in La Lanterne. She entered the association via the French employment centre because she no longer wanted to do only sex work. The third peer worker works only a few days a week and does not often visit the association's venues. La Lanterne's main target groups are nowadays migrant, cisgender, and transgender street-based sex workers.

[3] Le Planning Familial is a French non-profit organisation founded in 1956 that promotes sexual and reproductive rights, gender equality, and access to contraception and abortion.

Methodology

This research is based on a qualitative, ethnographic approach, that relies mainly from my fieldnotes. etween November 2021 and March 2023, fieldwork was conducted through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and informal conversations with both staff members and sex workers who accessed the association's services. As Hockey and Forsey (2012) note, the reality of fieldwork is that we interview in order to find out what we do not and cannot know otherwise. Building on this insight, this research also sought to examine how public and semi-public discourses around sex work are produced and negotiated within and around the association. The ethnography took place mainly at the association's venues in Paris, as well as during outreach activities in the city. I carried out the research work by joining the association as a volunteer and therefore participating in activities ranging from the distribution of condoms to socio-legal support, while making my position as a researcher explicit from the beginning. Over this period, I took part in at least two condom distributions per week. I was also consistently present at the association's venues, visiting at least once or twice a week, participating in health promotion days, socio-legal support, sexually transmitted infection (STI) training workshops, and a general assembly.

I conducted all the interviews with individuals with whom I had developed a form of relationship, although I had not previously met them in Paris in other contexts. I conducted twelve semi-structured interviews in French and translated the quotations cited in this text from French into English. The interviews lasted on average one hour and were mostly held at the association's venues, with three exceptions: one interview took place in the office of a participant employed by another association, and two were conducted in a bar. These settings may have influenced the data collected: the possibility of being overheard, either by someone entering the room or us raising our voices, could have affected participants' willingness to share certain information. Furthermore, as the interviews were carried out during working hours, time constraints may have shaped the depth of some discussions. The people interviewed are mainly social workers (who do not come from the sex work sector) and peer workers (who also carry out or have carried out sex work in addition to their work within the association). All the people I interviewed are paid by the association, except for two sex workers, as one does volunteering work in the association and the other uses its services. This study is therefore based on an analysis of field notes such as diary entries and an analysis of interviews.

Concerning ethics and positionality, I conducted this research based on the principle that sex workers are not merely subjects of study but experts in their own lives and the intersecting oppressions they experience. As such, they possess profound knowledge on criminalisation, racism, class and gender oppression, as well as on

survival strategies, mutual aid processes, and political perspectives. Sex workers in academia are often subjected to invisibilisation and victimisation. It was therefore essential for me, as a white Italian middle-class cisgender woman who has occasionally engaged in escorting, to prioritise the voices of those directly concerned and not to adopt a merely extractivist approach, disconnected from the political fight, thereby building on the fundamental premise that research is never neutral (Harding 1992; Smith 1987; Haraway 1988). This sensitivity aims to reflect on the 'very orientation of social research in order to understand the reproduction of mechanisms of epistemological domination, against the subsumption of this elaboration by white neoliberal thinking' (Giametta 2017: 6).

Having outlined the general characteristics of the research, I will now proceed to highlight the key findings that emerged in relation to the consideration of sex work within the association, the position occupied by sex workers inside the association, and the type of support work offered by the association.

Political neutrality and the perception of (sex) work

> *Every Tuesday morning there is a meeting only with the people who are social workers, where we formalise the practice in the field and reflect on what can be improved and proposed. In the afternoon there is a meeting with the same people and the peer workers, who do not come from the social field, but rather from the prostitution sector.*

This excerpt from my interview with Monica, the new head of the service of La Lanterne, exemplifies the association's distancing from its original community orientation. She moreover explained to me a new initiative that was being introduced within the organisation that she had implemented on her own: a division into the internal management meetings. Whereas previously there was only one meeting including all the association's staff, with this change there is now a first meeting just for social workers and a second meeting that also includes peer workers with experience in sex work. It is during the first meeting that the objectives to be achieved are formulated and decisions made, while during the second meeting what has already been decided is reported to the entire working group. One reason Monica gives to explain the separation of social and community workers is that it is aimed at improving the organisation of work.

> *In the beginning we used to have a meeting with all the people, but it was much more complicated to work together with the community workers, who do not have the same approach to formulating work. We used to get a bit lost.*

It thus emerges that the work perceived as necessary to structure the activity of La Lanterne is not the work that comes from the experience of the community workers, but from that of the social workers. Peer workers are identified by Monica as a separate category of workers. It is therefore interesting to question what is considered work in this context. When I ask Monica how she positions herself in relation to the decriminalisation of sex work, and thus the recognition of sex work as work, she states the following:

My job is the matter of organisation, of developing interesting projects. As far as politics is concerned, I am not quite sure about all the issues, but what we see at work, that I know better. Instead, as far as the law or ideological matters are concerned, I agree with the idea that, perhaps, prostitution can be a choice: it may be, it may not be. […] I'm not knowledgeable enough and assertive enough to have an opinion and I don't know if I will one day because I don't know if I really care to have it, but in any case I care even less now.

Sylvie, a social worker in charge of socio-legal support, similarly explains:

I stay neutral […]. When it comes to work, most people I help tell me, 'no, I don't work'. When I explain to them, 'not work, but the activity of prostitution, street work', they understand. And so they tell me that 'it is not a job'. And I can understand that. I nowadays support many more people who suffer doing this than live well doing it, but then in terms of the quality of life … This is up for discussion. For me it is still a minority of the people I see.

Both Sylvie and Monica, in replying to my question on decriminalisation, believe it is relevant to argue about whether or not people choose to engage in sex work, adhering to a trend that focuses on questioning why people sell sex (Agustin 2007), instead of the conditions in which it is done. They declare themselves uninterested in the political dimension of decriminalisation, expressing no engagement with the topic, and are unsure whether or not it should even be considered work. From their perspective, this question is not central and is deemed irrelevant to the work of the association. What matters are concrete issues of organisation and task distribution, rather than a reflection on the very notion of work itself that might examine the reproductive labour they interact with and also carry out.

Criminalisation and the unrecognition of work are therefore not identified as key factors in the experiences of the oppression of sex workers, and therefore lobbying for legal reforms and acts of political change is not considered part of the association's area of concern, contrary to what is stated on its website.

This lack of positioning on decriminalisation has an impact on the work of the association. In fact, Aicha tells me that she has no problem working with 'abolitionist associations and institutions' because what matters to her is 'the interest of the people being cared for' and therefore 'being able to offer answers and support' In fact, the workers identify the main motivation of people committed to working in the association as not a political stance but a desire to help a population that is perceived as fragile. Aicha speaks of a 'vocation to alleviate the anguish she observes'. Along this same line, Monica draws an analogy between her previous work with women victims of violence and her current activities within the association. She explains:

I had not considered prostitution with a clear identity. I had already met women who negotiated their accommodation with their bodies. When you work with women in a precarious, violent, difficult situation, you are in the same universe.

Prostitution is associated by Monica with the act of negotiating something with the body. The analogy between women victims of violence and sex workers is obvious to her and taken as an indicator of her experience and expertise in the field, which she identifies as dedicated to assisting 'women in precarious situations'. She therefore states that she is interested in working in this field out of a desire to help a precarious segment of women in society. Thus, we are not talking about labour relations between two different categories of workers, but about relations between the category of social workers and a category considered to be intrinsically fragile and subject to violence for selling sexual services.

This focus on violence and fragility made by Sylvie and Monica also denotes a distinction and distance between social and community workers that emerged in many of the interactions I was able to witness – for example, in the following fieldnotes:

I have just finished assisting Sylvie with a support work and we are in a friendly exchange, in the company of Monica, the manager, and Gisèle and Lydia, community workers. At one point, the conversation turns to sex work experiences, with Gisèle and Lydia joking with each other. However, Monica soon starts to show an interest in what seem to be the dangerous situations that occur, adopting a surprised and intrigued attitude. She focuses on the more violent details, appearing astonished and disturbed. Thus, a light-hearted conversation between two sex workers sharing work episodes is supplanted by Monica directing the conversation towards violent and potentially traumatic details. (Paris, 18 November 2022)

Therefore, claiming care for a precarious social segment does not translate into a political position. When I express to Aicha, a social worker, that my interest in con-

ducting this research is linked to transfeminist positioning, she tells me that she 'does not like feminism'. To justify this, she explains to me that 'it is not through struggle that results are obtained'. Similarly, Sylvie states that she does not feel 'committed to something very feminist', but that she likes 'equality'. In this sense, she does not 'necessarily want to defend women'.

The issue of debt (Graeber 2011) plays a key role in understanding these positions. During the end-of-year general meeting that I attended, the issue of debt consolidation notably took centre stage. Monica identified the current year as 'the first year of recovery after the crisis'. The aim of her presentation was to highlight how the association's economic situation had clearly improved. She also emphasised how the recent annual report was so aesthetically pleasing in order to 'create the idea that we are doing a good job in order to gain more funding'.

When the discussion at the meeting shifted to the choice of an icon that could symbolise La Lanterne to help it gain further grants, it was unanimously agreed that it should be a 'non-militant' person, in line with the trend identified by Schaffauser (2014) where activities are oriented towards non-conflictual stances in order to increase the possibility of obtaining funds.

'Translating my ideas into structured project proposals in order to secure funding' is in fact the main activity that Monica, the service manager, tells me to do. She argues that:

> *There is a lot of work involved in writing grant applications, creating partnerships, developing projects in accordance with the grants we have been awarded. There is also the work of representing our demands to institutions, which is both social and political, but political to a lesser extent anyway.*

It thus emerges that another impact of funding lies in adherence to certain compliance requirements, which creates an additional administrative burden for the association. Therefore, in this context of debt consolidation, volunteering is is an essential resource in the association's work as a matter of resource economy (Simonet 2018), as Nadia tells me:

> *It is a financial issue. People have to be available at night to do the distributions, and here in the association only Lydia is paid for this; the rest is volunteer work.*

Nadia is a sex worker who learned about the association 'through a friend who was a prostitute'. She tells me that she joined the association because she 'wanted to know her rights'. She then also became a volunteer, giving unpaid 'sewing workshops' and helping for free to sort out all the bundles of documents that were left

over from the previous administration. Nadia's work, although essential, is therefore unpaid and the value of her experience as a sex worker is not recognised.

The effect of the association's claimed political neutrality is therefore that sex workers' lack of access to rights is not linked to a political struggle. Even though the association does not position itself in opposition to sex worker-led organisations or collectives that, on the contrary, frame sex workers' rights as a political issue, the association ultimately finds itself more closely connected to state institutions, municipal and regional authorities, and other associations with a similar organisational structure.

The subordination of the viewpoints of sex workers

To explain the decision not to involve peer workers in the process that informs the association's directions, Monica gives another reason. She explains that:

> *I told myself that there are things that colleagues need to talk about and that community workers don't need to know. So you have to keep things secret that they don't necessarily need to know about.*

Monica, who occupies a position of power over all the individuals she mentions, further explains the distinction between employees at La Lanterne, referring to individuals from the social work sector as 'colleagues' while referring to sex workers as 'community workers, which means they are a particular type, meaning that they are a particular type of 'colleague'.

The population that the association's services are aimed at, sex workers, and thus their points of view (Hill Collins 1990) are not prioritised in the decision-making process or in the structuring and formulation of the practices to be adopted. It is as though they are not considered subjects capable of knowledge and social understanding. The involvement of professional employees in the association, arguably seen as a means to obtain funding, is seen as more important than having mechanisms in place to ensure that the needs of sex workers are prioritised.

Thus, on the one hand, people not involved in sex work are those whose discourse is most valued, despite their lacking practical knowledge from direct experience (Spade 2020). On the other hand, sex workers add 'diversity' within the labour staff structure (Busarello 2016), but formally occupy a subordinate position. The association thus employs a top-down approach exercised through a mechanism of 'epistemic injustice' (Fricker 2007). Moreover, this is paternalistically exposed as a change that is argued to be fair even for those who are affected by it (Tazzioli 2021b), the community workers.

The prioritisation of the social workers' point of view has the effect of establishing what kind of discourse can be integrated into the association, influencing the way in

which their own experience of sex work is recounted by the community workers. In an interview with me, someone considered part of the association, Gisèle and Nadia, the former a community worker and the latter a volunteer and sex worker, seem to reveal a form of shame in declaring that they have carried out or are carrying out sex work. Gisèle, after starting to tell me about her family background, claims: 'I really have to tell you, I am a prostitute'. Nadia is keen to emphasise that, in parallel with sex work, she also had 'a real job', namely dressmaking. The narrative community workers give of themselves seems permeated with the pietistic discourse on sex work employed by social workers, which is at odds with efforts to combat sex workers' internalised oppression and promote a sense of pride in themselves.

Gisèle, who works at the reception at La Lanterne, expresses little appreciation for her role within the association. Although she represents one of the most senior people in terms of accumulated working time within the association, she was reluctant to agree to an interview with me, as she felt that she did not have 'much to say'. In fact, she explains to me that her tasks now are simple and repetitive, while her work before the change of administration was instead 'very important and interesting'. She tells me that now:

> *It's always the same routine: I'm here […] I answer the phone, handle legal residence permit tasks, and record the visits for statistics.*

Gisèle also speaks to me about the afternoon meeting, which she can attend, as a 'small meeting'. In contrast, she refers to the morning meeting, which only includes non-peer workers, as a 'more serious' meeting. When I ask her if she feels part of the organisational work of La Lanterne, she replies that she feels 'excluded'. However, she says that this situation suits her because she is 'on standby', as she is starting to think about 'when to retire'.

Looking at the structure of the association, individuals who are hired by the new administration are all non-peer workers, without any experience as sex workers. This contrasts with the community-led approach applied when the association was founded, which preferred to hire sex workers because their experience gave them more effective skills than people who have never practised sex work. The only community workers involved in the association had already been hired within the previous administration. The association's recruitment is therefore gradually moving towards a reorganisation centred more on non-peer professionals, thus affecting the structuring of the association's community-led approach. This is consistent with a tendency already described by Ana (2024) in which technical skills are favoured over political commitment and embedded positionality.

Stigma and solidarity

Another justification given for the lack of centrality of the community workers in formulating the association's work is that some community workers have links with sex workers supported by La Lanterne. This is seen as problematic by the social workers because it is indicated as potentially jeopardising professional secrecy. Sylvie, a social worker, tells me:

> *When working with community workers you cannot mention certain situations because they know each other.*

This reasoning implies that community workers cannot professionally handle sensitive data if they have personal relationships with the sex workers supported by the association. Familiarity among sex workers is therefore not regarded as a positive factor in the context of support work. This type of negative conception of relations between sex workers can be observed to permeate other activities within the association.

The following is an excerpt from my field diary:

> *Strasbourg Saint Denis, 10 p.m. A sex worker comes to get condoms. We ask her how she is. She replies that other sex workers annoy her and that is why she prefers 'talking to men'. I ask her why and she replies that she is a 'loner' because 'between sex workers, between women, there is a lot of jealousy'. Lydia nods her head and voices her agreement. Once we leave with the van, Lydia adds that she too was a 'loner' when she worked 'because you cannot trust others'. We begin to discuss relationships between street sex workers and I ask her whether or not she thinks it is important to try to develop solidarity between sex workers. She says that she thinks it is right, but that, on the other hand, 'the association does not deal with problems between sex workers'.* (Paris, 15 December 2022)

This excerpt reveals a fundamentally negative view of relationships between colleagues working on the street. The critical point of the interaction between Lydia, the community worker who manages the condom distribution, and the sex worker is not Lydia's expression of her difficult experience of relationships between colleagues. Rather, what is interesting to observe is how this experience is objectivised, instead of being relativised and seen in relation to structural mechanisms of stigmatisation. Consequently, this is also how it is transmitted to the people who benefit from the service of condom distribution. In this respect, is significant that Lydia notes that the question of solidarity between sex workers is not of interest to La Lanterne.

The condom distribution carried out by the association, which is a means of establishing contact with sex workers on the street, is done with a van, in which a space is set up with sofas and a coffee machine. This is therefore the association's only activity that is still structured around a peer approach with a community worker. Condom distribution also serves as a moment when sex workers can take a break from work, which can foster solidarity dynamics, as they often get into the van together, talk, and share information. As Soraya, an Algerian sex worker with a residence permit, supported by La Lanterne, tells me:

> *I was a bit isolated, I felt dirty compared to the bus operators. They always came by, offering coffees. Then a friend of mine, who already knew the association, told me to get on the bus because she saw me alone, not motivated to do the work for my residence permit, and after a while I did and started drinking coffees, chatting, getting some chocolate and condoms.*

The condom distribution is appreciated by sex workers, who benefit from it. However, the fact that relationships between sex workers are not necessarily viewed as positive has repercussions with regard to responses to violence and the expression of solidarity.

> *Porte Dorée, a city gate located in the south-east of Paris. It is a November evening, at about 9.30 pm. A sex worker working on the corner of a street is sitting on the floor wearing a fixed expression and looking somewhat disoriented. Looking at her, Lydia says that 'it is not surprising that she gets raped and doesn't even remember it, since she is under the influence of substances'. She goes on to tell me that 'today sex workers no longer have a code, as they did in the past'. So it is somehow 'their fault if they are harassed'.* (Paris, 14 January 2022)

Lydia's words here, instead of expressing solidarity, convey a discourse of blame and the individualisation of responsibility for those experiencing sexual violence. This framing reinforces the narrative of violence as inherent to sex work, while disregarding the structural dimensions of the violence experienced by sex workers.

A continuum can therefore be identified in the association's approach that starts from an interest in working in this area to help the people being cared for in their vulnerable position and extends to the framing of individual, technical responses rather than political processes of solidarity formation (Fisher 2016). In spite of this, some of the services the association provides, such as condom distribution, can stimulate processes of mutual help, as demonstrated by the word-of-mouth between Soraya and her friend.

Understanding the system: a classical life

This type of humanitarian approach also shapes the socio-legal assistance provided by La Lanterne. This support can be provided with or without an appointment. A fixed time is set during the week when sex workers can come freely for an initial appointment and then, if necessary, continue the support at other agreed appointments.

> *It is a moment between two appointments on a day of socio-legal support by Sylvie. Sylvie starts talking to me about her concerns for a person from Nigeria who is in danger of losing custody of her child. She states that this person needs to understand that 'slapping your child is forbidden in France'. She goes on to say that there could have been educational work on this issue to make her 'understand the system'.* (Paris, 5 February 2022)

The key to Sylvie's discourse is to argue that, with further intervention, the person could have been better integrated into the French social context in order not to lose her child. Aicha, a social worker, also emphasises the importance of the integration of non-French people:

> *The woman who did not receive health benefits from the state, who had papers full of stains, ruined … Here this morning I created space for her to be able to declare her taxes. I gave her a social existence … And now she has all the evidence of her existence in the French state.*

This integration, and the position from which it is encouraged, is recognised as an important step, by Soraya, a sex worker supported by the association.

When I go to Aicha I feel … good. She appreciates a woman. She is kind, she goes beyond her duties in her work…

Socio-legal support is thus aimed at integrating marginalised individuals into the French social context, particularly those whose bodies are racialised, sexualised, and gendered (Ticktin 2006). The declared goal is to reduce their state of precariousness. Indeed, Sylvie explains to me that what she aims for in her work is:

> *To as much as possible create stability for the people we meet. Many come from Nigeria, the Ivory Coast, Congo. They are extremely marginalised, isolated, and have absolutely nothing: no home, no social rights. […] They wait a long time before they go to social services and are stuck in a community environment and in a context that is the street and prostitution.*

Among the tools she can use for her work, Sylvie is particularly interested in Pathways out of Prostitution (PSP), a programme introduced in the 2016 law (Gouvernement français 2016). Sylvie describes PSP as a pathway to a 'classical' life. They represent for Sylvie 'a happiness … the only solution that exists for these women, to work, regularise themselves, emancipate themselves, live a more stable life'.

Sylvie thus views PSP as a pathway to work, implicitly suggesting that she does not consider 'prostitution' to be work. The aim of PSP is thus to 'reproduce' women citizens who can be included in the labour market (Cavallero and Gago 2021: 33). The exit from precarity is in this sense conceived as a return to work that adheres to capitalist criteria and conforms to gender norms (ibid.), validating them. This implies the exclusion of deviant practices (Fassin 2018), in this case that of claiming compensation for a relationship that should not have a price (Federici 1975).

The position of neutrality that Sylvie expressed in relation to the issue of sex work is therefore inscribed in a positioning that considers it desirable to redirect sex workers onto a different labour path. Indeed, Sylvie explains how she could never work with:

> *an association that works with women in prostitution and has no possibility of offering exit routes …. This would mean no prospects for the individuals who suffer this life on a daily basis. … These are people who have poor knowledge of the French system and will formulate their needs in a rather clumsy way. It is not that they are not capable, but they don't know their rights, and they probably don't know how to formulate what they want to do, which very often is to get out of prostitution, to be regularised, to get a job, a housing.*

Sylvie states that the individuals she assists are often unable to recognise the need to exit sex work, which she is instead able to recognise for them. This victimising and paternalistic discourse implicitly frames sex work as inherently destabilising, to the point that those who engage in it are seen as incapable of fully understanding or articulating their own distress. It also does not take into consideration the fact that a person may decide to embark on a migration path and to finance it herself through sex work (Agustin 2007), given that sex work could be a smart strategy for migrant women to obtain the money and resources they need, irrespective of their migration status (Gallant, Lam 2024).

Promoting the importance of PSP within the association is also conveyed by individuals who are not directly applying and organizing the PSP programme. When I ask Nadia, a sex worker and volunteer at the association, to define, in her opinion, the association's objective, she replies that it is:

helping prostitutes, victims of trafficking in women … Here, like elsewhere I suppose, we help people fill out their forms, we help them a lot, and that is the purpose of the association. The people don't speak French, you have to help them fill out the forms… […] It's not easy for a foreigner because the laws change quickly.

The PSP programme mainly proposes 'care-related professions' (Ayerbe et al. 2011: 81). Sylvie shows me the paths taken by sex workers she has assisted who have gone through the PSP programme:

We have one person in training to work in tourism as a hostess, another who is a cleaner, another who works for an airport and wants to continue on this path, another who wants to work as a hairdresser, another in aesthetics, and yet another as a caregiver and a home assistant.

Sex workers are thus encouraged to leave sex work to take up poorly paid, highly feminised, and increasingly racialised care and social reproduction jobs. Sara Farris (2017) points out in this regard that the kind of jobs migrant women are pushed towards are the very jobs that the white, bourgeois feminist movement fought against and that European white women no longer want to perform. She analyses how the rhetoric of women's rights has been used to promote nationalist and racist agendas. Criminalising sex work could therefore help to control the cost and availability of the labour of poor racialised women (Gallant, Lam 2024).

Following this reasoning, PSP turns out to be a programme for assigning gender roles and underpaid social reproduction jobs to racialised subjects. The job placement policies that La Lanterne offers consequently intensify the configurations of racial discrimination and the construction and perpetuation of gender roles (Farris 2017). It thus emerges how, since there is no explicit critique of gender, race, and capitalist labour norms in the work of the association, the pathways considered are oriented within these systems. Rather than politically neutral, therefore, these kinds of practices reinforce a certain social order (Ticktin 2011). In this sense, the rhetoric of rescuing bodies identified as vulnerable, but not political, according to class, gender, and race, legitimises and validates the systems at the source of the vulnerability, which thus appear not incompatible but reconcilable' (Tazzioli 2021a).

As Emilie, formerly responsible for the health field at La Lanterne, tells me:

We did a distribution with the police. It went very well. They wanted to see our work and they were very pleased.

The association's decision to conduct condom distribution on some occasions in the presence of the police, an institution widely recognised as perpetuating violence against sex workers, particularly migrants (Spade 2015), suggests a preference for alliances not with social justice movements combating gender-based violence, but rather with institutions that oppose racial, social, and economic justice (Gallant, Lam 2024). Police operations target racialised women, seize their earnings, arrest them, and deport them under the guise of 'liberation' (ibid.). Even those seeking help risk being flagged as trafficking suspects, triggering investigations that implicate not only sex workers, but colleagues, friends, and family members.

One of the effects of this declared politically neutral approach is therefore the consolidation of the power granted to institutions like the police, which can result in heightened state control and surveillance. In line with the association's lack of structural reasoning about violence, it avoids engaging in a broader discussion about the structural oppression exercised by these institutions. Instead, its interactions with the police are motivated by positive interpersonal relationships with individual officers.

Conclusion

This article provides a critical analysis of the support work carried out by an association in Paris for sex workers, highlighting its predominantly humanitarian orientation. The analysis underscored how the way the association is organised and the services it provides have over the last few years evolved away from the peer principles that guided it when it was founded and have instead adopted a victimising approach. The work of the association is no longer managed by the people from the community towards whom the work is directed, but by social work professionals with no experience of sex work.

One of the association's primary activities is securing funding from institutional sources. Absent from its work, however, are efforts such as lobbying for legislative change or engaging with the broader political movement of sex workers, likely because such activities are seen as having the potential to jeopardise access to funding. The work carried out by La Lanterne and by its employees does not acknowledge that criminalising laws are a primary source of the vulnerability faced by sex workers, especially those who face intersectional oppression, such as migrants, a concern that the association's social workers claim to address. Instead, the current objective is to integrate the individuals they assist into the French social system through individualised support pathways, thereby aiming to help them exit precariousness.

Although the tools provided by the association have a practical and material usefulness that is crucial to the lives of many sex workers, they also have limitations. These considerations are not intended to detract from the importance of grassroots

care and organisation in sustaining communities, which are often the foundation of the political work of some collectives (Hofstetter 2022). In the case of La Lanterne, however, it emerges that practices informed by perspectives that are not concerned with a structural vision of precarity can become an instrument of neo-liberal tendencies in reorganising the productive and reproductive sphere (Farris 2017). Indeed, the approach of the studied association treats precarity as a humanitarian issue that can be resolved within existing structures (Bernstein 2007b). A work path that follows the demand of the labour market is considered desirable, even if it is lower paid than sex work and even if it is inscribed in dynamics of subordination. In this case, therefore, the humanitarian and criminalising view of sex work plays a strategic role in the implementation of racialised and class based forms of control. Paternalism and the desire to 'rescue' can be pretexts for consolidating 'the construction of gender roles and racialized production' (Farris 2017: 176). While claiming to be apolitical, the association instead exercises a form of politics that is linked to capital and labour (Ticktin 2006) and thereby makes itself a participant in the exercise of the dynamics of oppression (Ahmed 2004).

Contexts where criminalising socio-legislative systems of sex work, such as neo-abolitionism in France, are in place, lead to increased precarity, risk of violence, and difficulties in accessing rights and health (Le Bail, Giametta, Rassouw 2018; Gallant, Lam 2024). In addition, such state policies harm collective forms of self-organisation, including through the control of public funding, driving them away from prioritising structure on the community-led principle and undertaking claims for social transformation. This research analysed a concrete and revealing example of these dynamics, with the aim of identifying their risks and arguing for the importance of maintaining sex-worker-managed community approaches that link support services to intersectional political fights.

In terms of its limitations, this research mainly focused on analysing the practices and discourses of individuals employed by the association, which proved to be valuable resources for understanding the functioning and logic of a particular type of humanitarian action. That said, the study would certainly have gained in thoroughness and depth by incorporating a greater number of interviews with sex workers who benefit from the association's services, an aspect that could be explored in future research. In addition, the role of debt in shaping associations' approaches to sexual humanitarianism represents another track that warrants further investigation.

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The Trade Union Organising of Sex Workers in Germany: An Analysis of Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract: Over the past two decades, there have been attempts to organise sex workers in trade unions in Germany. Still, it is a complex and challenging issue, as they are often affected by stigmatisation and discrimination and have difficulties representing and protecting their interests. This article analyses the challenges and opportunities of organising sex workers in Germany, a country that is at the centre of public debate on prostitution and its regulation due to its current discussions about a possible ban on the purchase of sex. It is based on two case studies as initial findings from a doctoral project in which qualitative interviews with sex workers were conducted and analysed. The results show that sex workers in Germany are affected by a variety of challenges, such as stigmatisation, isolation, and segregation. The entanglement of different power relations makes collective organising more difficult. However, the unionisation of sex workers offers a range of opportunities and perspectives in the fight for fair working conditions – for example, in wage negotiations and rent controls. The article shows that the trade union organisation of sex workers in Germany can play an essential role in representing the interests of sex workers.
Keywords: sex work, trade unions, precariousness

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The Prostitution Act (ProstG) has been in force in Germany since 2002, meaning that sex work is no longer considered immoral. Sex workers[1] can sue for their wages and take out health and pension insurance. The introduction of this law allowed sex workers to organise in trade unions for the first time because it recognised sex work as wage labour. In the same year, the first sex workers joined trade unions, with *Der Spiegel* (2001) running the headline 'Deutschlands erste Gewerkschaftshure' ('Germany's first unionised whore').

These developments are consistent with the first steps towards unionisation among sex workers in various countries.[2] They were preceded by two turning points in the 1970s and 1980s that paved the way for unionisation: an evolving discourse on sex work as work and the beginnings of self-organisation among sex workers. However, union organising went a step further, as the focus was no longer primarily on human rights but labour rights (Gall 2007).

In Germany, at the United Services Union (ver.di), which is the second-largest trade union, representing people from around 1000 occupations (ver.di 2023), sex workers are now organised in the 'Special Services' department. The 'Workplace Prostitution' project office was set up, a field study was commissioned, and a model employment contract was created (Mitrovic 2004). The Free Workers' Union (FAU)[3] also ran the 'Sex Work Section' from 2020 until 2024, when sex workers decided to leave the FAU because other structures could better support their struggle (Swunionbln 2025).

Sex workers also organise themselves outside of trade unions.[4] In 2013, the 'Professional Association for Erotic and Sexual Services' (BesD) was founded,[5] which is now the largest association organised exclusively by sex workers in Europe and functions as part of international networks. Unlike a trade union, which focuses on collective labour rights and working conditions for its members, BesD represents the interests of sex workers more on a professional and social level. Nevertheless, the BesD actively seeks contact with trade unions. In March 2025, it collaborated with the wom-

[1] When sex workers are mentioned in this article, it is with reference to people who work in this field voluntarily and in clear distinction from human trafficking. This voluntary nature is, of course, influenced by a labour market structured by power relations. Accordingly, following the social researcher Jane Pitcher (2019), within the context of this article I see sex workers as agents who make decisions under limited economic conditions.

[2] For developments in Australia, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Great Britain, and the United States, see Gall (2007), for developments in Argentina, see Hardy (2010).

[3] The FAU is an anarcho-syndicalist trade union federation in which decisions are taken at a grassroots level. It is made up of independent local trade unions, which are the syndicates (FAU n.d.).

[4] For a historical overview of the self-organisation of sex workers in Germany outside trade unions (and in comparison to Italy), see Heying (2019).

[5] For a detailed study on the founding of the association, see Gloss (2020).

en's representation of ver.di, which resulted in the union publishing a position paper that strongly opposes the planned ban on sex purchases and aims to influence the coalition negotiations (ver.di 2025). Many other collective organisations campaign for decriminalisation and better working conditions as well. Specific advocacy organisations were founded to address the particular and diverse needs of sex workers. 'Transsexworks' was founded in 2015 because, at the time, many counselling centres still refused to advise trans sex workers.[6] In response to the fact that Black sex workers are disproportionately affected by migration and deportation regimes, 'The Black Sex Worker Collective' was founded, and it enriches the existing sex work organisations in Germany with its perspective as a sex worker-led and Black-led organisation (Migrationsrat 2024).

Nevertheless, it should be noted that trade union representation for sex workers is not yet well established. This article addresses this shortcoming and examines the challenges and opportunities for trade union organisation among sex workers in Germany. To this end, I draw on two case studies from problem-oriented interviews (Witzel 2000) that I conducted with sex workers from trade unions and interest groups as part of my dissertation in order to find out, among other things, how intertwined power relations work in the context of sex work and what obstacles can hinder individual and collectively organised resistance. Resistance is explicitly not used here in Foucault's understanding of governmentality; instead, I stick to the empirical self-description of the actors. The aim is to show the extent to which collective organising can contribute to overcoming intersectional power relations and improving the living conditions of sex workers.

The context and legal framework of sex work in Germany

As the conditions in which sex work takes place in Germany have a fundamental influence on how it is organised, these conditions will be outlined here. It is difficult to determine how many sex workers are active in Germany, as the work takes place in a grey area between illegality and legalisation. Estimates range from 200,000 to 400,000 people (Erobella 2024). The wide range of the estimates is an indication of insufficient data. Erobella (2024), one of the largest erotic portals in Germany, believes that it serves the political interest of conservative forces to circulate very high figures, without transparent calculations, in order to make it easier to push through repressive measures against sex work. Erobella seeks to provide realistic figures and, based on its current calculation, estimates the number of sex workers in Germany as

[6] An interview with Luis from transsexworks (Martini 2024).

91,700. By contrast, at the end of 2022, 28,278 sex workers were validly registered under the Prostitution Protection Act (Statistisches Bundesamt 2025a). The comparison between the number of registered sex workers and the estimated figures, suggesting that more than two-thirds of sex workers are not registered (Erobella 2024), can already be interpreted as a consequence of a dysfunctional law.

In 2001, the Prostitution Act (ProstG) was passed in Germany. The main aim was to strengthen the rights of sex workers. The dependency of sex workers on their pimps was to be combated, access to social security systems was to be made easier, and working conditions were to be improved. Changes were also made to the Criminal Code to improve social security for sex workers. The provision of a legalised framework was linked to the hope that sex workers would then be less dependent on other protectors in the sex work environment. The previously criminal offence of promoting prostitution[7] through mediation (such as pimping) was abolished, except in cases where this impairs the freedom of sex workers. Since the introduction of the Prostitution Act, sex work is no longer considered immoral, and sex workers can sue for their wages and are covered by health and pension insurance. The introduction of this law is an improvement for sex workers with a German passport or migrants with secure residence and a work permit.

In 2017, the Prostitute Protection Act (ProstSchG) came into force. It was officially introduced to improve the legal situation of sex workers and to better protect them from violence, exploitation, and human trafficking. At the same time, it was also intended to increase transparency and control in the prostitution industry. Many organisations had already criticised the law before it was introduced but could not prevent it from being passed (Initiative Sex Workers Solidarity 2022; Hofstetter 2022).

The Prostitute Protection Act obliges people who wish to engage in sex work to register.[8] Sex workers within the meaning of the Prostitute Protection Act are all persons who provide sexual services in exchange for payment. The law defines a 'sexual service' as a sexual act performed by at least one person on or in front of at least one other person who is directly present in exchange for payment, or the allowing of a sexual act to be performed on or in front of oneself in exchange for payment (this includes BDSM and erotic or tantric massages). The following are not considered sexual services: performances of a purely artistic nature in which no other persons

[7] I use the term 'prostitution' for established terms from that time – for example, from legal texts.

[8] This creates a register that contains intimate data (such as the person's name, date of birth, place of birth, address, nationality) on all sex workers, even though they are not suspected of having committed any crime. The stated aim is to protect sex workers from sexual crimes and to make it easier to detect such crimes. Flügge (2022: 32) points out that, following this logic, one might just as well 'introduce a register of all altar boys'.

present are sexually involved or directly present (e.g. pornographic performances, table dancing without audience participation, telephone sex, webcam sex).

Depending on the region, a sex worker may need to register with the public order office or trade office. For registration, a valid ID and two photos are required. Foreign nationals who are not covered by the Act on the General Freedom of Movement for EU Citizens must provide proof that they are entitled to pursue employment or self-employment and have a German postal address. When registering, a mandatory information session[9] takes place, during which information about German social legislation and counselling services is provided. After a mandatory health counselling session, a registration certificate with a photo is issued, which must be carried at all times. Proof of annual health counselling must be provided for renewal (for persons under the age of 21: every six months). These requirements of the registration process mean that illegalised migrants are excluded from the outset. In addition, they lead to the development of parallel structures in which sex workers pay large sums of money to people from the sex work environment in order to obtain support for the registration process, such as providing a German postal address (Degenhardt, Lintzen 2019: 39f.).

The professional association for sex work (BesD e.V. n.d.-a) has criticised the law for failing to achieve its goal: the protection of sex workers. They cite the following reasons for this: Some sex workers are afraid of being exposed or cannot afford to register because they do not have a work permit. This means that the ProstSchG is forcing them into illegality. When they work illegally, they are even more reluctant to turn to the police or counselling centres.

Furthermore, the law also led to brothels having to close – not because of poor working conditions, but because they were no longer located in the right zoning area. Overall, the ProstSchG is influenced by a strong victim protection impetus rooted in the conflation between sex work and trafficking. Sibylla Flügge (2022: 29), a German lawyer and a retired professor at the Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences who specialises in women's rights, describes the law as a 'perverse form of victim protection' as it attempts to protect sex workers 'by restricting their rights' (ibid.). It can be assumed that people who are afraid of the youth welfare office,[10] the police, or the

[9] Flügge (2022) sees forced counselling as a parallel to an abortion law, as in no other area are social benefits forced on people. This gives the impression that when it comes to female sexuality, social counselling services become paternalistic.

[10] In particular, with regard to motherhood, the 'whore stigma' seems threatening and serious (Greb 2022). My interview material shows that sex workers are concerned about (potential) discrimination against their children or clearly want to change careers if they ever have children. The media has reported individual cases in which sex workers' children were taken away from them by child welfare services (Weiß 2020).

immigration authorities[11] being informed are more likely to refrain from registering than from sex work itself.

In recent years, there has been renewed political debate about the effectiveness of the ProstSchG. However, these discussions do not focus on whether the law has ensured greater safety and better working conditions and how this could be promoted by organising sex workers into trade unions. Instead, it is argued that the ProstSchG has not improved the situation of sex workers and that the only way forward is to ban the purchase of sex. Politicians from various parties are campaigning for this. On 20 February 2024, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Christian Social Union (CSU)[12] called for the introduction of a ban on the purchase of sex. They cited the insufficient effect of the ProstSchG and stated that 'in the interests of the victims, action must now be taken' (Deutscher Bundestag 2024: 2).

Interestingly, on 24 June 2025, the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women, and Youth published an official, comprehensive evaluation of the Prostitute Protection Act, commissioned by the ministry, which highlights the positive aspects of the law and possibilities for improvement in terms of legality, but does not recommend any bans (Bundesministerium für Bildung, Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend 2025). At the same time, a PR photo was staged on the same day that Minister Karin Prien (CDU) presented a non-peer-reviewed study by a theologian supporting the so-called Nordic model (prohibiting the purchase of sex). His study contradicts the scientifically based findings of the official evaluation. The fact that the large peer-reviewed study commissioned by the ministry itself receives much less attention than a non-peer-reviewed study that arrives at the desired conclusion gave some scholars the impression that political interests could be overshadowing scientific facts, so they wrote open letters to the German Bundestag (Dolinsek 2025; DSTIG 2025). The coming months will show which direction the political and social debate will take.

[11] Even if migrants have a work permit, they may encounter difficulties when registering: It is not uncommon for them to be tied to a marriage during their first years in Germany, as their residence is based on this. If they officially register as a sex worker, they may run the risk of being accused of a fictitious marriage (Fraueninformationszentrum 2004). This may be due to the social assumption that sex work and marriage are mutually exclusive, and that 'proper' husbands would not accept that their wives engage in such work. However, my previous research findings show that some sex workers are in committed relationships and their partners are aware of their job.

[12] The CDU (Christian Democratic, a socially conservative and economically liberal party) and its sister party the CSU, the (Christian Social Union), together form the 'Union', which is politically on the right and has been in government longer than any other party since the founding of the Federal Republic.

Sex work between intersectional power relations

Before examining the trade union organisation of sex workers in Germany, it is necessary to situate sex work within the framework of social power relations.

Sex work is a highly feminised[13] field of work, in which services are predominantly provided by women and predominantly consumed by men. Women who offer sexual services are usually devalued. This is demonstrated by the swear words that exist for people who offer sexual services (and even for their children), but not for people who purchase them. In German, for example, 'Hure' (whore) and 'Hurensohn' (son of a whore) are common insults.

The majority of male sex workers are involved in male-male sex work and suffer multiple forms of discrimination. Because they do not behave according to heterosexual normativity and hegemonic masculinity, they are feminised and devalued. Given that it is men who have sex with men who predominantly contract HIV (RKI 2020), they are often associated with a risk of infection and continue to face discrimination in Germany, for example, when it comes to donating blood (Deutsche Aidshilfe n.d.).

Sex work is also an ethnicised area of work in which the majority are migrants, accounting for almost 82% of sex workers according to official figures (Statistisches Bundesamt 2025a). As legal migration becomes increasingly difficult,[14] people who do not have a residence permit are forced into the illegal labour market. This is where structural violence[15] hits them particularly hard, as they have to work in constant fear of discovery and deportation, are often unaware of their rights, and/or are unable to claim them in case of doubt. Urban migration regimes also contribute to the precariousness and vulnerability of sex workers (Künkel, Schrader 2020).

Most migrant sex workers are not victims of human trafficking but are dependent on third parties as intermediaries owing to a lack of opportunities for legal entry and accommodation. Veronika Munk (2006), who has been coordinating EU projects on sex work, migration, and human rights since 1993 – most recently a project named 'Indoors', which deals with the legal situation of sex workers – argues that the narrative of migrant women as victims who are deprived of their passports and coerced into sex work does not correspond to reality but is used to oppose migration and sex

[13] It total, 93% of sex workers in Germany are female, 3% are transgender, and 4% are men (TAMPEP 2007: 6).

[14] Stationary controls were introduced at Germany's external borders, and Federal Minister Alexander Dobrindt ordered asylum seekers to be turned away at the borders (Tagesschau 2025). Family reunification was suspended for two years (Bundesregierung 2025).

[15] I understand structural violence as disadvantages that arise from social structures, institutions, and power relations and cannot be attributed to individual actions.

work. The latest motion submitted by the CDU/CSU to the German Bundestag provides an impressive example. While sex workers are described exclusively as victims in the text of the motion, the party quickly concludes that 'return programmes should be initiated to provide women who leave forced prostitution with the necessary support in their home countries upon their return' (Deutscher Bundestag 2024: 3). This wording makes it clear that the aim is not to end exploitation, but to return people to their home countries.

Sex workers are often divided into those who work in the industry voluntarily and those who work under duress:

> The 'voluntary' prostitute is a Western sex worker, seen as capable of making independent decisions about whether or not to sell sexual services, while the sex worker from a developing country is deemed unable to make this same choice: she is passive, naive, and ready prey for traffickers. (Doezema 1998: 42)

This division is usually linked to the racist image of the white, emancipated, self-determined sex worker[16] vs the migrant sex worker as a victim. It ignores the fact that capitalist labour relations are always associated with coercion and that migrant sex workers also have agency (Castro Varela 2005; maiz 2022).

Classism also plays a role in sex work, as, on the one hand, people with many resources work in this sector, but so do many people who have few alternatives because access to the labour market is shaped by sexist, racist, and other power structures. Poverty is gender-specific (Statistisches Bundesamt 2025b) and correlates with people's migration background (Statistisches Bundesamt 2025c). Migrant women are therefore at increased risk of poverty.

As this section has shown, the intertwined categories of discrimination described above interact and powerfully shape the field of sex work. The more vulnerable the social position of the sex worker, the greater the degree of exploitation and oppression. An intersectional perspective can help to show how differentiating power relations affect trade union organising under conditions of precariousness.

Trade union organisation under conditions of precariousness

Collective resistance is generally tricky in precarious working conditions, as not only the working conditions but also the living conditions of those affected are usually

[16] Ruby Rebelde (2024: 225) describes how they were invited to participate in political consultations (so that it could be said that those affected had been consulted), but at the same time it was implied that Ruby was an exception and therefore could not speak for the majority of sex workers.

precarious (Artus 2015). Systematic problems also make trade union organisation difficult (ibid.).

When I use the term 'precariousness', I am referring to the use of the term by Brinkmann et al. (2006: 18ff.), who, although they base their concept of precariousness on the employment system, extend it to include precarious living conditions beyond wage labour. Their definition comprises five dimensions, each with its own potential for (dis)integration:

1. The reproductive-material dimension: they describe wage labour as precarious if, among other things, an activity whose remuneration is the main income source is insufficient to secure a livelihood.
2. The social-communicative dimension: wage labour is precarious if the form of employment prevents equal integration into social networks that develop through work.
3. The legal-institutional or participation dimension: this applies when an activity tends to exclude workers from the full enjoyment of institutionally enshrined social rights and opportunities for participation (such as collective bargaining rights, co-determination, protection against dismissal).
4. The status and recognition dimension: wage labour is described as precarious if it denies workers a recognised social position and is associated with social disregard.
5. The work content dimension: precarious employment can also lead to a permanent loss of the sense of meaning derived from one's professional activity or a pathological overidentification with work (e.g. burnout, loss of private life).

If trade unions want to promote the organisation of precarious workers, they must, according to Brinkmann et al. (2006: 89), develop target group–specific offers – because people who have to devote all their energy to getting through the day in the first place need help from trade unions primarily to secure their basic needs. Brinkmann et al. therefore make the following demand: 'Trade unions […] must not wait for the problems to come to them. They must move towards the problems themselves.' (ibid.)

International research has already pointed out that unionisation could help to represent and protect the interests of sex workers better (Gall 2007; Künkel, Schrader 2020). Gregor Gall, professor of industrial relations, examined trade union organisation among sex workers in various Western countries and concluded that the social discourse on sex work has a significant influence on whether sex workers dare to join a trade union and organise themselves (Gall 2007: 81). Among other things, he sees the self-employed nature of sex work as a barrier, because the classic employer-employee relationship does not exist, so there is no obvious negotiating partner (ibid.).

In view of existing research and current developments in Germany, where the trade union ver.di is increasingly attempting to organise precarious workers, includ-

ing 30,000 self-employed (ver.di n.d.), the question arises as to what challenges, but also what opportunities, sex workers themselves see in unionising from their perspective.

Research methods

In this article, I refer to two explorative interviews which are part of 21 interviews I have done with sex workers from trade unions and interest groups, as well as with experts from trade unions and interest groups who are familiar with the topic but are not involved in sex work (ver.di, FAU, police union). The interviews chosen for this article were conducted with two sex workers who, based on their experiences with union organising and founding a cooperative, can contribute valuable perspectives. The counselling centre 'Kassandra e.V.', where I completed an internship as part of my social work studies, allowed me to make initial contacts, which were then expanded using the snowball method. The interviews were conducted in various cities in Germany between June 2024 and July 2025. They took place in person or via (video) telephone. Video calls made it possible to conduct interviews with sex workers throughout Germany on a very spontaneous basis, whenever it suited their schedule. Even though a video can never replace the direct personal atmosphere, it was still possible to respond to non-verbal signals and create a personal situation.

Through my internship in sex work counselling, I have developed solidarity with sex workers and approach the topic from this perspective. I am not involved in sex work myself and in stating this I do not wish to distance myself from it but only to ensure transparency.

To conduct the interviews I used the problem-centred interview (Witzel 2000). This is an open, semi-structured interview that allows respondents to speak as freely as possible but is focused on a specific problem that the interviewer repeatedly returns to.

In order to allow the interviewees to participate and gain insights together, feedback loops are provided to ensure communicative validation of the interim results. The interviewees were given space to talk about their experiences in an appreciative atmosphere and to recognise that these experiences are part of a larger context.

The article refers to two case studies presented in the following chapter. The analysis of the interviews focused on responses to the question of challenges and opportunities for the trade union organisation of sex workers and the results are discussed in reference to existing literature.

The challenges of (trade union) organisation for sex workers

Regarding the historical and social conditions described above that currently shape sex work in Germany, the question now arises as to what specific challenges the unionisation of people who work in this field poses. The study refers to two interviews:

The first interviewee, Lia (31), is unionised and politically active. She is studying for her master's degree, makes a good living from her work as an escort, has no immigrant background, and is completely outed. Lia lives with her partner in a big city. Her previous work in a brothel and in a counselling centre for sex workers broadens her perspective to include less privileged realities of life, which are also a part of reality in Germany. The interview with Lia was conducted in German and translated into English by me for this article.

The second interviewee, Emma (37), is also active in trade unions and politics. She migrated from the USA to Germany, where she tried to make a career in ballet and eventually studied dance at university before entering sex work. Emma lives in a big city and speaks English and German. She gained work experience in brothels and escort agencies before co-founding the cooperative escort agency Paramour e.V. and is politically active for the rights of sex workers. The interview with Emma was conducted in English.

The interviewees cannot, of course, be representative of the very heterogeneous field of sex workers. At the same time, they reveal who can usually become politically active in sex work: People who have sufficient resources to do so, have the necessary language skills, and do not have much to lose because they are already outed.

The following sections from the interview with Lia (2024) show that it is very challenging to form alliances among individual sex workers. Sex work takes place almost exclusively in the context of self-employment, which means that there is inherently intense competition for clients. Lia, who had previously worked alone as an escort, started working in a brothel with the desire to socialise with colleagues. However, she was quickly disappointed:

> *But it wasn't a team feeling, and it's not a team, it's competition. We're all against each other. Yes, I thought that was a shame. I was a bit hopeful that we could somehow forge alliances again or something. But that didn't work out at all.* (Interview with Lia 2024: 150)

She also sees the reasons for this in the organisation of the work, which involves little time together:

And basically, it was also the case that we spent a lot of time in our rooms. Everyone was in their room, and when a customer came, we just got together or went out for a meal. (ibid.)

The fact that Lia found it challenging to make contact with colleagues could also be due to linguistic divisions. Many sex workers who work in German brothels get their jobs through migrant networks. As a result, sex workers who speak the same language are more common in some establishments:

Well, it might have been different if I spoke Russian fluently. Most of my colleagues who worked in the shop spoke Russian because the manager also spoke Russian. So Russian and Polish, I think. Exactly, there were also a few Spanish-speaking colleagues there, but it was multilingual in the brothel kitchen and not so much German. (ibid.: 150)

Lia made another attempt at networking during her work as an escort:

And then I have a client who always organises a birthday party once a year and a Christmas party once a year with his company, which is a security service. And he always throws a big sex party and somehow invites 15 escorts and his mates, his boys. Through that, I got in touch with many other female colleagues and set up this [Telegram] group in Berlin, here in the Ruhr area. There aren't 500 people in it, there are about 15. But I started there again without a political focus, more for exchange, for empowerment, to develop a shared awareness and that kind of thing. Yes, I tried to build up this exchange and make it completely open to all sex workers in North Rhine-Westphalia. (ibid.: 124)

At first glance, what is striking is the underlying sexism in the form of the gendered dynamics of sex work, like in society, that we see in the scene described by Lia, as the gender role relationships could not conceivably be reversed: It seems impossible to imagine under the given social conditions a female security service in which the boss throws a party and patronisingly hires sex workers for her colleagues. For Lia, however, the scene becomes a moment of empowerment, as she manages to make contact with female colleagues and network with them.

Forming sustainable alliances and passing on knowledge in the long term remains difficult. Lia goes on to describe how she has been unable to find a contact person for her questions, for example, about tax law, as there is a high level of turnover in sex work. Some sex workers only do the job for a few years, some only occasionally as a side job, and many sex workers commute between their home countries and

German brothels (ibid.). Networking is complex between the core of politically active sex workers, who find themselves in more privileged working conditions,[17] and sex workers who work under marginalised conditions and have hardly any resources for political work. Lia also sees a need for action here at the Berufsverband erotische und sexuelle Dienstleistungen e.V. (BesD), the largest sex work organisation in Europe:

> *And that's still a criticism of mine. The BesD is an association of white, German, high-earning sex workers. There is this ONE street sex worker […] who is always brought to the forefront to show: 'Here, we also have street sex workers in the association.' So it's exactly this ONE. And then there are somehow THREE Romanian colleagues who are in the association. And I also feel mean criticising that because I know that people put in the work they can. And it's super difficult to connect these networks. I also do political work and have no contact with these colleagues. But […] if we as an association want to advocate for the improvement of the living and working conditions of sex workers, THOSE are the living and working conditions that need to be improved for migrant colleagues in Germany.* (ibid.: 164)

Lia gives an example of the working conditions of migrant colleagues. She is aware that they are affected differently than she is by existing laws on sex work in Germany due to different positioning and racial profiling:[18]

> *Lia: But the police can enter my flat at any time if they suspect that I'm offering sex work here. That's not something that affects me specifically, nor is it something I'm really worried about. But yes, maybe relevant for other female colleagues.*
> *Interviewer: Why aren't you worried about that?*
> *Lia: Because I'm a white German with a German passport and a well-earning escort. The police have never had me on their radar.* (ibid.: 106)

[17] Basically, it can be assumed that working in a BDSM studio comes with more privileges (but also more hurdles, such as language skills and valid registration as a sex worker) than working on the street. Nevertheless, what constitutes 'privileged working conditions' for one person may mean the opposite for another. By privileged, I therefore mean greater freedom to decide on one's working conditions.

[18] For more information on racial profiling in sex work, see S. O. Dankwa and C. Ammann, in collaboration with d. J. Santos Pinto (2019). Their text describes how Thai massage parlours, for example, are under general suspicion of offering 'happy endings', and how women who work in them are therefore assumed to be sex workers based on their ethnicity. Although this refers to Switzerland, it can be assumed that similar practices exist in Germany.

The networking between the core of politically active sex workers, who tend to have more privileged working conditions, and sex workers who work under marginalised conditions would, therefore, be fundamental. Later, Lia describes language barriers as a significant challenge. From her perspective, sex work is a low-threshold field of work in terms of formal requirements, and therefore, there is a high proportion of people who do not have many other options in the labour market. As a result, based on her experience in German brothels, many people work in the sex industry and speak only one language, namely their native language (ibid.: 152).[19] Reaching people with language barriers to engage them in union organising requires financial resources and time – for example, with the help of language mediators. In addition to language barriers, daily survival can also be an obstacle to union organising. Emma was once frustrated when she tried to get food provided during union meetings at the FAU:

> *We had a long debate in a general assembly about a motion I had written to get the union to pay people to bring food to the meetings. The reason was that there are a lot of homeless sex workers we would like to unionise, and that it's an incentive for them to come if we take care of everyone's physical well-being and offer them something to eat, and that it's a way to take care of the community and support people at work. It was really controversial, and I can't believe how controversial it was. People said: That's not union work, blah blah blah, it's not a good use of our resources […]. It was very frustrating. So there's a certain privilege structure in the union world as it is right now, and there's a complete lack of understanding of the precarious situation of our community.* (Interview with Emma 2024: 01:39)

This finding refers to the reproductive-material dimension of Brinkmann et al.'s definition of precariousness (2006: 18), because if wage labour, which is the primary source of income, does not provide a living wage, then precariousness must be assumed. At the same time, Emma addresses what Brinkmann et al. (2006: 89) also state in their research on trade unions: if they want to support precarious workers, they must support them in their basic needs.

In addition, the stigma associated with sex work is very high, which also influences political work. Many sex workers cannot afford to come out of the closet for

[19] Since most sex work in Germany is unregistered and language skills are not assessed when sex workers officially register, there is no data to support these statements. However, through my work at the Kassandra e.V. counselling centre in Nuremberg, I have gained the impression that many sex workers lack language skills, which limits their career choices. Many counselling centres for sex workers in Germany therefore offer language courses themselves or refer sex workers to appropriate services.

various reasons. This is clearly illustrated by the example of the association work described by Lia:

> *But the functions [in the professional association] aren't to be taken too seriously anyway because you always have to come out of the closet, and your name has to appear in the register of associations. Not all colleagues can do that. That's why it was always clear that [on the one hand] the executive board on paper is someone, and [on the other hand] the work happens in the association with all members who want to participate.* (ibid.: 36)

The situation described by Lia can be linked to the recognition dimension described by Brinkmann et al. (2006): wage labour is precarious when it is treated with disrespect. At the same time, this finding is consistent with the results of Gall (2007): the discourse on sex work fundamentally determines whether sex workers dare to organise themselves in trade unions (or, as in this case, in a professional association). Furthermore, based on my observations from recent years, this stigma also affects trade union work, meaning that trade unions prefer not to deal with the issue to avoid potentially discrediting the rest of their work.

Furthermore, trade union members are also a reflection of society and its discourse on sex work. Progressive positions negotiated within a section must also exist within the entire union. For example, as Lia reports from her experience, ver.di issued a statement on the Prostitutes Protection Act, which was developed within the section but was not supported by the wider union:[20]

> *And then they threw it out, and it was completely torn to shreds in [the] large [association of] ver.di and criticised super harshly and then actually withdrawn. And then a swerfy*[21] *'but we don't see it as that unproblematic' part of ver.di probably prevailed.* (ibid.: 140)

[20] Unfortunately, I was unable to find any further documentation regarding this withdrawn statement by ver.di.

[21] 'SWERF' is an acronym that stands for 'Sex Worker-Exclusionary Radical Feminist'. It refers to a person who identifies as a radical feminist and is critical of or opposed to sex work. This stance is based on the assumption that sex work is a form of structural violence against women. They argue that the existence of sex work is an expression of a patriarchal system in which women's bodies are made available – mostly for male needs. This attitude contradicts liberal or sex-positive feminist movements, which view sex work as a possible form of self-determination and clearly distinguish between voluntary sex work and human trafficking. These groups often call for the complete decriminalisation of sex work and emphasise the rights and autonomy of sex workers.

Ver.di recently issued a statement opposing the planned ban on the purchase of sex work in Germany (ver.di 2025). The union's internal agreement on this statement can be seen as progress. At the same time, this fact reveals that unions are currently busy influencing the regulation of sex work in general. Thus, the workplace is not the focus of their organisation.[22]

The structures within ver.di also need to be expanded to enable continuous industrial action for better working conditions in sex work. Lia reports that when she first contacted the union, the only existing network within ver.di dealing with sex work that she was told about was in Hamburg. Nothing further happened, even after she forwarded her networking request to this organisation. This is in line with the experiences from my research project, as I couldn't find contact persons within the trade union who had specifically dealt with the topic within the last two years.[23]

Sex workers sometimes feel that unions are working inconsistently with their reality. For example, the employment contracts drafted by ver.di (Mitrovic 2004) were never actually implemented in the sex work sector. Lia describes the reasons she sees for this:

> *Absolutely, it just doesn't reflect the reality of sex work, I would say. Of course, employers, I would say, always prefer self-employed people to employees because then they don't have vacation or sick days, no social security, etc. But with sex work, there's the added problem that you would be hiring someone for a job, but you can't force them to do the work. Because, of course, you can force them to, I don't know, be there for an eight-hour shift, but you can't force them to actually have sex, because that's not in line with the person's sexual self-determination. And in that respect, I find it pretty understandable that brothel owners don't want that.* (Interview with Lia 2024: 1075)

This was also the conclusion reached by a study conducted by the Federal Ministry of Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women, and Youth (2007: 16). Here, brothel operators cited limited authority to issue instructions as their main argument against concluding employment contracts, but also a lack of knowledge about the extent to which specifying the place of work, working hours, and prices could lead to criminal liability. However, Lia also explains in the interview that it is not only brothel operators but also sex workers who prefer independence:

[22] Gregor Gall (2016) comes to similar conclusions in his cross-national study.

[23] Instead, it was possible to speak to the head of the federal administration's women's and gender equality policy and the head of the self-employed division. Both were interested and open, but were not specifically responsible for the area of sex work.

And I think it doesn't reflect the reality of sex workers in that a huge advantage of sex work is that you are so independent that you can do it anytime and anywhere, that you can travel around, and that being 'new' in the city also brings with it higher earning potential, because 'the new girl, we all want to try it out', that's the motto. And many of them only do it sometimes, when they need money, or very irregularly, because it somehow coincides with an illness, so if they can manage it, they do it, and if they're not feeling so well, they don't do it, or something like that. Or with migration, that people come to Germany for, I don't know, six weeks, really work hard here, work for six weeks, and then can support their families in Romania for half a year with that. So these are all realities that an employment relationship simply doesn't fit with. (Interview with Lia 2024: 1075)

These results are consistent with Cruz's (2013) findings, which found that neither bosses nor employees consider employment contracts desirable in England. In a study conducted by the Federal Ministry for Education, Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women, and Youth (2007: 17), 60% of sex workers stated that they preferred to work independently. This desire expressed by the majority of sex workers must therefore be taken seriously, and consideration must be given to how the working conditions of sex workers can be improved within the framework of self-employment. As Gall (2007) has described, self-employment is an obstacle to trade union organisation, as there is no obvious negotiating partner. Nevertheless, there are various ways to improve working conditions in the sex industry, and it is therefore necessary for unions to work much more closely with those affected to understand what they truly need.

In addition to her union involvement, Lia is also thinking about establishing good working conditions on a practical level:

The idea was more to start something like a co-operative brothel again or to set up something together with colleagues where there are somehow good working conditions. And yes, I don't think that's realistic. I would love to do it. I think it would be super cool, but it fails a bit because of the commitment, the money you have to put into it and the colleagues. (Interview with Lia: 110)

Lia is not alone in these experiences. Over the last few decades, there have already been several attempts by sex workers in Germany to take the creation of fair working conditions into their own hands: In Bochum, Madonna e.V.[24] tried to set up a co-

[24] Madonna e.V. is a counselling centre for sex workers. For the history of the counselling centre, see Eickel (2024).

operative brothel;[25] in Berlin, HYDRA[26] attempted to create dependent employment relationships through a brothel GmbH;[27] and in Frankfurt, HWG[28] also tried to setup the 'L'etiole Bleu' accommodation co-operative. All of these projects failed. Initial findings from my research suggest that this was due to the enormous bureaucracy, the change in political responsibilities, and the lack of financial and time resources available to sex workers.

In 2023, the first cooperatively run cross-gender escort agency, the Paramour Collective, in Berlin, was founded. In this case, too, particular obstacles had to be overcome before its founding: Emma reports that the first issue was non-compete clauses in the existing contracts of sex workers:

> *I happened to mention to my union comrades [from FAU] that I was worried that Paramour would be jeopardised because I was still stuck, trapped in the contract with her, and that contract contained a non-compete clause that says you cannot work for any other escort agencies. I believe it said for one year, even after leaving [name of the agency].* (Interview with Emma 2024: 78ff.)

A conflict acta was initiated against the escort agency within the union, as a competition clause must not deprive freelancers of their livelihood and must consider that this person needs to work to survive.

Another problem was that only registered sex workers are allowed to work in cooperatives. Of the 30 people who were initially interested in founding a cooperative, only five ultimately wanted to join:

> *I mean, like, I have noticed that a lot of German sex workers who do independent escorting, but through online advertising, don't register. Because they don't really need to. So then by creating a situation where they're breaking the rules, those people are never going to come to the government and say, hey, we're*

[25] This project was the most advanced. For documentation of the project and its failure, see Martini (2025).

[26] HYDRA is both a meeting point and a counselling centre for sex workers in Berlin. For more information see Schug (2024).

[27] A GmbH, short for 'Gesellschaft mit beschränkter Haftung' (limited liability company), is a legal form for companies in Germany and is a type of corporation. It is characterised by the fact that the liability of the shareholders is limited to the company's assets. This means that in the event of debts or liability claims, only the assets of the GmbH itself are liable, not the private assets of the shareholders.

[28] HWG was an organisation for sex works organised by sex workers themselves. The abbreviation HWG stood for 'Huren wehren sich gemeinsam' ('Whores defend themselves together') and thus represented the self-empowered claiming of the persecution category 'HWG', which under National Socialism stood for 'frequently changing sexual partners'.

a collective of sex workers, we're not registered, but we're interested. That's never going to work. So that's the problem with the registration system. A lot of them cannot trust authorities. So don't expect people to go and trust you when you have these policies that illegalise them. (Interview with Emma 2024: 530ff.)

Furthermore, some sex workers commute between their home countries and their place of work in Germany, making it difficult to build long-term networks or change working conditions by creating their own workplace:

And, you know, especially if those workers think that they're not here permanently, you don't want to start a business somewhere that you don't think you can live forever. It has to be people who have some roots in the community, or some attachment to staying in the community. (Interview with Emma 2024: 523 ff.)

This narrows down the number of sex workers for whom cooperative work is even an option, and just a few people carry out the work that needs to be done. Over the last few years, hundreds of hours of volunteer work have been invested in passing Paramour's cooperative examination and registering with the commercial registrar. The business registration is still pending because the trade office has rigid requirements and is unprepared for the conditions of an online escort agency. It can be considered a great success that, after four-and-a-half years of founding and a tremendous amount of volunteer work, an agency that advocates for fair working conditions in the industry has emerged. However, as this section showed, fair working conditions must not depend on already marginalised people without much start-up capital investing all their free time to create them in the first place. At this point, trade unions are being called upon to examine existing exploitation conditions in German brothels.

Opportunities and prospects for trade union action in the sex industry

Notwithstanding the challenges to unionisation already outlined and analysed in the previous section, the question arises as to why sex workers continue their efforts to organise themselves into unions. To answer this question, the following section reconstructs how sex workers assess the chances and perspectives of successful unionisation. As a fundamental first step, Lia sees the recognition of sex work as work by trade unions (interview with Lia: 212). This view must be established within the trade un-

ions and communicated to the outside world to make sex workers feel welcome. Building on this, trade unions should work to destigmatise sex work (ibid.: 212).

In the interview, Lia also mentions the solidarity of sex workers and sees the potential of building a counter-power:

> *If all sex workers say, no, I won't work under these shitty conditions, then they'll get their arses kicked, the operators. But if a single sex worker says: 'I won't do it!', then of course it's her problem*. (ibid.: 194)

This is where she would like to see the trade unions come in:

> *Bringing sex workers together, because it's a HUGE problem that we're all so isolated and always working in competition. And creating this space, so to speak, and perhaps also actively approaching sex workers to create a network would be such a great added value*. (ibid.: 190)

Actively approaching sex workers seems essential, as Lia goes on to describe how her colleagues find the idea of unionisation 'valuable' in principle but have mostly 'not had access to it' (ibid.: 190). This point corresponds to the demands made by Brinkmann et al. (2006: 89): trade unions must not wait and see, but must actively address problems.

Since sex work mainly takes place in solo self-employment, trade unions may not feel directly addressed, as the organisation of solo self-employed workers is not the main focus of trade unions. Nevertheless, trade unions can provide valuable support here, too (ibid.: 212). The 30,000 solo self-employed workers, now organised in ver.di, for example, receive free advice and legal protection (ver.di 2020). In this way, trade unions can address the legal and institutional dimension of precariousness by supporting the implementation of institutionally enshrined social rights (Brinkmann et al. 2006: 18).

Lia sees one way of supporting sex workers as solo self-employed persons in establishing a social insurance fund for sex workers, similar to the social insurance fund for artists. She would also like to see the trade unions involved in this area. Self-employed sex workers would then enjoy similar protection from statutory social insurance as employees:

> *Where people say, okay, artists are kind of self-employed, but all the music companies and so on profit from their work. And that's why it's a bit of an employer-employee relationship. And that's why all these music-processing industries pay something into the artists' social security fund, like an employer's contribution. Artists, therefore, have lower social expenses for their self-em-*

ployment. And I also think that's a super good concept for sex work. So, what the fuck, how transferable is that? Well, operators are SO much in the employer position. And it's a huge problem, that most sex workers don't have health insurance because they somehow come here as migrants, don't have health insurance or something, and as self-employed people would have to take out private insurance. And it's SUPER expensive. And many of them simply can't afford it or say: 'Wow, before I pay that, I'd rather pay for the doctor's visit myself'. And if you were to say that there is an extra fund that is somehow more reminiscent of the statutory system and where operators pay an employer's contribution, that would make a huge difference. (ibid.: 214)

Lia mentions wage negotiations as a further point for representing the interests of sex workers (ibid.: 196). She describes how brothels indirectly set the prices, although this is prohibited in Germany under the Prostitutes Protection Act:

So I can't go to a brothel with my escort prices and say: 'That's what my service costs.' But, well, I can. Well, in the brothel where I worked, I could have done that; I could have told the customers after they had booked me and travelled to my room. And I tried it once, not with my prices, which I would feel comfortable with, but with slightly higher prices than they were charging. And, of course, it led to maximum confusion and irritation on the customer side because they were told the price they were charging on the phone. And, of course, I can charge more. Of course, I can, so negotiating extras is also up to me. And they say that too. So they say: 'The basic price is this and this; extras are negotiated with the sex worker herself.' But it's not really a realistic option to charge different prices. (ibid.: 196)

This pricing probably has the most significant impact on sex workers who, for various reasons, are under the most tremendous pressure to earn money:

In other words, what happens is that I slim down my offer as much as possible, set that as the basic price offer, and then add anything else I can offer. And that's what I actually use to set my real price. For me, this means that I stay very close to the basic price because I don't offer many extras and because I stick strictly to it. With other colleagues, I could imagine, well, I could imagine that it basically leads to people rethinking their limits. Because the more extras I offer, the more likely I am to earn a reasonable wage. For example, giving a blowjob without a condom is the absolute standard in a brothel because it's an extra that customers pay more for. (ibid.: 196)

To make matters worse for sex workers, extremely high room rents increase the pressure to earn enough:

> *And the operators are already in a position of power vis-à-vis sex workers because there are very few places to work where you can somehow do your job if you don't want to visit customers and don't want to do it at home. (….) And in that respect, the rents, it's unbelievable what they charge and what they get away with. I called several brothels here in [name of a major city]. The one where I ended up working was the best in terms of the pricing model. And they have fixed prices for the rooms, depending on whether the appointment is for half an hour, three-quarters of an hour, or an hour. (…) But I have to pay something for every customer. Anyway, on my first day, I had nine customers, and I think I left almost 300 euros for the room hire. And that was the BEST model. Everyone else charges 50-50, and I think that's really outrageous. Really outrageous. But you can't do anything about it because they just take it. And if you don't want to pay it, you just don't work there. So that would be a point where I feel that trade union organisation would build up countervailing power.* (ibid.: 194)

A rent cap similar to a statutory rent cap for housing is desirable, and here the support of the trade unions is essential. For sex workers who pay daily rents in brothels, for example, such a regulation could be beneficial in several ways: A rent cap could prevent sex workers from being excessively exploited by operators or landlords by having to pay excessive daily rents. This would help to reduce the financial burden and strengthen the economic independence of sex workers. At the same time, cheaper and more transparent rental costs could help sex workers to work in safe and legal environments, which would increase their safety and reduce the risk of illegal or unsafe working conditions. By reducing the financial burden, the social and economic stability of sex workers could also be improved.

In Germany, 'exploitative pimping' is currently only deemed to exist when sex workers have to hand over 50% of their earnings (Lackner, Kühl 2011). Therefore, many operators take great care to stay below this limit while at the same time making maximum use of the legal leeway with regard to the levies on sex workers. Escort agencies also like to take 30–40% of sex workers' income, even though they do not provide rooms or working materials, such as condoms or lubricants (interview with Lia: 196). Therefore, developing fair concepts for room rents and negotiating prices and conditions could be starting points for trade union work.

Conclusion: the future outlook for the unionisation of sex workers

When the Prostitution Act was introduced in Germany almost 25 years ago, it created the legal basis for the unionisation of sex workers. Germany's second-largest trade union, ver.di, took this as an opportunity to set up its own project office, commission a field study, and draw up a model employment contract. The Free Workers' Union had been running a section for sex work for four years. Nevertheless, trade union representation for sex workers has not yet been able to establish itself well. The article took this desideratum as an opportunity to ask about the challenges and opportunities for the trade union organisation of sex workers in Germany.

To this end, sex work was first located within its social framework and situated between intersectional relations of domination. The study showed how vital the intersectional perspective is to understanding the challenges of the unionisation of sex workers. While poverty and competitive pressure lead to the isolation of sex workers, migrant networks often result in the separation of sex workers according to different first languages. Migrant sex workers also suffer more from the repressive legislation on sex work. Heteronormative gender roles influence who can work and under what conditions. Under these circumstances, networking is complex, especially between sex workers who work under more privileged conditions and their migrant colleagues, with whom there is little contact. The high turnover over sex workers also influences long-term organisation in the sex work sector.

The high level of stigmatisation attached to sex work affects both sex workers and trade unions. While sex workers have to weigh up whether and to what extent they can organise and risk a potential outing, trade unions may be concerned that addressing sex work issues could discredit the rest of their work.

By analysing intertwined power and domination relations at different levels (especially in laws and security policies as well as discriminatory attributions), it can be shown that the low level of organisation of sex workers is due to a complex interplay of migration policies, heteronormative sexism, and classist distinctions. In addition, various dimensions of precariousness contribute to making union organisation difficult.

In the long term, trade unions can contribute to improving the working conditions of sex workers. This article shows where trade unions can start:

- Recognising sex work as work and destigmatising sex work;
- Actively approaching sex workers, networking, promoting solidarity, and building up a countervailing power so as to be able to act as a negotiating partner with brothel operators when it comes to rents and wages;
- Providing information and assistance with questions about solo self-employment;
- Meeting basic needs, such as providing meals during union meetings;

- Making a commitment to developing a social fund similar to the artists' social fund;
- Engaging in wage negotiations and developing concepts to limit rents.

While a ban on buying sex is once again being discussed in Germany in 2025, which would risk shifting sex work into illegality and further worsening working conditions, there is a risk of losing sight of what sex workers really need: Recognition of their work as wage labour and solidarity in the fight for fair working conditions.

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Mediating Queer Visibility: Identity Modulation and Sex Work in Reddit Communities

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Abstract: In an era of increasing content restrictions across digital platforms, specialised Reddit forums have emerged as spaces for queer individuals to express their sexuality, build connections, and market sexual content. While many mainstream social media networks restrict sexual or nude content, Reddit's moderation structure allows for designated spaces where sexual content can exist. This paper explores the subcultures of three prominent queer and trans-centred NSFW ('not safe for work') Reddit communities (subreddits): r/transporn, r/FtMPorn, and r/EnbyLewds. We examined how these digital spaces function simultaneously as sites of identity validation, affirmation, and commerce. Our findings show distinct cultural practices across these subreddits, each with unique approaches to language use, body descriptions, and content moderation. We examine how these spaces can facilitate gender-affirming interactions, allowing users to express identities beyond heteronormative constraints, while also serving as marketing channels for digital sex work. Drawing on Duguay's concept of 'identity modulation' and Tiidenberg's work on digital self-representation, we analyse how queer content creators strategically adjust their presentation across platforms with different norms and audiences. Our research discusses the intertwining of commercial interests with identity expression and interrogates how moderation practices shape these environments by crafting safer, more inclusive spaces for queer individuals. By fostering supportive and flexible environments, the subreddits create a platform for both affirmation and sexual agency, reflecting the evolving nature of erotic culture within marginalised online communities.
Keywords: trans sexwork, Reddit, identity modulation, queer studies

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Online spaces offer both opportunities and risks for marginalised communities seeking connection and self-expression. While digital platforms can facilitate identity exploration and community building, they also present significant challenges, including content restrictions, harassment, and surveillance. For many queer individuals, sexual self-discovery and expression involve sharing and consuming sexual or sexualised 'Not Safe For Work (NSFW)' content, yet, most platforms ban or heavily restrict such material through practices of shadowbanning and deplatforming. In contrast, Reddit has emerged as a valuable alternative platform due to its relatively permissive policies toward NSFW content and its community-driven moderation system, which allows niche adult communities to thrive within defined spaces. This makes Reddit an important site for studying queer digital cultures and practices (Miller 2022; Paasonen, Jarrett, Light 2019).

This paper explores how queer and trans individuals portray themselves in NSFW subreddits and how they interact with one another within these spaces. It examines the dynamics of sex work and the conditions these subreddits foster online. We aim to explore how and why queer users engage with these platforms. In particular, we are interested in how queer individuals use Reddit to provide and share their own content to 'be seen' and find self-validation, to connect with like-minded and similarly-bodied individuals, and to find clients through community-based sex work. While these types of community-centred sexual interactions are often precarious on other social media platforms (e.g. Wang, Ding 2022; Labor 2025), we are interested in the role of dedicated subreddits that create distinct online cultures for ongoing engagement.

We examine several of the largest and most active queer and trans-focused subreddits, r/FtMPorn, r/EnbyLewds, and r/transporn. Subreddits are user-created forums within Reddit that are organised around a specific topic or community. They exist for any conceivable topic or interest group and are designated on Reddit by r/SubredditName. All three of the subreddits investigated in this study allow queer and trans individuals to share explicit images and videos, including for commercial purposes, while enforcing strict rules against misgendering and transphobia, thus attempting to foster safer environments. They are catering to amateur queer sex workers and a wider (queer) audience. Each of the subreddits has a different focus and culture that we explore by conducting a digital ethnography.

Moreover, we contextualise Reddit usage within the fluidity of the platform economy that digital sex workers find themselves in: the landscape of digital sex work has dramatically evolved in the past few years, shaped by shifting platform policies, technological innovations, and regulatory or political pressures. By 2025, queer sex workers navigate a complex ecosystem of interdependent platforms that serve overlapping functions within their overall digital strategy (Wang, Ding 2022; Labor 2025). For queer sex workers, platforms simultaneously offer unprecedented visibility and impose new forms of precarity. Within this interconnected ecosystem, digital sex work-

ers have to navigate how to strategically leverage different platforms' affordances in the most efficient way for them.

In this paper, we begin by introducing our theoretical framework for understanding digital platforms, identity work, and queer communities online. We describe Reddit as a platform and our methodological approach of digital ethnography. Following this, we examine the culture of posting within and between these subreddits, analysing the dynamics of affirmation, community building, and commercial activity. We then present insights from interviews with queer sex workers, which provide additional context about how digital sex workers navigate platform ecosystems and identity presentation across different spaces. Finally, we discuss these findings within broader theoretical frameworks of identity modulation, digital self-representation, and queer joy, considering the implications for understanding how marginalised communities create and maintain affirming spaces online.

Literature review

Digital platforms and queer community formation

Online spaces have played a significant role in trans identity formation and community building since the early days of the internet, offering connection, visibility, and affirmation often unavailable in offline contexts. The growth of home computer use in the 1990s was crucial for the development of trans communities (Whittle 1998, 2006; Cromwell 1999; Shapiro 2004). Whittle (1998) specifically highlights how cyberspace facilitated trans political activism and enabled the creation and promotion of 'transgender' as a self-identification category. Stryker (2006) observes that usage of the term 'transgender' increased exponentially around 1995, fuelled in part by internet expansion. This historical context frames our understanding of contemporary online trans spaces as continuing a tradition of community formation through digital means that spans three decades.

Raun's (2016) concept of an 'affective counter-public' is particularly relevant here, as these subreddits maintain 'an awareness of their subordinate status' while simultaneously creating space for resisting dominant discourses around trans identity. The public platform these subreddits provide becomes transformative, allowing users to renegotiate and resist subject positions that pathologise or victimise queer and trans individuals. As Raun notes in his study of YouTube trans vloggers, this public display aims at 'transforming, testing and reevaluating styles of embodiment and the feelings of shame and disgust that surround them', making the visibility of these interactions crucial to their transformative potential.

Reddit is a social media platform used for news aggregation, content rating, and forum-based interaction. Content is organised into subreddits, which are user-cre-

ated boards focusing on specific topics. Each subreddit is moderated by volunteers who belong to the respective community. Registered users ('Redditors') contribute content in the form of links, text posts, images, and videos, which are ranked by up- and downvotes. Currently, Reddit is one of the largest social media sites and ranks as the 9th most-visited website globally.[1] Unlike many other platforms, Reddit permits NSFW content. As of September 2024, such content is restricted to designated NSFW subreddits and must be explicitly flagged as adult material. Additionally, active users must be registered and verify that they are over 18 years old in order to access this content.[2] As described by Paasonen, Jarrett, and Light (2019), the NSFW tag takes on a double role: it functions as a warning for outsiders as well as an invitation for users interested in the respective content.

While Reddit as a platform has been studied extensively (Medvedev, Lambiotte, Delvenne 2019; Singer et al. 2014) and to some extent in relation to queer representation and NSFW content (Corradini et al. 2021; Makbul, Zannat, Hale 2024; Miller 2022; Robards 2018; Watson 2021), the specific role of NSFW representations of queer bodies in community formation remains underexplored.

Identity work and digital self-representation

Digital platforms serve as spaces where individuals can 'type oneself into being' and explore aspects of identity and sexuality without fear of social repercussions (Sundén 2003, as cited in Tiidenberg 2014). In these spaces, sharing explicit content becomes an important aspect of personal transitions and identity exploration. Tiidenberg emphasises that identity is not stable or given but rather 'a work in progress' that requires continuous reflection and social validation. The visual sharing of one's body through 'self-shooting' (taking and sharing selfies or videos) serves a critical function by giving 'new meaning to one's embodied identity' (Tiidenberg 2014).

This process is particularly significant for trans and non-binary individuals, whose embodied experiences may be marginalised or invalidated in mainstream spaces. Through posting content in digital communities, users engage in sexual self-exploration, which Tiidenberg, drawing on Arnett (2004) and Horowitz and Bromnick (2007), identifies as an important aspect of emerging adulthood. The community feedback these posts receive serves as a 'witnessed manifestation' of individualised identity development, providing necessary social acknowledgment for self-reflexive identity projects (Tiidenberg 2014). By receiving affirmative comments that align

[1] November 2024, retrieved 11/2/2025 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_most-visited_websites).
[2] Retrieved 2/1/2025 (https://support.reddithelp.com/hc/en-us/articles/360061032831-How-do-I-view-NSFW-communities).

with their gender identity and preferred body terminology, users find validation for identities that might otherwise be contested or erased in broader social contexts. Identity presentation across digital platforms involves strategic adaptation to different contexts. Tiidenberg's analysis reveals how social media users craft multifaceted identities through ongoing performances of self-presentation, noting that identity is 'multiple, not singular, fixed, or static' (Tiidenberg, van der Nagel 2020). This connects to what Duguay (2022) describes as 'identity modulation' – the strategic adjustment of self-presentation across platforms with different norms and audiences. As Duguay notes (2022: 18), queer individuals develop 'contextual practices for negotiating visibility across platforms with different governance mechanisms and user cultures'.

This process operates through what Raun (2016) describes as 'interaffectivity' – a reciprocal process where subjectivity and affect mutually constitute the self through ongoing interactions with others. Digital platforms like Reddit facilitate both identity production and social recognition, allowing users to create and label their identities while receiving feedback and support.

Platform ecosystems and digital sex work

While social media platforms can serve as valuable spaces for connection and discourse, they also present significant challenges for queer communities. Triggs, Møller, and Neumayer (2019) note that 'context collapse' on Reddit can result in heightened vulnerability for queer users seeking support in semi-anonymous spaces. Similarly, Park, Seering, and Bernstein (2022) observe antisocial behaviour on Reddit, often manifesting as targeted harassment against marginalised groups. Schmitz, Burghardt, and Murić (2022) further demonstrate that hateful online communities on Reddit actively radicalise users, increasing the prevalence of hate speech site-wide.

Shadowbanning and deplatforming represent common moderation practices used by many mainstream social media platforms to restrict or remove NSFW content without explicit notification to users. Shadowbanning involves covertly limiting the visibility of users' posts, making their content effectively invisible to others, while deplatforming refers to the complete removal of users or communities from a platform (Gillespie 2018). These measures often disproportionately affect creators of adult content, limiting their ability to reach audiences and build communities.

As Paasonen, Jarrett, and Light (2019) established in their foundational work on NSFW content, digital platforms are not neutral spaces but active mediators that shape how sexual expression is both enabled and constrained online. Their concept of 'platform vernacular' – the distinctive communication styles, norms, and practices that emerge on specific platforms – remains particularly relevant for understanding how different platforms develop distinctive cultures around sexual content.

Rather than viewing platforms as discrete categories, Swords, Laing, and Cook (2021) propose understanding them as a networked ecosystem with overlapping functions. They identify how platforms serve different roles within sex workers' overall business strategies, with some primarily facilitating client discovery, others enabling content monetisation, and many serving hybrid functions. This perspective helps explain how platforms like Reddit can function simultaneously as community spaces and as entry points in a broader marketing funnel.

Sanders et al. (2018) document how sex workers develop sophisticated cross-platform strategies, using more public-facing platforms to build visibility while directing potential clients to monetised spaces – a practice that continues to evolve as platform policies change. For queer sex workers specifically, this navigation includes additional layers of complexity around gender expression and representation, as platforms simultaneously offer unprecedented visibility and impose new forms of precarity.

The usage of social media sites for the promotion of digital sex work has been described for gay sex workers (Wang, Ding 2022) as well as in the context of a participatory online porn culture (Smith 2017). In these studies, it was found that in comparison to conventional porn actors, this form of digital sex work hinges on a strong notion of creativity, a certain disclosure of the private life, and the creation of a connection between the content creator and the user-as-potential-client (Smith 2017; Wang, Ding 2022).

Wright and Falek's (2024) concept of 'queer joy' provides a framework for understanding the affirmative interactions observed in these digital communities. Drawing on previous works on empowered joy, such as Black Joy (Mitchell 2022) and crip joy (Wright, Manuel 2024), they consider queer joy to be 'affective engagement that creates expansiveness, where constraints from dominant sexual scripts loosen in ways that feel liberating and deeply pleasurable'. In this way, 'queer and trans people negotiate the performativity of gender and sex, their own bodily knowledge, and the epistemic injustices that have precluded this knowledge from being valued'.

This theoretical framework highlights the tensions between platform affordances and constraints for queer communities. While digital spaces can enable authentic expression and community formation, they operate within broader systems of surveillance, content restriction, and potential harassment. The success of spaces like the Reddit communities examined in this study depends on careful navigation of these competing forces – leveraging platform features that support community building while developing protective measures against the very real risks that digital platforms pose to marginalised users.

Methods

Over the course of three months (from December 2024 until March 2025), we conducted a digital ethnography in the queer digital sex work sphere on Reddit. First, we collected a list of NSFW subreddits using search terms such as 'trans', 'enby', 'FtM', 'MtF', and 'queer' to account for the variability in queer representation, and 'porn' and 'NSFW' to find explicit communities.

The terms 'enby', 'FtM' (female-to-male), and 'MtF' (male-to-female) are part of a diverse lexicon used within and beyond trans and non-binary communities to describe gender identities and transitions. Enby is a phonetic abbreviation of 'NB' (non-binary), referring to individuals whose gender identity does not fit within the traditional binary of male or female (Richards et al. 2016), while FtM and MtF are commonly used shorthand terms to describe trans men and trans women, respectively (e.g. Beemyn, Rankin 2011). To increase our search radius, we also screened the suggested subreddits when viewing a community. In this first step, we compiled over 40 subreddits of varying size, activity, and community focus. Through this assessment, we found that the vast majority of active queer NSFW subreddits is focused on transfeminine porn, totalling several millions of members. Moreover, in subreddits that aim to be inclusive of all trans representations, such as r/TransExplicit, a subreddit of 130,000 members that describes itself as the 'Hottest inclusive TransPorn lounge of Transfem, TransMasc and non-binary TS Porn', mainly content of transfeminine porn was being posted during the course of our assessment. By contrast, communities focused on transmasculine or non-binary porn content were much harder to find and were much smaller.

From this list of NSFW subreddits, we decided to zoom in on three communities that focus on different groups: transgender and genderqueer people, and non-binary individuals. We filtered for subreddits that have a large member base and active engagement and show active moderation. We excluded communities that reproduce potentially offensive, trans-phobic, or harmful language in their name or description. Through these filtering steps, we settled on r/transporn to represent a focus on transfeminine porn (even though technically, it is also open to transmasculine or non-binary porn), r/FtMPorn for transmasculine porn, and r/EnbyLewds for non-binary porn.[3] We chose these communities because they had a significant number of subscribers: r/EnbyLewds with 220K members, r/FtMPorn with 283K members, and r/transporn with 1M members (as of April 2025), and we specifically picked r/FtMPorn and

[3] While terms like 'FtM' are considered outdated in much contemporary discourse about transgender experiences because they emphasise a binary transition narrative that many trans people find reductive, we use the term here when directly referencing online communities that incorporate this terminology in their names.

r/EnbyLewds because they are run and moderated by members of the queer community.

In those three subreddits, we conducted a comparative observation of user activity, content, and moderation practices. Rather than attempting a comprehensive assessment by scanning all user interactions and posts as proposed by Cauteruccio et al. (2022), we aimed for a more qualitative approach to investigate the cultures and behaviours within the subreddits. Over the course of three months, we identified around 40 active users for each of the three subreddits and noted their activities within their respective communities. We observed whether they were posting from a newly generated account or had been active in the community for a longer time, whether they were actively engaging in the comment section of their posts, how they presented and advertised themselves in their user profile, and whether they actively advertised for any commercial digital sex work site or tool such as OnlyFans or other platforms. For each of the profiles, we analysed three to five of the most recent posts, depending on previous user activity (for some of the newest profiles, not enough posts were available yet). In total, this equates to around 480 posts. As we were aiming for an analysis of current activities, we only included the most recent posts, made within the six months prior to the start of our analysis.

Analytical framework and procedures

In our research, we employed a thematic analysis within a digital ethnographic framework to explore patterns of language use and user behaviour across selected subreddits. Our methodological approach was oriented around the framework outlined by Postill and Pink (2012), who conceptualise digital ethnography as a flexible, immersive practice that adapts traditional ethnographic principles to the complexities of online environments. Inspired by their emphasis on 'messy' digital spaces, we approached Reddit as a dynamic cultural field, observing user interactions, discourse norms, and language patterns across selected subreddits. This enabled us to treat online posts not just as isolated texts but as socially embedded communicative acts, shaped by the affordances and culture of the platform. Our analysis focused on posts and profile descriptions that revealed user motivations, moderation practices and justifications, and the intersection of community dynamics with commercial activities. In particular, we followed posts or profile descriptions that described intentions and gave reasons for a particular post or user behaviour. Through this we aimed to understand the motivations for posting NSFW content and the ways in which users and moderators interact and engage with each other. We also observed the moderation practices in the subreddits and took note of moderator engagement and the explanations the moderators used when commenting on a post or removing content.

While Reddit is an anonymous platform in that users are not required to disclose their names, the individuals posting in these subreddits share sensitive information in the graphic material they publish. Moreover, some users share information in the comments or profile description, such as their location. To protect the privacy of the members, we did not gather any identifying information or share or replicate user names. When we are quote user comments, profile descriptions, or posts, we paraphrase the parts of the text that could lead to identification of the user while keeping the content intact in order to avoid exposing users via their post history.

Interview component

While we did not actively engage in the communities by posting or commenting, we attempted to connect with active members and moderators of these subreddits by personally contacting around 15 user profiles, providing various contact options (via Reddit, Signal, or e-mail). However, in the current political climate and amidst concerns around online privacy and safety for queer individuals, especially in the United States, we were met with a heightened sense of caution. Some users initially responded to our messages but were not able to participate in our research, citing a sense of unease in the current political situation. Nevertheless, we were able to conduct a structured interview with an active moderator of several queer sex work subreddits. This interview lasted approximately 90 minutes across multiple exchanges, including a structured video call, and focused on moderation practices, community dynamics, and self-presentation strategies within these spaces.

To complement our observational research and provide context about digital sex work practices more broadly, we additionally conducted structured interviews with three active queer and trans sex workers in Europe whom we recruited through professional and academic networks, leading to a total of four participants in this study. Given the sensitive nature of the research topic and current political pressures affecting queer communities, we worked with available participants willing to share their experiences, prioritising participant safety and comfort over systematic sampling criteria. While these participants primarily operate on platforms other than Reddit, their experiences illuminate the broader ecosystem of digital platforms within which spaces like the subreddits we studied exist. Thus, in total, we were able to include four interview participants for whom (mainly digital) sex work is the main source of income. The interviews were informed by the initial patterns and themes identified during our digital ethnographic analysis and were structured around our core research questions (Postill, Pink 2012). The interview questions focused on participants' daily experiences offering NSFW services online, platform navigation strategies, community interactions, identity management, and interpretations of community norms.

Table 1: List of Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity/ Race	Nationality	Gender identity	Pronouns	Place of residence
A.	29	White	Russian	Transgender non-binary	they/them	Germany
M.M.	35	Hispanic/ Latino (Mexican origin)	US American	Non-binary trans, presents femme for work	they/them	United States / Germany
N.N.	35	White	US American	Trans masculine, non-binary, gender fluid	they/them	Netherlands
S.P.	32	Fars/ Iranian	Iranian	Transmasculine, gender-noncon-forming, non-binary	he/him	Germany (as a refugee)

Source: Interviews with participants.

Interview data were transcribed and stored securely, with all identifying information removed to protect participant privacy. While our sample of four interviews is modest, these conversations served to complement and contextualise the patterns observed during our digital ethnographic analysis rather than provide generalisable findings. In analysing the data, we employed a mixed deductive–inductive approach, creating codes by combining themes drawn from the existing literature with insights emerging from our subreddit observations.

Limitations

Our approach aimed to glean an understanding of the motivations and culture of queer, community-driven digital sex work on Reddit. As a mainly observational study, it necessarily has some shortcomings that could affect the depth and reliability of the findings. Our focus on three major subreddits offers insight into trans and non-binary representations but captures only a limited slice of the broader queer digital sex work landscape on Reddit.

Moreover, although our observational approach aligned with digital ethnographic practices, enabling non-intrusive analysis of community interactions, passive observation may have limited our grasp of deeper contextual nuances. The platform's anonymity, while ethically protective of participants, limits our ability to fully analyse how intersectional identities (race, class, nationality, disability) shape community experiences and representation. This represents a broader methodological consideration in anonymous digital spaces rather than a unique limitation of our approach.

The researchers' positionality

In line with Haraway's (1988: 581) critique of 'seeing everything from nowhere', we reject the notion of the objective, disembodied observer who parades as 'the all-seeing I' – an observer who acts as if their view is not situated and informed by the politics of location. Instead, we embrace the partiality of our perspective as a strength that allows for more responsible knowledge production. While neither of us is a digital sex worker on Reddit, our academic interests in body politics and queer representation inform our approach to this study. We acknowledge that our positionality as queer researchers shapes both our research questions and interpretations, and we engaged in reflexive practice throughout the research process to address these influences while maintaining methodological rigor.

Anna Ivanova's background includes experiences with marginalisation in Russia, which have shaped their scholarly interest in embodiment and corporeal agency. As a queer filmmaker and porn director, they bring an awareness of NSFW content production, while recognising the distinct differences between commercial production and the community-based content examined in this study. This positioning offers both an insider perspective on queer identity and creative work and an outsider perspective regarding the specific experiences of digital sex workers on Reddit. Dana Hombach comes from an academic perspective that is focused on the gendered perception of bodies in culture and social media.

Results

In this paper, we focus on three of the largest and currently most active communities for queer NSFW content: r/EnbyLewds, r/transporn, and r/FtMPorn. Each of these communities has emerged as an active space where queer and trans individuals can share explicit content, discuss identity, and engage with others who share similar experiences. To create a safer environment for the users, each subreddit has a set of rules and guidelines designed to protect members and ensure that harmful behaviours such as misgendering, transphobia, and harassment are not tolerated. Moderation practices are central to maintaining these boundaries, with moderators actively monitoring posts and comments to uphold these standards and with clear consequences for violations. We found each of the three subreddits to be quite distinct in their culture, customs, and communication. These differences are evident in the types of posts, engagements, and comments prevalent within the community, as well as in the focus of the various posts and the moderation practices. The following section describes each of the three subreddits in further detail and in comparison to each o ther.

r/transporn

The subreddit r/transporn describes itself as dedicated to 'Amateur TRANS who wanna post porn on reddit'. It has a large community with around one million members. It enforces strict rules to foster a safer environment, including prohibitions on misgendering, crossdressing, photoshopping, and hookups, with clear consequences for violations. For instance, intentional misgendering is labelled as a 'one-way ticket to the ban list'. While the promotion of platforms like OnlyFans is not allowed in the posts themselves, users are encouraged to include such links in their profiles, and most active users appear to have links to OnlyFans, cashapp, or similar services. However, our moderator interview revealed that these advertising restrictions do not create significant barriers for sex workers. As N.N. explained:

> *even as a sex worker, it's better to just make a post. And if your content is good, if your post is compelling, people will go to your profile and that's the actual advertising stream. So whether or not advertising is allowed or not, I'm like, don't even worry about it, guys, because, even if we did allow it, it just wouldn't be effective the way you want to do it.*

The majority of the content shared is by trans women. Interestingly, users in this subreddit don't make much use of flairs, which are labels or tags that can be added to a user's profile or to a post within a subreddit and are used to provide additional context or categorisation. Crossposts or content shared across multiple subreddits are common, suggesting that many members are active in other communities as well. We found connections from r/transporn to a wide range of similar (transfeminine-focused) NSFW communities, such as r/hornytrans, r/TransGoneWild, r/OnlyIfShesPackin or others. Many users of r/transporn tend to crosspost identical content to a number of these subreddits. However, we only found occasional crossposts between r/transporn and the other two communities that we focused on in this study.

Within the r/transporn community, most of the posts we found over the course of our observations were short videos or GIFs. We found the comment sections to be very active, with posts often receiving hundreds of upvotes, numerous comments, and frequent replies. Original posters (OPs) often directly engage with and respond to other users. Moreover, user engagement is often encouraged by the OP by asking direct questions or by conducting surveys ('fuck or suck' is a popular post title, for instance). In terms of posting activity, we found that some users post a series of short clips in the same setting and style or wearing the same clothes, indicating that the content of a single session was split into several posts. Sometimes these serial video posts are also spread across a number of different (but related) subreddits. Over the course of the study, we found a large number of new profiles (in part generated

during the observation period) to be actively posting. We also found most profiles to have at least one link to a commercial or payment platform in their description, such as OnlyFans, cashapp, Wishlist, RedGIFs, or others. OnlyFans was by far the most prevalent link, and many profiles stated that their direct messages (DMs) were closed on Reddit and encouraged other users to contact them on OnlyFans. Many of the active profiles within r/transporn seemed to be using the subreddit as a way to connect to potential clients on other platforms, and some of them mentioned in their descriptions that they were within the 'top X%' of earners on OnlyFans.

r/FtMPorn

r/FtMPorn is aimed at trans men to share their own nudes and adult content. As r/transporn, it is guarded by a strict set of rules and has a clear stance on banning users who violate them, emphasising that 'we are not afraid to ban people!'. Together with r/EnbyLewds, it is run by a queer sex worker, N.N., who we were able to interview as part of this study. In contrast to r/transporn, r/FtMPorn explicitly permits promotions within posts as long as they include media featuring an actual person and are clearly marked as such by using the appropriate 'promotion' flair. Despite these different approaches to advertising policy, N.N. noted that explicit promotional posts consistently underperform compared to engaging content that drives organic profile visits. Users can choose from and are encouraged to use a variety of flairs, especially to describe the way in which they wish to be addressed, described, or interacted with. Consequently, flairs are widely used in this subreddit and include, but are not limited to, designating promoted posts, detailing the terms a user is comfortable with when describing their body (e.g. 'all anatomical terms', 'masculine anatomical terms only'), and labelling kinks. Moreover, the subreddit provides an extensive wiki resource focused on rules and guidelines regarding posts, but also on staying safe while posting NSFW content online. Amongst hints on how to secure content (e.g. by watermarking it), this section also provides safety advice and states that posts that include contact information will be deleted.

Active moderation does occur in the subreddit, ensuring that posts adhere to the rules, with deleted content often accompanied by clear justifications for its removal. Users with profiles that are too new and 'karma' that is too low (a Reddit-specific way of measuring user engagement by awarding points for active posts) cannot comment in the subreddit; their posts are automatically deleted. Occasionally, moderators actively engage in constructive conversation with users and use moderation as a way to educate rather than just delete posts. For instance, instead of deleting, banning, or other more restrictive practices, posts that disregard the rules around flairs are usually commented on with a reference to the relevant rule and retrospectively fitted

with the appropriate flair. In addition to this individualised moderation, the subreddit uses a number of moderation bots to automatically manage problematic users and spammers. Through the use of flairs in the subreddit, the preferred language for describing the depicted bodies was quite clear, and we found many comments to be actively affirmative of the stated preferences.

Our interview with community moderator and sex worker N.N. provided additional insight into the moderation philosophy. They emphasised the importance of in-group moderation, arguing that 'moderators of trans subreddit should be trans people, because there's possible harm being done to the community that a cis person might not understand'. This approach enables nuanced recognition of subtle forms of transphobia that might appear benign to outsiders. For example, N.N. identified posts titled 'How drunk would you have to be to fuck me?' as harmful because they imply that sexual contact with trans people would be a mistake requiring impaired judgement, reinforcing stigmatising narratives about trans desirability even when posted by trans individuals themselves.

Regarding the users of the subreddit, over the course of the study we found that the majority of active individuals fall within the category of amateur NSFW posters ('amateur' is used here to denote that these users are not affiliated with any form of porn industry). In addition, many of the users in this subreddit seem to engage in NSFW posts for reasons other than economic and rather seek gender affirmation or representation. Fewer than half of the investigated profiles link to any commercial tool or website. In contrast to r/transporn, none of the profiles we reviewed in r/FtMPorn made any statements about their commercial success on platforms such as OnlyFans. Some profiles mentioned the offer of customised content for a small price (usually at or below USD 10 for a video, gif, or picture), while other users stated that they post this type of content 'mostly for themselves', without seeking compensation for it.

In terms of posting behaviour, we found that users crosspost with a limited number of other subreddits, such as r/ftmspunished, r/TransFeet, or r/t4t_porn (trans for trans). We found hardly any crossposts to r/transporn, which underlines the observation that r/transporn caters to a different user group posts. The vast majority of users crosspost only to trans or FtM-specific subreddits, but a small subset of individuals within this subreddit show a certain degree of flexibility in posting also in NSFW communities directed towards content created by cis-women, such as r/SheLovesPounding and r/ExtremelyHairyWomen.

r/EnbyLewds

r/EnbyLewds serves as a dedicated space for non-binary individuals to share NSFW content, describing itself as a community for 'non-binary, genderfluid, and gender

non-conforming people to post lewds'.[4] Like the other communities analysed in this study, it maintains clear rules designed to create a safer environment, prohibiting harassment, misgendering, and non-consensual content sharing. What distinguishes r/EnbyLewds from other NSFW communities is that its moderators openly identify as transgender and non-binary themselves. The community structure of r/EnbyLewds has limited connections with r/FtMPorn, with N.N. as a moderator active in both communities. This connection provides some continuity in moderation approaches between the two spaces. Similar to r/FtMPorn, moderators in r/EnbyLewds employ a combination of manual moderation and automated tools (bots) to maintain community standards, which are quoted as 'body-positive community for 18+ non-binary/genderqueer people and other gender-nonconforming people to share their NSFW selfies and lewds. This is a sex work-friendly community'. Moreover, the moderators frequently engage constructively with users when issues arise.

The content shared in r/EnbyLewds consists exclusively of media posts (photos or short video clips), with users employing flairs to specify their gender identity, preferred terminology, and content type. Comments on posts are generally affirmative and supportive, often emphasising positive aspects of the poster's appearance or gender expression. The language used tends to be flexible and adaptable to each poster's preferences and avoids assumptions about how non-binary individuals wish their bodies to be described. Popular posts can receive around 100 comments, with interactive posts that include questions in the title (such as 'Tell me your favourite video game and I'll tell you if we can fuck') generating particularly high engagement.

Regarding the users of r/EnbyLewds, our observations indicate that the majority of regular posters link to commercial platforms like OnlyFans or Fansly in their profiles, suggesting that the community serves as part of a broader digital sex work ecosystem. An interesting finding unique to our observation of r/EnbyLewds is the prevalence of crossposting behaviours. Users frequently share their content across multiple NSFW communities, including some that employ terminology considered derogatory in queer-affirming spaces (such as r/traps with 1.6 million members). This strategic crossposting appears to be primarily motivated by economic considerations, as creators seek to attract more traffic to their monetised platforms. When posting in these less queer-friendly communities, we observed that the same users often adjust their language, adopting more objectifying or fetishising terminology that contrasts sharply

[4] According to UrbanDictionary, 'a lewd is a photograph taken by oneself as a tease. Not a full on nude showing your private parts but teasing the receiver of the photograph. A picture of a girl in her underwear is considered a lewd'. Retrieved 10/4/2025 (https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=lewd).

with the affirming language they employ in r/EnbyLewds. We do not aim to make normative statements about users' language practices, and while we acknowledge the contradictory and complex nature of using self-derogatory terms in queer-affirming spaces, a detailed discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of the present paper.

The moderator interview revealed specific challenges in community governance around what they termed 'straightbaiting' – for examples, posts in non-binary spaces with titles like 'Where are all the straight boys who want to fuck me?' As N.N. explained: 'You're in EnbyLewds … you're here looking at non-binary people, then the idea is, you're not straight, so stop, pandering to these people who are disrespecting nonbinary people.' This example illustrates how community-led moderation enables recognition of subtle forms of erasure that might not be apparent to outsiders.

Insights from queer sex worker interviews

Platform ecosystem and strategic navigation

All interviewees described navigating complex digital ecosystems, which highlights the networked nature of sex work platforms described by Swords, Laing, and Cook (2021). Each participant strategically uses different platforms for different purposes within their overall workflow, which supports our observation that platforms serve overlapping functions within sex workers' digital strategies, and that shadowbanning and deplatforming are major issues for digital NSFW content creators.

S.P., a transmasculine sex worker, described the limited options available to them based on their gender presentation. They noted, 'as a trans masc person who doesn't pass as a cis woman, I don't have many options'. Their experience reflects how gender non-conformity can restrict access to certain markets or platforms that prioritise cisnormative beauty standards, underscoring the structural limitations some trans sex workers face. In contrast, A., who identifies as non-binary/transgender, illustrates a more strategic navigation of these constraints. They shift their branding across platforms – 'On [one platform] I brand myself as a transman, and on [another platform] as a non-binary woman who is really hairy and has a low voice' – and adapt their presentation to fit the perceived audience's expectations. While these are distinct experiences, both highlight how platform economies reward particular gendered embodiments, pushing marginalised creators to either confront or conform to normative standards in order to maintain visibility and economic viability.

Our interviews revealed that queer sex workers carefully select platforms based on their specific needs, client demographics, and the platforms' tolerance for sexual content. They develop complex cross-platform strategies to maximise visibility while minimising risk, often using one platform for initial client contact and another for ongoing communication and transactions.

M.M., a non-binary dominatrix who presents as femme for work, described platform instability as a major challenge: 'I'm starting to avoid Instagram because the TOS [terms of service] suck … I've lost over 5 Instagram accounts'. This constant threat of deplatforming creates precarity, as there is ongoing uncertainty about whether one's digital presence will remain stable and accessible.

Similarly, N.N., who moderates various queer NSFW subreddits, describes Reddit as a valuable alternative to posting NSFW content and reaching an audience in comparison to other platforms:

> *I find Reddit compelling as a platform for sharing amateur content because it effectively fosters community hubs [in the form of subreddits] with a low barrier to entry: having a functional Reddit account, basically. Of course trans people can share nudes on sites like BlueSky and X just as easily, but without followers on those sites, it's hard to get visibility and engagement. Reddit puts everything on a subreddit feed so the size and age of one's account doesn't matter at all.*

However, our research also uncovered concerning practices that threaten the integrity of community-led governance on Reddit. While moderation on Reddit is typically unpaid volunteer work, some moderators exploit their authority for financial gain, according to our interviews. N.N. described encountering a moderator who 'bans people from the subreddits who do better than the models who pay him. So he reduces competition by accepting bribes'. They noted they had been 'banned from multiple of his subreddits' despite never having posted in them, suggesting the pre-emptive exclusion of successful creators who might compete with paying clients. This monetisation of volunteer moderation roles creates barriers for creators who cannot or choose not to pay for favourable treatment, distorting what should be merit-based community participation. Such practices highlight how the economic pressures of unpaid digital labour can corrupt community governance, undermining the community-centred values that make effective moderation possible.

Reddit's platform architecture, as analysed in our theoretical framework, played a crucial role in enabling these interactions. The semi-anonymous nature of the platform encouraged candid self-expression, while the upvote/downvote system and comment threading fostered visibility and feedback. However, our interview with moderator N.N. revealed the significant costs of maintaining these affirming spaces:

> *Moderation is both tedious and challenging … I have received hate mail and threats, harassment on my account, and even a power struggle with another moderator who didn't like how I was making rulings. In the last case it was so stressful that I had fantasies of totally destroying the subreddit.*

Identity modulation, and strategic self-presentation

Our interviews provided substantial evidence for Duguay's (2022) concept of 'identity modulation'. Each interviewee described consciously adapting their gender presentation to maximise appeal and income on different platforms. For example, A. explicitly detailed how their gender presentation changes across platforms:

> *So [one platform] is for gay/bi men, so my pics there are more manly … [another platform] has a lot of people who live in a delusion that I am really an enby woman who had top surgery for aesthetic or medical reasons. I try to be more girly in my pictures and in the way I chat with clients.*

The strategic nature of these presentation decisions emerged clearly in M.M.'s reflections: 'I present hyper femme for work because I make more money since I grew my hair out, got fake lashes and nails etc. It sucks, but I'd rather have money.' They further explained: 'Although I'm transmasc non-binary, my gender identity at work is moving back to she/her sadly, as I don't earn as much when being open about my trans identity.'

Similarly, N.N. described adapting their gender presentation across platforms based on regional and cultural differences in trans awareness. On European platforms like F2F (a Dutch-based adult content platform similar to OnlyFans), they present 'as a gay man, because people do not have much awareness of trans people in particular, and no idea what I mean when I say genderfluid'. In contrast, on US and UK-focused platforms like OnlyFans and Fansly, they present as 'non-binary transmasc, and people will project whatever they want'. This geographic dimension of identity modulation highlights how creators must navigate not only platform-specific norms but also regional differences in queer awareness and acceptance.

These accounts align with our observations of crossposting behaviours on Reddit, where some users adapt their presentation and terminology when posting in less queer-friendly subreddits. This practice of users adapting their presentation and language when crossposting to less queer-friendly subreddits highlights the strategic self-positioning required in online sex work. This behaviour underscores the precariousness of digital labour in adult content spaces, where creators must constantly navigate shifting platform norms, community standards, and audience expectations to maintain visibility and safety. It reflects how online sex work involves not only content creation but also careful curation of identity and tone, often shaped by the need to access broader markets while avoiding harassment or deplatforming. These adaptive strategies reveal the complex interplay between authenticity, self-protection, and marketability that characterises digital sex work (Wang, Ding 2022; Labor 2025). However, the interviews reveal the emotional complexities behind these strategies.

Mistress Maven described this adaptation as 'pretty depressing', adding, 'I guess I have been struggling to earn enough to focus on transition. Eventually, I'll open a dungeon and be able to cut my hair again and transition.'

For S.P., the ability to maintain authenticity in gender presentation is a bottom line: 'If a client is not interested in my gender presentation, they can find another sex worker who can respond to their desires and needs. I perform as I want, and I'm not trying to mask.' This stance reflects an important counterpoint to the economic pressures that often drive identity modulation, highlighting how some sex workers prioritise authenticity even when it might limit their potential client base.

Market realities and clientele dynamics

The interviews revealed significant insights about market pressures and client relationships that help contextualise our observations of content creators' behaviours on Reddit. All interviewees described navigating economic pressures while trying to maintain boundaries and authenticity.

N.N., drawing on their experience as a subreddit moderator, explained that while the majority of the posts in the subreddits they manage are strictly non-commercial, about one-quarter are promotional posts submitted by sex workers. A. noted how clients often misunderstand or fetishise transness: 'I know that the majority of my clients think that transness is some kind of pose or aesthetic, or they do not factor it in at all. They usually call me FtM (female to male) and even that verbiage is so anatomical and objectifying that it gives me an ick'. This objectification parallels what we observed in some Reddit communities, particularly those with less community-centred moderation.

S.P. described their clientele in structural terms: 'All of my clients are white, queer cis men, mostly wealthy and over 40', highlighting the class and racial dynamics that shape client relationships. They also noted that the queer community they personally identify with often 'can't afford meeting an escort', creating a separation between their personal community and their client base.

N.N.'s experience further illustrates the structural challenges facing trans content creators, describing what they call the 'trans ghetto online', where 'all trans content is kind of shunted into its own thing. Trans women are not treated as women. They're treated as trans women'. They noted the particular invisibility of transmasculine creators: 'transmasc people are not even on the radar, we're like either in with gay men or with trans women, and it's kind of a 50/50 split of where we're put'. As N.N. explained, this segregation creates significant barriers to audience discovery: 'men who are going to cis women's profile[s] will not often click on my profile. Gay men, gay performers will be like, "What the hell are you?"'

Moreover, N.N.'s personal experience exemplifies a process of identity formation through digital self-representation. They described how sex work became intertwined

with gender exploration: 'I started sex work when I was starting to question my gender identity and experiment with it more, and [I] transitioned medically while still creating content. So there's this record, visual, an auditory record of my transition through work'. This documentation process began unconsciously through posting 'lewds' on Reddit during early gender questioning: 'I wasn't doing this consciously, but, looking back, it was me trying to be, like, Is this acceptable? Is this desirable? What's going on with me? And using the reactions of others to understand, in some ways, how I felt.' The positive community responses provided crucial affirmation that encouraged continued participation, as expressed in their personal emphasis: 'I strongly believe in freedom of expression, including erotic expression. I believe that trans people are desirable and beautiful and should have an easy way to share their content online.'

M.M., on the other hand, directly addressed how being openly transgender affects income: 'I still get messages from ppl saying straight up that they will pay me less for being trans'. This economic pressure helps explain the identity modulation strategies we observed across both the interviews and Reddit communities, where queer sex workers must balance authentic self-expression against financial necessity.

Discussion

Our investigation of r/transporn, r/FtMPorn, and r/EnbyLewds revealed distinct community cultures that simultaneously serve affirmation and commercial purposes, though with significant differences in how these functions are balanced and prioritised.

Community governance and cultural distinctions

Our analysis revealed that governance structures fundamentally shape community dynamics. r/FtMPorn and r/EnbyLewds, both moderated by members of the queer and transgender community, demonstrated stronger community coherence and more nuanced approaches to identity affirmation compared to r/transporn. This difference in governance appeared to create separate spheres of influence, with minimal crossposting or interaction between r/transporn and the other two communities. While r/FtMPorn and r/EnbyLewds shared moderators and showed substantial overlap through crossposting and commenting, r/transporn operated within its own network of transfeminine-focused communities.

The moderation approaches also differed significantly. In r/FtMPorn and r/EnbyLewds, we observed educational moderation practices where moderators explained rule violations and worked constructively with users. In contrast, r/transporn showed more straightforward enforcement without the same level of community dialogue.

This aligns with our finding that community-led governance creates more responsive and contextually aware moderation practices.

N.N.'s moderation experience demonstrates the sophisticated cultural competency required for effective trans community governance. For instance, they regularly intervene when users post titles asking questions like 'Is it gay to fuck a T boy?' N.N. recognises this as problematic, as they explain to users: 'this is you misgendering yourself, and you're asking cis men to affirm, or not, that you are fuckable because of your gender identity, and that's kind of fucked up'. This intervention reveals that effective moderation requires not only an understanding of trans identity politics but also the ability to recognise the subtle manifestations of internalised transphobia in sexual contexts – cultural knowledge that would be challenging for cisgender moderators to develop.

Contradictions between affirmation and commerce

A central tension emerged between community-building and commercial activities. While N.N. emphasised that 'over 3/4 of all posts (maybe more)' in their subreddits are non-commercial and seeking affirmation, our observational data revealed a more complex picture. In r/transporn, nearly all regular posters maintained prominent links to commercial platforms in their biographies, suggesting a primarily commercial motivation. However, in r/FtMPorn, fewer than half of the investigated profiles linked to commercial platforms, with many users explicitly stating they post 'mostly for themselves'.

This contradiction reflects different user populations and motivations across subreddits. r/EnbyLewds fell somewhere between these extremes, with a majority of users linking to commercial platforms while also maintaining strong community engagement patterns. The interview data help to explain this complexity: participants described how economic pressures often coexist with genuine desires for community and affirmation, making it difficult to separate purely commercial from purely social motivations.

Gender affirmation in digital spaces

The affirmative interactions we observed across all three subreddits align with the concept of queer joy (Wright, Falek 2024). Users engaged in playful, gender-flexible interactions that challenged heteronormative scripts through posts spanning from casual activities ('Will you be my gayming buddy?') to more intimate invitations. These socially interactive posts were particularly prevalent in r/FtMPorn and r/EnbyLewds, generating active comment sections with sustained back-and-forth between OPs and commenters.

The flair system on r/FtMPorn allowed users to specify preferred anatomical terminology (masculine, feminine, or all terms), giving them some control over how their bodies were described in the comments. This represents a departure from fixed categorisation systems, though the options remain limited. This connects to Watson's (2021) analysis of how a community-based organisation can provide more user agency than traditional categories.

Our findings, as expressed in interview statements especially by N.N., as well as in our subreddit observations, confirm that these spaces function as sites for digital self-representation and identity work. This supports Tiidenberg's (2015) theory of how visual sharing provides a 'witnessed manifestation' of identity transitions. This also relates to creating a sense of queer joy, in which queer bodies and identities are being seen and celebrated (Wright, Falek 2024). In this, these communities function similarly to the trans vlogging spaces described by Raun (2016) that serve multiple purposes simultaneously: mirrors for self-reflection, documentation platforms, and community-building forums.

Sex work and community dynamics

While the affirmative aspects are significant, our observations reveal that many active users also employ these subreddits strategically as marketing channels. Commercial activities took three primary forms: explicit promotion posts (permitted only in r/FtMPorn); profile links to monetised platforms (dominant across all subreddits); and private transactions through direct messaging. This pattern aligns with Paasonen, Jarrett, and Light's (2019) analysis of how independent content creators build audience relationships through significant unpaid labour with uncertain returns. Commercial creators typically responded more actively to comments, using brief acknowledgements and emojis to build rapport while avoiding explicit solicitation, which would violate subreddit rules. These interactions represent what our framework identifies as the blurring of boundaries between promotional activities and personal time. Creators must maintain a consistent presence, responding to comments and engaging with their audience without any guarantee that these interactions will convert to paid subscriptions. This creates a precarious work environment, where the boundaries between promotional activities and personal time become increasingly blurred, requiring constant attention to audience engagement.

However, these commercial activities cannot be understood as simply transactional. Content creators across all three subreddits also commented appreciatively on other creators' content, and the boundaries between creators, consumers, and supporters frequently blurred. This reflects Smith's (2017) concept of 'erotic culture that is simultaneously public and private'.

Part of this erotic culture is the community aspect of the subreddits: The spaces are run and moderated by active community members, some of whom participate in commenting and content creation themselves. Content creators across all three observed subreddits comment on other creators' content, leaving appreciative remarks or emojis. Especially in r/FtMPorn and r/EnbyLewds, but to a lesser degree also in r/transporn, the borders between users acting as content creators or as potential clients are frequently blurred. These blurred lines create a fluid and inclusive space, where individuals can move between roles as consumers, creators, and supporters, without being constrained by rigid distinctions. Furthermore, this blurring of roles contributes to the overall ethos of mutual recognition and affirmation we described for the observed subreddits.

This multifaceted nature of these online spaces recalls Raun's (2016: epilogue) observation that platforms like YouTube (and in our case Reddit) can become 'a site for self-revelation as much as for self-creation, and a site for community building as much as for business enterprise'. Like in Raun's study, we observed that 'community and commerce go hand in hand' with self-promotion that often serves both economic needs and the purpose of becoming a visible trans advocate. The economic dimension rarely overshadows the community-building aspect, suggesting that these spaces function simultaneously as vehicles for the 'communication and production of trans identity' and platforms for financial support.

However, one must refrain from idealising community-led moderation as a purely altruistic endeavour, as our interviews reveal how these community structures can be exploited, especially in the intersection of economic pressures and platform affordances. The unethical monetisation strategies described by N.N. (banning potential competitors in favour of paying users) undermine the meritocratic ideals of the platform and introduce gatekeeping dynamics that privilege financial access over community value. Furthermore, the emotional toll and interpersonal conflicts described by N.N., including harassment and internal power struggles, expose the unsustainable demands of unpaid digital labour.

Identity modulation and market pressures

Market pressures significantly impact how queer and trans content creators present themselves online. They are even more pronounced when we examine how creators navigate between different digital spaces. We observed users crossposting in less trans-friendly subreddits while strategically adapting their self-presentation and terminology to match the expectations of those spaces. This crossposting behaviour illustrates Duguay's (2022) concept of 'identity modulation' – a process where individuals adjust how they frame and present their identities across digital spaces with different norms and audiences.

This practice demonstrates Tiidenberg's (2020) concept of multifaceted identity performance across different digital contexts. Users brought particular aspects of themselves to the fore in specific situations, creating what can be understood as digital code-switching. The performative aspect of identity becomes particularly visible when users navigate different subreddits with varying norms and expectations.

For non-binary and trans content creators, this practice reflects the economic pressures they navigate while seeking to maintain authentic self-expression in queer-affirming spaces. It highlights the significant difference between community-moderated spaces like r/EnbyLewds, where moderators themselves identify as part of the community they serve, and larger NSFW subreddits focused on trans content (such as r/traps), where moderators typically do not identify as transgender or non-binary, resulting in spaces that tend to exoticise rather than affirm trans and non-binary identities.

The harsh economic realities of digital sex work mean that visibility and audience size directly impact income potential. Larger subreddits, even those with a problematic framing of trans bodies, offer access to substantially larger potential client bases. For creators attempting to earn a living through platforms like OnlyFans, this exposure can be crucial for financial survival.

Our observations on Reddit revealed that users often crossposted to larger subreddits that employed fetishising representations – ones emphasising certain physical attributes or using terminology that positions trans bodies as exotic or unusual. This suggests that these spaces may be more numerous and accessible than the community-focused affirming spaces we studied. This imbalance creates market structures that financially reward certain narratives about trans bodies while offering fewer economic opportunities for authentic self-representation. The phenomenon illustrates Raun's (2016) observation about the intertwining of community and commerce in trans digital spaces. This imbalance in available platforms creates what can be understood as a form of digital code-switching, where individuals adapt their language and presentation to navigate different digital contexts while maintaining their core identities. Importantly, these strategic adaptations do not reflect the authenticity or legitimacy of trans identities. Rather, they highlight the unfair burdens placed on marginalised creators, which come with mental and emotional costs, as discussed in the interviews we conducted within this study. The burden of navigating these tensions falls unfairly on trans and non-binary creators who must balance economic needs against authentic representation.

Conclusion

In this paper, we investigated the subcultures of trans NSFW posts in three subreddits: r/transporn, r/FtMPorn, and r/EnbyLewds. We chose the approach of qualitative observation in order to gain an understanding of the cultures and motivations within these subreddits. We focused on these three subreddits because we found them to be currently the leading subreddits for their respective focuses. Our analysis revealed distinct patterns of community governance and interconnection among these subreddits: While r/FtMPorn and r/EnbyLewds share moderators who explicitly identify as queer and transgender themselves, creating communities managed by members of the populations they cater to, r/transporn is not moderated by members of the queer community. This difference in governance appears to create separate spheres of influence, with minimal interaction between r/transporn and the other two communities we studied. While we found a strong overlap between r/FtMPorn and r/EnbyLewds in the form of crossposting and commenting, r/transporn instead operates within its own network of transfeminine-focused communities.

Our exploration of the subcultures within the queer NSFW communities of r/transporn, r/FtMPorn, and r/EnbyLewds reveals the complex ways in which these spaces foster affirmation, support, and interaction and thereby contribute to community and culture building. Despite their shared focus on trans and non-binary identities, each subreddit maintains unique cultural practices that reflect different gendered and sexual experiences, from language and anatomical descriptions to moderation policies. These variations are not incidental but reflect how community-led governance shapes online environments: spaces moderated by members of the community they serve, like r/FtMPorn and r/EnbyLewds, develop notably different cultures than those with more external governance structures. Our analysis highlights how the specific affordances of Reddit – including its semi-anonymous architecture, bottom-up moderation model, and use of flairs and community rules – enable these spaces to foster affirmation, visibility, and a sense of belonging. In particular, subreddits moderated by in-group members (r/FtMPorn and r/EnbyLewds) demonstrated community coherence and intersectional awareness.

The interviews with queer sex workers provide additional context and critical reflection, highlighting how these Reddit communities exist within a broader digital ecosystem where content creators must navigate multiple platforms with varying norms, audience expectations, and economic pressures. As demonstrated by both our Reddit observations and interview data, content creators often engage in strategic identity modulation across platforms, balancing authentic self-expression against economic considerations. This highlights the ongoing tension between authentic self-expression and financial survival that characterises queer digital sex work.

The role of digital sex work in these subcultures further reveals the complex interplay between creative content production and community building. The blurred boundaries between content creators and audiences, as well as between transactional and social interactions, challenge simplistic understandings of digital sex work as merely commercial. These spaces function simultaneously as sites for identity validation and as marketing channels, with these purposes often complementing rather than contradicting each other.

While these communities create important opportunities for representation and affirmation, they also operate within the constraints of platform capitalism and its economic pressures. The subreddits we studied demonstrate both the potential for community-led spaces to foster supportive environments and the ongoing challenges of creating truly inclusive digital cultures. By examining these dynamics, our research contributes to understanding how marginalised communities carve out digital spaces that serve multiple, sometimes conflicting purposes – enabling members of these communities to engage in personal expression and economic activity while navigating the constraints of the larger platform ecosystems.

Our research reveals that successful queer digital communities require more than just permissive content policies. Community-led governance, flexible identity categories, and active protection against harassment emerge as crucial factors in creating spaces where both commercial and affirmative activities can coexist productively.

The strategic modulation of identity and the struggles around moderation practices that we observed also highlight the broader structural inequalities facing queer content creators. While platforms like Reddit offer important alternatives to more restrictive social media, they operate within economic systems that often reward the fetishisation of representations of queer bodies over their affirmation. Users must navigate these constraints using careful presentation strategies that protect their authentic identities while maintaining their economic viability and also protecting their mental health.

Finally, our findings suggest that the boundaries between sex work, community building, and identity affirmation are becoming increasingly blurred in digital spaces. Rather than viewing these as competing motivations, our research indicates that they often function as complementary aspects of queer digital life, with users finding ways to meet economic needs while building meaningful community connections.

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Performance as a Tool for Destigmatisation: The Berlin Strippers Collective's Sex Worker-Led Advocacy

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Abstract: This article explores the formation and activism of the Berlin Strippers Collective (BSC), now known as Slut Riot. The author, writing from his perspective as a trans sex worker and core member of the Collective's founding network, explains how the BSC arose in the context of German sex-worker association and activism. Drawing on an autoethnographic method, he uses his personal experience with the group as a basis for the article. The political goals of the BSC are explained, which include combatting Sex-Work-Exclusionary-Radical-Feminist (SWERF) ideas and pushing for decriminalisation by decreasing the stigma surrounding sex work. Next, important elements of the collective's organisational structure, such as the requirement that all members be sex workers, and its policy on transgender individuals are laid out. The BSC's activities, mainly performance art and media engagement, are described. Finally, to illustrate how the BSC's performances were a tool used to accomplish its political goals, the author presents a short performance analysis of an evocative theatre play entitled 'Merry Stripmas and a Happy New Queer', which was produced and acted by the collective. The primary intention of this article is to aid other sex-work activism groups through an account of a prominent Berlin-based sex worker collective.
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As right-wing radicalism rises around the world, sex workers' rights are being curtailed through policies based on stereotypes that are imposed on them about what it means to sell sexual services. The Berlin Strippers Collective (BSC), now Slut Riot, attempts to involve sex workers in the construction of narratives around their own identities in order to reduce the stigma from both state institutions and the public. This article is written through my perspective as a former member of the BSC and a sex worker. Through analysing the BSC's structure, performances, and eventual organisational transformation, it becomes clear that sex worker-led advocacy combats stigma by reshaping public narratives about the work and life of sex workers. The aim of this piece is to share first-hand experiences about the history and structure of this collective which other sex-work activist groups can use to aid their efforts to combat stigma and improve sex workers' lives. I will introduce the BSC, speak of my personal experience with them, explain their political goals and organisational structure, and detail their activities. To finish I will analyse one of the BSC's theatre plays to show how they destigmatised sex work through performance and then draw conclusions about the implications of their work for other sex worker groups.

Who were the Berlin Strippers Collective?

Founded in 2019, the BSC emerged in response to exploitative working conditions in Berlin's strip clubs, such as unfair fines, forced adherence to a strict schedule without a working contract, and racist and transphobic discrimination in club hiring practices. A group of sex workers met at their jobs in the clubs and started talking about their dissatisfaction with these conditions. They decided that a performance collective, where members could perform erotic dance styles to a wider audience on their own terms, could be both an alternative source of income and an activist platform. Their mission was to combat stigma surrounding sex work, advocate for better working conditions, challenge heteronormative standards about dress and gender presentation often enforced in strip clubs, and push for the decriminalisation of sex work in Germany. To achieve these goals, their activism combined public visibility with self-representation through performances at venues like queer bars, techno clubs, and the Volksbühne theatre. Notable productions, such as 'Merry Stripmas and a Happy New Queer', blended artistic expression with political commentary. Beyond performances, the BSC engaged in media advocacy through interviews, photoshoots, and social media campaigns, drawing from the German Prostitutes' Movement and global sex worker advocacy.

As a co-benefit, they created a platform where sex workers could find community and support each other. The BSC operated with an anti-capitalist, queer, feminist,

anti-racist, and non-hierarchical structure, ensuring collective decision-making and shared responsibility. While the BSC has since evolved into Slut Riot, their work laid the foundation for ongoing sex worker rights activism in many forms in Germany, emphasising community, solidarity, and self-representation. They utilised performance as a tool for intentional political intervention, spreading knowledge to the public and fighting simplistic stereotypes through dance and storytelling.

My relationship with the Berlin strippers collective

I met some of the founding members of the BSC at the first strip club I worked at in the summer of 2021. After becoming friends with several of them and sharing our unhappiness with the working conditions at the club, I attended one of their events at a local queer bar. Their grassroots, self-organised structure and strong political advocacy impressed and attracted me. Additionally, I was planning on undergoing an FTM (female-to-male) gender transition at that time, and I knew that the club I worked at would not allow me to continue to work there after hormonal transition. So the opportunities to perform and generate an alternate source of income in queer spaces through the BSC came at the perfect time for me, allowing me to pursue my gender transition. Through drag and pole performances with the BSC, I was also able to explore my gender identity in a way that had not been possible before. I quickly joined the group and remained a member for two years (2021–2023).

My experience as a member gives me insight into the inner workings and motivations of the group. Additionally, my occupational identity as a transgender sex worker allows me to draw on my own lived experience as a source of knowledge. Countless pieces, studies, and theses have been written about us by 'civilians' (a term colloquially used to denote individuals who are not sex workers), but just as the BSC espouses, it is truly revolutionary when we tell our own stories. It is in this spirit that this article was researched and written.

A history of German sex-worker association and activism

To understand the context for the creation of the Berlin Strippers' Collective as a group in Germany, it is necessary to understand the history of the German Prostitutes' Movement, informally known as the Whore's Movement (*Hurenbewegung*). The exchange of sexual services for money, referred to by law as prostitution, has been technically legal in Germany since 1949, excluding street work in some restricted areas. But there have been many regulations imposed on sex workers by the state which have degrading effects on sex workers.

Tolerated but restricted

From 1949 until 2002, 'prostitutes' in Germany were required to have mandatory health (STI) checks, were not allowed to work in groups, and had no right to make the client pay if the client decided they did not want to. Clients could not be sued for payment because prostitution was classified in the law as '*sittenwidrig*', which translates to 'immoral'. Brothels were also not allowed to provide condoms or towels, because this was seen as 'promoting prostitution' which was illegal. Sex workers had to pay income tax, but did not get benefits and social services like all other tax-payers in Germany (Heying 2018: 26).

Sex workers and the AIDS crisis

Although the regulation of sex work has been going on for longer, the movement truly began in the 1980s alongside the rise of the AIDs crisis. This occurred because during the HIV/AIDs crisis, sex workers were both stigmatised as potential spreaders of HIV and called on by the German government to help prevent the virus's spread (Heying 2018: 35). This period essentially brought the situation of German sex workers into public view, and empowered many sex workers to mobilise for their rights.

By the year 1987, eight sex worker self-help groups were operating in Germany, including Hydra, which is still operating in Berlin today (Heying 2018: 28). In 1985, the first Whores Congress (*Hurenkongress*) took place in Berlin, where thirty sex workers gathered from across Germany and developed twenty-two social and political demands that would inform the development of the German Prostitutes' Movement (Heying 2018: 29).

Mandatory registration and the 'whore ID'

Many, but not all, of these goals were accomplished after years of advocacy in 2002 with the passage of the new prostitution law (Heying 2018: 36). But in 2017, the Hurenbewegung experienced a big setback with a new law requiring the official registration of all prostitutes with the state, which included mandatory health education as a prerequisite for registration. Now, to work legally, sex workers in Germany must register with the state to receive what they call the 'whore ID' (*Hurenpass*). If sex workers are not registered, they are working illegally and can be prosecuted (Heying 2018: 44).

Registration requires the applicant's name, date of birth, nationality, and registration address, and must be done yearly at the local 'Prostitute Protection' authority. After providing this personal data and a passport/ID card, there is a health counselling session. The registration ID is then issued and must be carried and presented in order to work at some registered workplaces such as brothels or shown to the po-

lice if asked. There are multiple drawbacks to this regulation, including the fact that it excludes undocumented workers and certain groups of visa holders like students. Both categories of people often engage in sex work out of necessity, since other jobs that provide an income comparable to sex work can be difficult to find. Additionally, street workers often begin sex work quickly for survival reasons and either do not have time to wait to register or are unaware that they must do so. If sex workers are caught without this pass, they can be fined up to 1000 euros, which can be a devastating amount if they are in a precarious financial situation (Freie Arbeiter*Innen Union, 2018). Although the situation in Germany is safer for sex workers than in other places where the occupation is completely criminalised, sex workers here continue to face discrimination, stigma, and unsafe working conditions.

The political goals of the collective

It is notoriously difficult to improve conditions at strip clubs and brothels because of the oppressive business structure that many managers and club owners in the industry employ. In Berlin, when managers do not approve of a worker raising concerns, they simply fire them and ban them from the club. The sheer lengths to which managers go to prevent sex workers from speaking to each other about working conditions encouraged the members of the collective to do just that.

Queer feminism and cis-heterosexual beauty standards

All the events the BSC were involved in had the purpose of educating the public about sex work through a queer feminist lens and enabling sex workers to take control of the telling of their stories. Because the conditions and hiring requirements in Berlin strip clubs are set by managers who operate according to cisgender heterosexual beauty standards, it is often expected that strippers conform to a certain mainstream beauty ideal. Although many anti-sex work advocates use these conditions to argue that sex workers are promoting these beauty standards, the BSC believed the problem lay with the managers, not the workers. They argued that rather than trying to abolish heteronormative standards in the industry, the proper response is to create alternative sex worker-led spaces, where workers who choose to do so can express themselves differently.

Decriminalisation: sex work as labour

The BSC viewed sex work as a labour issue. Sex work is a job just like any other job and therefore should not subject to specialised laws regulating or criminalising it (Leigh 1989). They were pro-worker above all else and viewed themselves as a group

of workers fighting for better working conditions. They held the view that workers engage in sex work for many different reasons, but the choice should be theirs to make (Cruz 2020: 194).

One of the narratives that they pushed back against is the Sex Worker Exclusionary Radical Feminist (SWERF) view that sex workers are not able to consent to having sex for money. This anti-sex industry narrative, though it may seem to be concerned with sex workers' wellbeing, actually ends up taking away sex workers' agency by speaking for them and labelling them as exploited, even when sex workers do not agree with this portrayal. Teela Sanders (2016) explores the question of whether sex work is inevitably violent in their paper on the SWERF position and its shortcomings. 'Prostitution' has historically been constructed as an inherently violent occupation and social role. Violence is a reality in the lives of many sex workers and street sex workers experience the most violence of all the subgroups under the sex work umbrella. SWERFs claim that this violence is due to the nature of the transaction between sex worker and client, but Sanders argues that this violence stems from the criminalisation of sex work and the media's depictions of sex workers as victims.

Transforming the language of disgust through destigmatisation

Therefore, the BSC believed that fighting for the decriminalisation of sex work and sharing accurate, destigmatising stories about sex workers from their own perspective is more useful than condemning the sex industry as a whole. Their overarching goal was to reduce stigma in order to reduce violence and discrimination against the sex worker community. In his article on reducing the stigma surrounding sex work, sociologist Ronald Weitzer (2017: 725) argues that:

> since stigma is not inherent in any kind of behavior and is instead a social construction, it can be countered and deconstructed. And such destigmatization can have important consequences for other aspects of sex work: If prostitution is allowed 'to function in a social climate freed from emotional prejudice' (Ericsson, 1980: 362), it then becomes 'imaginable that prostitution could always be practiced, as it occasionally is even now, in circumstances of relative safety, security, freedom, hygiene, and personal control' (Overall, 1992: 716).

The SWERF narrative depicts sex workers with a 'language of disgust' (Sanders 2016: 11) that violent men latch onto to legitimise their actions. These men do not view sex workers as human beings but rather as a subclass of humanity. And due to stigma about the profession, this violence is accepted by the public as inherent to sex work. The BSC attempted to share information directly stemming from their

lived experiences to help well-meaning people understand how to show solidarity with sex workers.

Sex workers' rights should be protected and workers should enjoy the same benefits as all other citizens. Specific laws targeting the industry should not exist (Comte 2014: 24). When Sex work is criminalised in any way, even under regulations like the Nordic Model, which only criminalises clients, sex workers suffer (Jordan 2012: 1–17). The BSC, like many other organisations, such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, UNAIDS, the World Health Organization, and sex worker advocates around the world, supported the decriminalisation of sex work, rather than legalising it through registration, which is the current situation in Germany.

Stigma and the deviant prostitute

Although the members of the BSC view sex work as a labour issue, the general public in Germany and abroad mostly view it differently. This is because sex work is still heavily stigmatised and the 'prostitute body' is constructed as deviant. The BSC tries to move beyond this and intentionally reduce the stigma by confronting it with defiance. The direct involvement of sex worker-led groups in this process has been and will continue to be essential for any further change to take place. And, of course, to achieve better working conditions, they need to gain some support from the general public and non-sex workers. The fact is, however, that many people who have never been involved in the sex industry simply have no information about it other than the mainstream narratives pushed in the mass media.

Collective structure and membership requirements

Before dissolving in 2024, due to internal conflicts over collective goals, the BSC had a self-organised and decentralised structure. No individual member held any particular position of power. All major decisions were made through consensus voting. We attempted to meet in person about once a month to keep the group spirit strong and have a meal together. General meeting topics included upcoming events, our merchandise, and the political climate surrounding sex work. Prospective members had to be based in Berlin and to be working or have previously worked as a stripper.

Not a pole-dance group

Pole dancers who had never worked at a strip club were not accepted, although many applied. It is important to emphasise that the collective was not just a pole-dancing performance group. It was an organisation of sex workers who worked together to

decrease the stigma surrounding sex work and this often had very little to do with pole dancing. On this topic, the collective member guidelines stated that:

> as our name implies, we are a strippers' collective and our activism and shows are closely related to the problematics of strip clubs and aim at achieving independence from strip club managers. Therefore, experience in the field is relevant. Exceptions to this are trans sex workers if they want to work as a stripper but have faced discrimination finding a job or safe space in strip clubs. (Berlin Strippers Collective 2022)

The exception for transgender sex workers is important because of the unsafe and often hostile working conditions trans people face in Berlin strip clubs.

The inclusion of transgender sex workers

In Berlin's mainstream strip clubs, it is often very difficult for trans people to find a safe job. Transfeminine people often have to completely pass as cisgender women to be considered for a position, and they face discrimination and violence if it is discovered that they are trans. Transmasculine people (especially those on hormone replacement therapy) may have to disguise themselves as cisgender women at work, which can often cause extreme dysphoria. They may also have to attempt to explain their transition to clients, who are often cisgender men who are uneducated about transgender people, leading to unsafe situations.

Therefore, the collective accepted transgender people who had worked in other areas of sex work but not at strip clubs. The collective had several transgender members who benefited from this essential policy. They aimed to give marginalised sex workers a voice, and recognising the difficulties transgender people face in the Berlin sex work industry was part of that mission. If potential members met all these requirements, current members considered their application and voted on their admission to the collective.

Activities and practices

The main activities the collective was involved in were performances, gogo-dancing and pole-dancing gigs, press interviews, collaborations with other sex worker activist groups, management of a successful Instagram page/Patreon, and selling self-made merchandise. Members of the collective could create and organise their own events if they had a unique idea and took the initiative to make it happen. The collective owned two portable poles, purchased with the shared budget.

Workshops and sex-worker pole exchange
Workshops were also a much-loved event, especially the Valentine's Day lap dance workshop. The BSC also hosted a free 'pole jam' or pole practice hour only for sex workers at a local pole dance studio. This event was born from a desire to give sex workers a space to practice pole with colleagues if they do not have access to expensive studio classes or practice spaces dominated by civilians.

Performances within alternative and queer nightlife
Performances by the BSC quickly became a staple of Berlin's nightlife scene. Some members of the collective, including me, performed in drag style at queer bars. The BSC has also performed at several alternative festivals in Germany, including the Whole Festival and the Fusion Festival. Their presence in the community led them to be recognised as one of the forty clubs and collectives that made significant contributions to Berlin club culture at the 2021 and 2022 Tag der Clubkultur (Day of Club Culture) Award Ceremony. As one of the forty winners of this prestigious award, the BSC received recognition and a 10,000 euro grant from the Berlin Club Commission, the Senate Department for Culture, and the Musicboard Berlin.

Collaboration with other activist groups
In Berlin, there are several other sex worker and queer activist groups that the BSC collaborated with. Trans Sex Works, Hydra e.v., and the Black Sex Workers Collective are three of the other major players in the Berlin sex work community. Notably, the Black Sex Workers Collective is also groundbreaking for the Berlin sex work scene and has a membership of only Black sex workers; they, too, have received the Tag Der Clubkultur Award and funding for their outstanding contribution to Berlin's nightlife (The Collective). Occasionally, members travelled for gigs to neighbouring countries to collaborate with other sex worker collectives. The BSC saw itself as part of the larger 'Hurenbewegung' in Germany and the world and collaborated with other organisations that had similar missions.

Media and public engagement

Collaborating with the press was one of the most effective ways for members of the collective to share their experiences with people who may never have set foot in one of their shows. The BSC has been featured in many publications across Germany and beyond, including the *Berliner Morgenpost*, *VICE Germany*, *The Economist*, the *Berliner Zeitung*, *Dazed & Confused Magazine*, *Lola Mag*, *I Heart Berlin*, *Tip Berlin*, and *Playful Mag*. For example, in their interview with *Dazed & Confused Magazine*, the BSC stated that their main motivation for forming was:

> to tell our story in our own words; sex work is a hot topic, but you hardly see sex workers taking ownership of their own narrative. We want better working conditions; we don't want to pay out half of our earnings to clubs in commission; we want to create and manage our own projects. To be autonomous, self-organised, and make collective decisions around how and who we work with is radical. It's also a fuck you to the top-down patriarchal capitalistic systems usually found in the business world - collective collaboration is a way to challenge and overcome many of the issues found in modern capitalist societies. (Dawson 2021)

Social media is an effective tool for combating what Weitzer (2017: 722) describes as 'cultural lag', or time it takes for social norms to combine with legal norms, which, because of the speed and reach of social media, emerges when there is a push for legal reforms. For this reason, members were active almost every day on the Instagram page, which had around 20,000 followers. Every month, the collective posted a timeline of events, as well as members' own stories about their experiences with sex work. Even though Instagram is an important tool for sharing information, the BSC was required to censor all words related to sex work (e.g. s*x, skripper, br*thel, wh*re) and to cover nipples in photos. The account was flagged several times for 'sexual solicitation', even though none was occurring. Members were constantly double-checking whether everything had been properly censored before posting. Sex workers are currently being targeted on social media platforms and activist collectives do not get a pass in this. Some alternatives, such as Bluesky, are popping up now and becoming popular with the community for their more inclusive practices.

Performance as political praxis: Volksbühne performance analysis

I believe that to truly understand the power of the BSC's performances to destigmatise sex work, the reader would have to see one in person. Since that may not be possible, I will provide the next best thing, a performance analysis. I will intentionally employ a non-traditional writing method of mixing description with analysis, since I want the reader to feel as if they are experiencing and processing this theatre piece in real time as an audience member.

On 23 December 2022, the members of the Berlin Strippers Collective acted in a self-written tragicomedy at the renowned state theatre Volksbühne at Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, attracting an audience of over six hundred people. The show was titled 'Merry Stripmas and a Happy New Queer' – a self-reflexive show on the working conditions of a Berlin strip club. The setting was a strip club holding a Christmas party (Merry Stripmas and a Happy New Queer Showcase).

Act I: Fines from an exploitative manager

All of the members played strippers, which was an intentional choice. So often, sex workers are portrayed by civilians in the media and in performances, so playing themselves was a way to take control of their own narratives. At the beginning of the play, all four characters on stage are bored, waiting for a customer to come in. Suddenly, a door-like noise echoes and everyone sits up, thinking it is a customer. However, it is actually another stripper who is two hours late. The voice of the manager booms, 'Cristal, that's fifteen euros for being late. Aphrodite, ten euros for texting. Charly, ten euros for book reading. Mädels, arbeiten!' To the audience, fines for things like texting and reading a book may have seemed ludicrous, but managers often fine strippers for insignificant things like these. By controlling the dancers' behaviour so strictly, the managers exert power over the strippers and act like pimps towards workers who are nominally independent. One of the reasons the BSC was founded is because they believe that managers who operate their clubs in this way keep sex workers down. Throughout the play, the manager's voice continues to come across the loudspeaker and exact fines from the dancers for other ridiculous reasons like 'unseasonal behaviour' (not wearing Christmas outfits) and even being sad.

Act II: The 'doll client' and the whorearchy

In the next act, there is a mannequin sitting in one of the chairs on stage, which represents a client. Since the client is not represented by an actor, but by a lifeless doll, his voice is taken away. With this artistic choice, the BSC echoed the following words from the book *Revolting Prostitutes*: 'nobody will give us our power: not the police, not our bosses, not our clients. (…) Sex workers have been made to listen; now it is our turn to speak' (Smith, Mac 2018: 220). The clients' voice here is unimportant; we never hear his perspective on what is happening because he is literally a prop that allows sex workers' voices to be heard.

Another topic that the BSC addressed in the play was the *whorearchy* which is a term used in sex worker circles to name the internal stigma within our communities. Although it is common to offer services that go beyond a lap dance at Berlin strip clubs, this is still stigmatised in the industry. One of the characters in the play, Melody, sits down in the chair near the customer and contemplates what will happen if she tries to sell more than a lap dance. She thinks, 'I don't want that the manager knows about it or even worse that a co-worker finds out. (…) Probably, they already think I'm a cheap hooker who has no clue how to make good money. I'm so tired of getting price-shamed. Let's support each other instead of being competitive. It's my body and my decision' (Melody). In all of their performances, the BSC attempted to show solidarity with full-service sex workers and repudiate the whorearchy. Stripping is sex work, just like working at a brothel or working on the street. Although people

within these different subcategories experience different levels of privilege, the BSC members used that privilege to liberate all sex workers, not just strippers.

Dignifying traditional stripper style dance and the BSC Manifesto

Throughout the production, three more strippers share their inner monologues followed by a pole-dance performance. During the pole-dancing scenes, some of the strippers completely undress – a consciously performed public act of liberation that resonates with the BSC Manifesto (2021):

> Through undressing we express our freedom. We will not tolerate the restrictive expectations society has laced us into, like a heavy gown. They expect us to wear the corsetry of the eternal double standard: Be subservient, be sexy, remain respectable. We reject systemic sexism, and song after song, we take off those corsets and peel off those expectations. Dancing to the rhythm of freedom, we climb higher and higher up the pole, reaching for liberation. (…) We gathered in the red light, and now we step into the daylight. (…) We cast off stereotypes that tell women they can be either sexual or smart, but never both.

By undressing and dancing sexually in a theatre context, the BSC made a statement that we strippers are proud of what we do in an artistic sense. We fight for labour rights, but we are also talented performers. Traditional strip club style dance is difficult and requires artistry and athleticism. By performing this type of dance in a theatre environment, strippers claim that their artistic practice is worthy of such a place.

In the end, none of the strippers manage to convince the customer to spend, and the mannequin is carried off the stage. Attempting to cheer up her colleagues, one of the dancers (Cristal) rallies them by speaking to the group of strippers and saying, 'Look at you, you're all so beautiful. Talented. Charming. Skillful. The world should belong to us. (…) There is no such thing as a bad night as long as we have each other.' The focus of the production is on the strippers, their stories, and the solidarity they have with one another.

Backlash to the theatre as a strip club

However, the production did receive backlash online. After the play took place, the Volksbühne posted on Instagram about their gratitude to the BSC for performing. Some people were not happy that a prestigious theatre was giving a platform to sex workers. One person left the following comment under the announcement of the play on Instagram:

> Somehow embarrassing to turn the theatre into a strip club (…) It's just cheap – sorry. Clearly, I stand by my criticism – ass wiggling is just zero art. If you really want to make a queer theatre, then just leave out the stripping. Yes, for me, it is a cheap, blasphemous work. (volksbuehne_berlin)

This comment makes it clear that the sex work movement still has a long way to go before sex workers can exist in society without stigma, and reinforces the importance of sex worker-led advocacy groups such as the BSC. By turning the theatre into a strip club, the BSC packed the house and were able to tell their stories as sex workers to a large audience. They proved that 'ass wiggling' is, in fact, art, and that audiences will pay to see it. And most of all, they showed that any serious queer theatre should include sex workers as performers if they want to be truly committed to intersectionality.

A change in organisational structure and the transition to Slut Riot

Although the BSC dissolved in 2024, the spirit and advocacy goals live on in Slut Riot, a performance company co-founded by Edie Montana, a former founder of the BSC, and Mei Magdalene, a former member. After speaking with them about the transition, they reflected that the rapid growth in the number of members of the BSC without a clear structure from the start created organisational issues that made co-operation in a non-hierarchical manner difficult.

Conflicts of interests arose about whether to prioritise members' financial goals through performance bookings or the collective's general political aim. These conflicts could not be resolved because there was no leader, and no consensus could be reached on these issues. Many members who dealt with the administrative side of the BSC were overworked and although there was much discussion about paying them an hourly wage, the legal and financial conditions required to do so could not be sorted out. Montana and Magdalene decided to shift the structure into a performance company, which involves a hierarchical approach. However, they claimed their personal experience with exploitation in their working environments could be used as a tool to avoid replicating these structures and break the chain of oppression.

Slut Riot now functions as a resource and networking platform that books sex workers for performances and spreads awareness about sex worker rights. This is what eventually led to a change in the organisational structure of the BSC: some individuals in the BSC were more concerned about financial gain than adhering to anti-capitalist and inclusive values. Division erupted in the group because of their influence, and while providing an alternative source of income for sex workers was

one of the BSC's hopes, the primary objective was to destigmatise sex work from an intersectional lens. Montana and Magdalene felt that this goal was being lost in the search for individual financial gain. Coming from this experience, one suggestion to other collectives who want to function in a non-hierarchical manner is to establish clear standards of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour and contribution requirements for membership and stand by these standards. Another suggestion was to define the non-negotiable group values early on and always refer back to them when making decisions. Otherwise, the structure can be easily exploited by individuals who do not prioritise the shared political goals.

Conclusion: implications for sex worker advocacy

In the documentary entitled *Outlaw Poverty, Not Prostitutes*, capturing the 1989 World Whores' Summit in San Francisco, the founder of the International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights stated that:

> we need to mingle together, there is no question, and this movement, the most important start, is contact, is talking, is realizing that those divisions between us have been imposed and that they're artificial, and that our lives and concerns have a great deal in common, but we can only know that by talking together, by building personal relationships together, and by building a political analysis based on all of our experiences. (Leigh 1989)

The BSC continued the sex worker activist legacy of establishing contact between sex workers and civilians, who may otherwise never meet us unless they were our clientele. Although fighting stigma is a big task, it is also a simple one: sex workers must share the truth of our experiences so that those who wish to can understand our lives and work. By speaking about our lived experience, we can break the cycle of shame surrounding the sale of sexual services for money. This is a powerful strategy that could go into the toolbox of other sex work activist groups. The solidarity of our fellow workers and allies will support us against the inevitable backlash we receive when pushing against stigma.

As a sex worker myself who developed much of my political consciousness in the BSC, I can say that I am proud of what I do. I talk about it openly, because I hope that all sex workers will be able to do so in the future without fear. And I know we have many potential allies who just need sex workers to educate them on how to properly support us. Many people have never even met a sex worker. By telling our stories, we can educate the community in Berlin and globally about sex industry politics.

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Beyond Stigmatisation, Moralism, and Reductionism: Philosophical Guidelines for Research, Media Representation, and Policy-Making on the Topic of Sex Work

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Abstract: This essay offers an ethical and philosophical framework for researchers, policy-makers, film-makers, and writers working on the topic of sex work. It argues that in order to provide a more accurate and useful representation of the industry, three philosophical shifts have to take place. The first shift is from stigmatising sex workers to picturing them as complex, diverse, and whole human beings. The societal gaze upon sex workers tends to depict them as undesirables who have to be hidden, deviants who have to be cured, or victims who have to be saved. To challenge this stigmatisation process, I use Martin Buber's concept of the *I-Thou* relationship, Maria Lugones' concepts of *world-travelling* and the *loving gaze*, Linda LeMoncheck's concept of *care respect*, and Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality. The second shift is from moral ethics to pragmatic ethics. A pragmatic approach interrogates the practical consequences of our beliefs and rejects the idea that there is a universal ethical principle. It allows us to depart from a moral judgement of sex work itself and instead focus on sex workers' experiences and needs. The third shift is from considering sex work as an isolated topic to embracing an approach based on Edgar Morin's concept of complex thought, in order to address the systemic interdependencies and multidimensionalities of the topic.

Keywords: sex work, research guidelines, pragmatism

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Researchers, policy-makers, writers, film-makers, and journalists may all, in the course of their work, engage with the topic of sex work. As they do, they have influence over how sex workers are portrayed in literature, research papers, articles, on screens, and in the legal system. In this paper, I will present, not a list of recommendations – those have previously been written by sex work organisations and are listed in the bibliography – but a philosophical framework to overcome specific obstacles to a nuanced and constructive approach to the subject of sex work. My goal is not to address specific actions but the attitudes and narratives that one holds towards this topic.

This argumentation is based on the ethical position that, when studying or representing a marginalised group, it is important to take the interests of this group into consideration, as well as to do no harm (Lazarus 2013). Biases and ignorance influence which information is retained and which is discarded, the words chosen, and what the focus would be. This may lead to misrepresentation, which has a negative impact on the ways the group is perceived and treated (Chowdhury 2023). Consequently, this study will address three correlated risks. The first is the risk of reproducing the oppression that sex workers experience, whereby the research, content, or law would do more harm than good. The second risk is of overlooking the reality and complexity of what is happening and of neglecting the specific experiences of individuals and groups, thus failing to provide a useful depiction, knowledge, or course of action. The third risk is of repeating the same narratives over and over, missing the incredible richness of the diversity of sex work–related topics, which can shed light on other philosophical questions and social experiences.

This essay argues that three shifts in philosophical viewpoints are necessary in order to have a holistic, complex, and accurate view of sex work. The first shift is to move beyond stigmatising narratives – that reduce sex workers to deviants, undesirables, or victims – by seeking an understanding of them as whole, complex, and unique human beings, through the concept of *care respect*. The second one is to focus on situation ethics and pragmatic philosophy, rather than on moral philosophy. The third is to avoid compartmentalisation and reductionism by employing complex thought and systemic thinking to approach the topic of sex work.

Methodology

In this paper, I use critical analysis as a methodology seeking to 'expose and to challenge taken-for-granted power structures and to offer alternative perspectives to knowledge, theory-building, and social reality' (Holland, Novak 2017: 295). Critical Analysis aims to challenge the ways in which knowledge is produced, and the goal of this essay is to discuss which epistemological frameworks are the most useful when it comes to the study and representation of sex work. I more specifically draw

on critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995), which focuses on the relationship between power and language, by questioning the words and narratives that reinforce the stigmatisation of sex workers.

Methodologically, I also draw on pragmatist ethics, which is an ethical inquiry that interrogates the practical results of our beliefs and prioritises the consideration of human well-being over the quest for universal moral laws. In this paper, I do not discuss the morality of sex work itself. I instead examine which philosophical frameworks have the most positive impact on both sex workers' well-being and the accuracy of research. Pragmatist ethics considers the practical consequences of discourse for the people and communities concerned. It is why I use this method to challenge stigmatising narratives. Its emphasis on lived experience invites us instead to focus on sex workers' needs and diversity.

The thesis and methodology of this paper has been guided by both personal engagement with sex work activism and philosophical reflection. By sustained exposure to literature, public discourse, and an activist's knowledge surrounding sex work, I have identified a set of recurring philosophical issues in the dominant frameworks used to conceptualise the topic. To offer alternative philosophical frameworks, I drew upon various theories, such as philosophy of dialogue (Buber), feminist philosophy (LeMoncheck, Lugones), gender studies (Butler), intersectional feminism (Crenshaw), situation ethics (Fletcher), pragmatism (Dewey, Rorty), and complex thinking (Morin). These perspectives were selected for their potential to shift the narrative about sex work towards a more inclusive, pragmatic, humanising, and relevant approach.

The examples I use in this paper, specifically the ones illustrating the stigmatising narratives of sex workers, focus on Eastern and Western Europe and on the United States from the eighteenth century to modern times. Thus, my argumentation takes place in this cultural context. However, there are examples of similar stigmatising narratives, with cultural differences, in many other countries. For example, the sex workers collective VAMP and the NGO SANGRAM, both based in India, mention the stigmatising narratives of victimhood and deviance in their study on the impact of anti-trafficking laws: 'As a result, adult, voluntarily working sex workers are treated as helpless victims in need of rescue or, when they refuse to identify themselves as victims, as perpetrators or deviants who deserve punishment' (VAMP, SANGRAM 2018: xii). The Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) presents an international list of sex worker organisations and visiting their respective websites provides information on the stigmatisation and specific struggles faced by sex workers across the globe.

This paper is mainly addressed to scholars, policy-makers, journalists, writers, and film-makers who are not sex workers themselves. It can also be useful for visual artists, dancers, and directors of plays.

From stigmatisation to care respect and world-travelling

In this first part, I discuss the difference between stigmatising sex workers and considering them as unique, whole, and complex people. I argue that the latter improves research, media representation, and policy-making. I focus on two types of stigmatisation: the depiction of sex workers as deviants or undesirables, and the presentation of sex work as fully and wholly victimising. In order to question these narratives, Buber's (1923) concepts of *I-It* and *I-Thou* relationships and Lugones' (1987) concepts of *arrogant gaze* and *loving gaze* complement one another and, together, provide a framework to identify and differentiate between stigmatising and humanising approaches to the topic of sex work. The impact of the deviance and victimhood narratives will then be outlined through additional theories, such as Butler's (2004) discourse on the politics of grievability, and Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality. Finally, LeMoncheck's (1997) notion of *care respect* provides guidance in overcoming a stigmatising gaze.

The first stigmatising narrative presents sex workers as undesirables to hide or deviants to cure. A moralist view tends to describe sex workers as a 'great social evil' (Ericsson 1980: 337), as sinful – both a threat to family and corruptors of the young – and people who should be banned from society. Painting sex workers as immoral individuals who have to be separated from society has led, historically, to controlling their rights to freedom of movement. For example, in Germany, regulated brothels appeared in 1870, but the workers couldn't freely leave the premises and had to wear a red rose to indicate their involvement in prostitution (Tate, Oscyth 2022). Foucault's work (1961, 1977, 1978) addresses how, from the end of the 18th century, the figure of The Prostitute was constituted socially, as were the figures of The Madman and the Homosexual. The houses of confinement were emptied of lepers and The Prostitute then became a new target of these institutions (Beloso 2017). Across the Soviet republics, from the late 1950s and early 1960s, anti-parasite laws[1] were targeting individuals seen as deviants, including sex workers. They could be prosecuted for a variety of offences, such as being believed to have transmitted venereal diseases, and could be expelled from some cities (Hearne 2022). These attempts to control and mark sex workers as deviants went even further during Nazi Germany. Sex workers were sent to concentration camps, sometimes to work in forced brothels, under the category 'asocial', which was symbolised by a black triangle (Tate, Oscyth 2022).

[1] 'In the late 1950s and early 1960s, anti-parasite laws were enacted across the Soviet republics, which targeted individuals who made a living from informal economies, refused to work or socialized with foreigners' (Hearne 2022: 291).

The second type of stigmatisation that this paper addresses is the presentation of sex work as inherently and wholly victimising. This narrative mixes disapproval with a facade of compassion, claiming the fate of the sex worker to be 'worse than death' (Ericsson 1980: 337). It presents sex work as degrading for both clients and workers, but generally focuses on the cisgender woman worker's presumed degradation. This narrative grew and gained popularity with specific late 20th century feminist movements. During the 1980s in the United States, two different feminist groups heavily disagreed on sexual matters, leading to a series of writings and debates referred to as the 'Sex Wars'. On the one hand, anti-pornography feminists were focused only on the negative aspects of sex with cisgender men under patriarchy, and specifically on gender violence. They claimed that pornography, BDSM, and prostitution were all inherently violent towards women, thus all sex workers were victims. On the other hand, pro-sex feminists were focused on the possibility for women's empowerment and liberation through sexual expression under patriarchy (LeMoncheck 1997). Many sex workers were part of the pro-sex movement, defending their agency as workers. However, these two feminist movements were and are not equal in their reach and power. The anti-pornography movement, defending the abolition of prostitution, gained social and political influence.

I argue that these narratives of deviance and victimhood both objectify and deshumanise sex workers. To support the claim that stigmatisation and objectification are interconnected, as well as presenting a methodology which addresses these issues, I will refer to Martin Buber's (1923) distinction between the *I-It* and the *I-Thou* relationships to otherness, and to Maria Lugones' (1987) distinction between an *arrogant gaze* and a *loving gaze*. These two philosophers both advocate perceiving others as valued and multidimensional human beings. Their philosophies are anchored in experiences of discrimination – antisemitism in Buber's case, racism and sexism in Lugones'. Their stances underline that interacting with marginalised communities – such as sex workers – is a call to reflect on the way one relates to otherness in general.

Martin Buber (1923) exposes two ways of relating to the other, which he calls two fundamental words we can 'say' in this relationship. The first is *I-It*, when one considers the other as an object that one can analyse, cut up, classify, judge, and act upon. Stigmatisation happens when one sees only a specific facet of a person, the facet one is judging, thereby making them into an objectified *It*. Furthermore, in this *I-It* relationship, the *I* places itself, not in a mutual and equal relationship, but at a distance from the *It*, which it analyses or classifies from this viewpoint.

According to Buber (1923: 4), the second fundamental word one can say in a relationship is *I-Thou*. In this dynamic, the *Thou* is no longer an object, no longer analysable, classifiable, judgeable: 'When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his object'. The *I* is no longer in the empirical world of things, but in the human world

of relationship, and 'if I face a human being as my *Thou* and say the primary word *I-Thou* to him, he is not a thing among things, and does not consist of things' (Buber 1923: 8). The *I-Thou* relationship arises when the *I* stops classifying, analysing, trying to control, and thus objectifying the other. The *I* sees their *Thou* as a whole, unique, and complex person and cannot define them anymore by just the one part of their identity that is being judged.

However, researching and representing a group entails analysis and classification. It is beyond the contemplation of another person in a one-on-one encounter. It raises the question of a possible transition from '*Thou*' to '*Them*'. When one writes about people one has never met in person, it heightens the possibility of staying in an *I-It* relationship, making the group into an object and projecting opinions and narratives onto them. As Martin Buber (1923: 17) wrote, 'every *Thou* in the world is by its nature fated to become a thing, or continually to re-enter into the condition of things'.

He then offers insight on how to remember the *I-Thou* relationship when one has to analyse people, thereby considering them as *It*:

> It's enough for him to know [the man who possesses the guarantor of his freedom] that he can cross the threshold of the sanctuary at any hour, where he cannot stay; moreover, the obligation he has to leave it immediately afterwards, is intimately part of the meaning and destination of this life. It's here, on the threshold, that the ever-new response, the Spirit, is kindled in him; it's here, in the profane and needy life of every day, that the spark will have to manifest its virtue. (Buber 1923: 52)

The 'sanctuary' Buber mentions is the *I-Thou* relationship. He means that when one has the experience of seeing a person in their entirety and uniqueness, without any desire to objectify them, one can retain the memory, the flavour of it. And it is in everyday life, when one has to analyse and classify, that 'the spark will have to manifest its virtue'. This means that one should remember that the people being considered are more than just the aspects of them that one is referring to, that they are whole and unique people, that they could be a *Thou*. The virtue of this 'spark' is to mitigate the downfalls of the objectification process.

Maria Lugones (1987) offers more concepts that can be used to differentiate between objectification and embracing a whole and complex human being. The first one is the difference between the *arrogant gaze* and the *loving gaze*, two different ways of perceiving another. The arrogant gaze is rooted in the arrogant perceiver's supremacy (Akdoğan 2020) and is defined as a failure of love and a failure of identification (Lugones 1987). If one fails to identify with and understand another, while

being secure in one's superiority, one's perception of this other will be arrogant. Maria Lugones calls for developing a *loving gaze* instead, based on her concept of *world-travelling*. *World-travelling* is a reciprocal, playful, and creative approach to getting to know someone else that requires the traveller to accept that giving and receiving understanding will alter them.

Maria Lugones' and Martin Buber's approaches present differences and complementarities. They both stress the importance of mutuality and dialogue as ways to humanize others, but they phrase the obstacle standing in the way differently. According to Buber, the obstacle is seeing others as objects; according to Lugones, it is a failure of identification. Maria Lugones addresses the issue of systemic power dynamics, while Martin Buber offers the reminder that people could be a *Thou* even when we have to analyse them and momentarily consider them as *It*.

These concepts show the connection between stigmatisation and objectification. The act of stigmatisation meets several criteria from the definition of an objectifying *I-It* relationship. It is based on judgement, on seeing only one part of a being, and it often leads to analysing and controlling the ones seen as *It*. It also encompasses elements of the *arrogant gaze*. The person who stigmatises places themself in a superior position, where they fail to identify with the other, travel to their world, and perceive them with a *loving gaze*. That is why studying different stigmatising narratives placed upon sex workers means studying different ways that they are being objectified by society, and perceived through an *arrogant gaze*.

As demonstrated earlier, the stigmatising narrative of social deviance has repeatedly targeted sex workers throughout history, endangering their freedom and survival. In these circumstances, sex workers become not unique individuals, a *Thou*, but a social problem to solve, an *It*. Institutions, police, and governments attempt to classify and control them. The 'deviance' narrative is a failure of identification and *world-travelling*, inviting a perception of sex workers only through an *arrogant gaze*.

The stigma of deviance connects with the concept of grievability of life, or as Judith Butler framed it, the 'biopolitics of grievability', which refers to the status of some lives as more or less 'killable' (Butler 2004). Butler explains that 'some lives are regarded as if the prospective loss of that life would be a serious loss; they are the grievable. Others are regarded as if their loss would be no loss, or not much of a loss; they are in the category of the ungrievable' (Butler 2004: 38). Sex workers' lives are perceived as ungrievable. In the media, 'discourses of disposability' reinforce this stigmatisation and ungrievability:

> Lowman (2000) describes how 'discourses of disposability' evident across core institutions such as the media and through public and official discourses which

> position sex workers as non-citizens, as rubbish, not to be cared about, or indeed there to be violated. These discourses work to 'other' the sex worker, separate her from 'normal women', through ideas which perpetuate associations with criminogenic offenders, immoral and dangerous sexuality, disease, incivility and disgust. (Sanders 2016: 9)

According to Sanders (2016: 10), this reinforced stigmatisation has a direct impact on the violence against sex workers, as the quoted report shows:

> Boff (2012: 2), the author of the report, cites a serial murderer: 'I picked prostitutes because I thought I could kill as many of them as I wanted without getting caught', to drive the point home that how we treat sex workers directly affects the public imagination.

By this logic, if research, representation, or policy-making reinforces these narratives, they participate in the perpetuation of controlling policies and sex worker stigmatisation and encourage violence against them. Butler (2004) argues that for all lives to be equally grievable, to socially matter, people have to be perceived as subjects – and not objects. Furthermore, in an objectifying *I-It* relationship, one sees only one part of the other. This means that many components of their experience and circumstances are missed. If the goal of research, representation, or policy-making is to be based on a view as complete as possible, then stigmatisation and prejudices are obstacles to the process of data collection.

The second stigmatising narrative, which reduces sex workers to inherent victims, meets different criteria of objectification, of the *I-It* relationship, and of the *arrogant gaze*. First, the choice of language in the anti-pornography feminists' discourse tends to be directly objectifying. Some refer to sex workers as 'broken dolls' (Hyde 2018), others describe them as 'selling themselves' (Bateman 2021: 830). As Bateman (2021: 830) states:

> The notion that buying *sex* is equivalent to buying a *woman*, seems to suggest that radical feminists themselves – somewhat ironically – see the women involved as just sex objects.

Secondly, presenting sex workers as victims, or, as Butler (2004) states, 'in the framework of vulnerability', means denying their agency. It is seeing only one part of their experience and negating the others, which is part of an *I-It* relationship. This insistence on vulnerability may lead to an *arrogant gaze* where, instead of mutual world-travelling, there is an unequal power dynamic between saviours and victims:

> Rather, Butler's point is to note a number of problems that can exist in the framework of vulnerability; for example, its paternalistic overtones in positing a seemingly 'invulnerable' 'strong' agent coming to the aid of the 'vulnerable' and the 'helpless' who lack agency (Borg 2023: 301).

Thirdly, the victimhood narrative erases the nuanced and different experiences of sex workers. bell hooks (1984) cautioned against making common oppression the basis of feminism and thus erasing diversity within the movement. The term *intersectionality* was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to address that the needs and experiences of black women differ from the ones of white women. Similarly, to apply an intersectional gaze to the topic of sex work is to explore how sex workers' and non-sex workers' experiences differ, as well as to acknowledge diversity within the sex industry. For example, a straight female black stripper will have different needs and experiences than a white gay male escort. The former may face hiring discrimination and racist beauty standards (Vermish 2017) and the latter may face stigmatisation as 'vectors of disease transmission' twice over – for being gay and for being a sex worker (Koken et al. 2004: 16). Discovering the different experiences and needs of diverse people implies a curiosity and openness that prevent the simple projection of one's own experiences and internal narratives. It gives an opportunity to *world-travel*, to playfully and creatively discover the reality of someone else, which Maria Lugones places as a condition for looking at others with a *loving gaze*. This demonstrates how a victim-centred approach to sex work participates in processes of simplification and generalisation, which creates an *I-It* relationship, where one cannot embrace the uniqueness, agency, and complexity of the people one is referring to. Furthermore, Judith Butler argued that focusing only on vulnerability, on victimhood, leads to denying the resilience, solidarity, and resistance which arise from the same circumstances (Butler, Gambetti, Sabsay 2016).

On one hand, reinforcing this narrative as a researcher, film-maker, writer, or policy-maker means participating in another form of objectification of sex workers. Ronald Weitzer (2005) shows that studies presenting sex work as inherently degrading and sex workers as victims tend to lead to biased data collection. These data are then used in policy-making, and have a direct negative impact on sex workers' lives.

On the other hand, glamourising sex work, presenting it as only empowering, provides an incomplete view as well. It denies the gender-based violence and exploitation which exist within the sex industry. However, addressing these issues can be done without simplification and systematic victimisation. As Judith Butler (2020: 182) stated, 'we do not recognise their suffering by further depriving them of all capacity'.

Being aware of the narratives of deviance, pathologisation and victimhood while working on research, media representation or policy-making is a useful tool to ques-

tion our own gaze and its influence on our work. However, a method is needed to overcome one's objectifying gaze. How does one see sex workers as a potential *Thou*, travel to their world and present them through a *loving gaze*? LeMoncheck, inspired by Lugones' writings, recommends an approach she calls *care respect*:

> […] treating a person with care respect means not only valuing her as one among many unique individuals worthy of respect but also valuing the particular ways in which she is unique. This perspective allows us to acknowledge the shared partiality of social location in all of us as well the contextual specificity of each person. An ethic of care respect also requires that we try to understand an individual in her own terms and not through our favoured ways of seeing her and that we try to promote, where possible and desirable, the interests of individuals consistent with that ethic. (LeMoncheck 1997: 43)

This approach gives specific indications for engaging with others without objectifying, stigmatising, or projecting personal opinions onto them. It implies respect, valuing uniqueness, and being aware of one's own social position and that of the person one faces. LeMoncheck (1997: 43) presents two useful questions to ask oneself in order to heighten both respect and awareness: 'What is it like to be them?' and 'What is it like to be myself in their eyes?' What is it like to be this specific person engaged in sex work? What is it like to be myself – the policy-maker, the researcher, the writer, or the film-maker – in their eyes? In order to use these questions effectively, one has to grasp that the question 'What is it like to be this specific person engaged in sex work?' is different from asking 'What would it be like for *me* to engage in sex work?' or 'What do I think it is like to be a sex worker?' *World-travelling* requires refraining from projecting our own emotions, opinions, and expectations on a unique and different person.

LeMoncheck adds an additional layer:

> […] treating sex workers with care respect will mean trying to see the world from their point of view and, even more important, to respect each worker as a unique individual whose social location specifies her needs and interests in ways that may be quite different from other sex workers' or my own. (LeMoncheck 1997: 43)

This resonates with Martin Buber's *I-Thou* relationship, wherein recognising the uniqueness of the person one faces is an important component. In everyday life, when one has to analyse sex workers as a group, 'the spark manifests its virtue' (Buber 1923: 52) when we remember that sex workers are unique people with different

views of the world and different needs within it. This underlines once more the importance of intersectional feminism within studies of sex work (Morrison 2023). For instance, transgender women street-based sex workers do not have the exact same struggles and needs as cisgender women escorts. However, a simplistic approach to intersectionality can create a view of these categories as static and homogenous, while we are actually referring to a multitude of unique individuals, each with their own relationship to these parts of their identity, always in flux and evolution. That is why focusing only on intersectional identities, on 'social location', is not enough to travel to someone's world. When one meets a sex worker, one doesn't meet a category of identity, but a person with their own unique life story. They have their own origin story about entering the sex industry. They have their own childhood memories, worldviews, qualities and flaws, favourite type of food or music, hobbies, and so on. Another facet of the blindness of stigmatisation is to perceive others only through the part of their identity that is stigmatised, negating the infinite and often mundane details of their own life experience. Seeing sex workers as whole and diverse human beings demands that one embraces complexity. This richness and diversity found within sex workers' lived experiences are an invitation to consider sex work itself as more than an isolated topic or an abstract moral problem.

Situation ethics, pragmatism and complex thought

When one engages with the topic of sex work, one's chosen epistemological method defines the questions one will focus on. Deontological ethics attempts to define actions that are universally good or universally bad. The most famous example is Kant's (1785: 421) categorical imperative: 'act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law'. His search for moral universality has been criticised for its lack of acknowledgment of context and situationality, and for its rigidity. Defining universal moral laws asks for an abstract position, for distancing oneself from the specifics of the given situation. In the case of sex work, deontological philosophy would ask 'Is sex work inherently good or bad? Should it be part of society?'

On the opposite, situation ethics rejects moral absolutism and 'holds that moral judgements must be made within the context of the entirety of a situation and that all normative features of a situation must be viewed as a whole' (Rosenthal 2023). This approach resists the abstraction of universalisation, inviting ethics to be flexible, adaptable, situational, and based on care for all people involved in the situation. It bears close similarities with the pragmatic philosophy movement (Rosenthal 2023).

Being pragmatic is defined as 'solving problems in a sensible way that suits the conditions that really exist now, rather than obeying fixed theories, ideas, or rules'

(Cambridge Dictionary 2020). Pragmatism is a philosophical movement that opposes the research of absolute truth in philosophy. It claims, on the contrary, that the value of an idea or narrative is defined by its usefulness. One of the main pragmatist philosophers, John Dewey, 'sought to promote pragmatism by reorienting philosophy away from abstract concerns and turning it instead toward an emphasis on human experience' (Morgan 2014: 1046). Therefore, it argues that philosophy should be based on people's experiences and be useful for the improvement of their lives.

While people in positions of power debate abstractly on the good and the bad of a topic, others on the ground may suffer from their lack of action or from their inaccurate actions. Juno Mac, a well-known sex worker activist, provided an example of this criticism during a TED talk:

> People get really hung up on the question: 'Well, would you want your daughter doing it?' That's the wrong question. Instead, imagine she is doing it. How safe is she at work tonight? Why isn't she safer? (Mac 2016)

From a philosophical point of view, it means that she denounces a moral and deontological approach to sex work whose questions focus on judging an abstract concept and turning this judgement into a universal law. She claims these are the wrong questions. Departing from moral abstraction, she brings the public back to situational and pragmatic ethical questions such as immediate safety in a specific environment and the reasons for this lack of safety. Pragmatism takes into account people's experiences, as a database and as feedback on the usefulness of the narrative crafted or of the action taken. This method calls for questions such as: 'What are sex worker's struggles?' and 'What do sex workers need?'

Thus, for policy-makers, researchers, writers, and film-makers, the risk of abstract moral questions is a distraction from the reality on the ground and a reduction of situational complexity to a universalist moral stand. Both the moral and the stigmatising approach carry the risk of being reductionist, which has two main components: 'reductive approaches isolate phenomena from their environment and operate with a disjunctive logic of either/or' (Montuori 2013: xxviii). The logic of either/or would tend to present sex work as entirely morally bad or entirely morally good, as inherently violent and degrading or inherently empowering. A binary system lacks nuances. Furthermore, isolating sex work, the 'phenomenon', from its environment reduces the chances of understanding it. For instance, even under decriminalisation, the legal system globally defended by sex worker organisations, undocumented sex workers are not yet successfully protected. This is because their safety also depends on immigration laws (Mai et al. 2021). Sex work and immigration are two intercon-

nected topics that influence each other, and trying to understand sex work without addressing this connection leads to reductionist thinking.

The sociologist and philosopher Edgar Morin (2008: vii) claimed that in order to understand an uncertain and complex world, one should not over-simplify, reduce, or compartmentalise. He developed, instead, a theory of complexity:

> We need a kind of thinking that reconnects that which is disjointed and compartmentalised, that respects diversity as it recognises unity, and that tries to discern interdependencies. We need a radical thinking (which gets to the root of problems), a multidimensional thinking, and an organisational or systemic thinking.

This definition of the theory of complexity, or *complex thinking*, can be applied to the topic of sex work step by step. Firstly, reconnecting 'that which is disjointed and compartmentalised' and discerning 'interdependencies' means recognising that sex work does not exist in a vacuum but is embedded in economic, political and discriminative structures. For instance, sex work, by providing easier access to employment in diverse situations, sheds light on problems such as poverty, access to work, immigration, violent conflict, disability, queerness, racism, colonisation, labour rights, homelessness, and more. All factors that marginalise people – and thus place them in financial difficulties or make it harder for them to keep a job – share a connection with the topic of sex work (Yarbrough 2016). Therefore, ignoring the interdependencies between these topics would lead to a compartmentalised and reductionist approach.

Secondly, Morin (2008) states that complex thinking is radical and 'gets to the root of problems'. For instance, Teela Sanders (2016), in her research on sex work and violence, aimed to unearth the complex causes of violence against sex workers. She could have collected evidence of violence and concluded sex work was inherently violent – which would be a reductionist approach. Instead, she used radical thinking in order to find the roots, such as the influence of stigma.

Thirdly, 'multidimensional thinking' in the context of sex work means exploring different perspectives and layers. For instance, one's conception of sex work depends on one's conception of sex and one's conception of work (Danger, Phoenix 2022). Furthermore, another layer is the web of interaction and influence between the different groups involved: sex workers, clients, managers, bosses, the police, healthcare providers, social workers, politicians, etc.

Lastly, 'an organisational or systemic thinking' connects all these data, interdependencies, and dimensions in order to present a more complex picture, which allows for creative solutions. An example of systemic thinking applied to research on sex work

is a paper on unequal access to healthcare for sex workers in Canada. Squires (2024) uses both written analysis and diagrams to represent the parties involved in the system and their complex connections, as well as the types of stigmatisation of sex workers. This allowed the research to effectively articulate a complex situation, and to offer several potential solutions from different levels and perspectives.

A pragmatic and complex approach applied to sex work has many advantages. Pragmatism shifts the focus from abstract moral questions to an interest in lived experiences and aims at usefulness. Complex thinking breaks from compartmentalisation and an either/or logic to embrace the multiple dimensions, interconnections, and diversity of experiences. In policy-making, these tools suggest taking an interest in sex workers' lived experiences to question the concrete effects of the law, and studying sex work in connection with immigration, poverty, and discrimination to make sure that the different laws in these fields are coherent for the rights and safety of sex workers. For research, it allows scholars to be better informed and accurate and to reveal surprising connections. When it comes to media representation, it invites writers and film-makers to not repeat the same overused tropes, but explore new and original topics – providing that ethical research and sex workers' consultancy took place prior.

Notes on language and sex worker organisations' guidelines

Both *care respect* and pragmatism ask for an examination of the language used to describe sex work. For the pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty, vocabularies are to be thought of as tools chosen for their usefulness to serve our goal or purpose (Brandom 2020). LeMoncheck (1997: 43) points out that a *care respect* approach requires that we 'understand an individual in her own terms'. A guide on language and sex work produced by the organisation Stella (2013: 1) begins with the following statement:

> The way we talk about sex work is anything but neutral – it communicates meaning and influences how people understand our work and create policy about us.

Specific words support specific narratives. For example, the expression 'selling their bodies' supports the victimhood narrative, emphasising an inherent self-violation in the practice of sex work. Although, realistically, sex workers don't sell themselves, they sell sexual services (Ericsson 1980). The word 'prostitute' supports the narrative of degradation, as it also, as a verb, means: 'to use yourself or your abilities or beliefs in a way that does not deserve respect, especially in order to get money' (Cambridge Dictionary 2020). However, some sex workers refer to themselves as prostitutes. The

term 'sex work', coined in 1978 by Carol Leigh, is less stigmatising and connects the profession to the discourse on labour rights. Thus, when one writes about sex work, the choice of word reflects the narrative one wants to advance. Policy-makers, researchers, journalists, writers, and film-makers all have a responsibility in the words they choose to discuss the topic.

The responsibility to do no harm comes from a *care respect* approach, which requires 'that we try to promote, where possible and desirable, the interests of individuals consistent with that ethic' (LeMoncheck 1997: 43). Pragmatic philosophy stresses the importance of knowledge based on lived experiences. For these reasons, it is useful to explore the network of sex worker activism and organising. Discovering these local and global movements reveals the unique complexity of sex workers' struggles (Derkas 2019). Sex workers write articles, books, and academic papers and produce art and campaign projects. Sex workers' organisations publish detailed ethical guidelines for researchers. For example, SWOP USA provides a fact sheet on the risks, challenges, ethics, and recommendations for research on sex work (Bloomquist). These guidelines address how to respect sex workers, making it safe and positive for them to participate in research. The Sex Workers Project of the Urban Justice Center provides guidelines for every step of a research, from the choice of method and topic to the publication, and has a very valuable list of resources at the end, presenting more research and articles about ethical research on sex work. They encourage a systemic, intersectional, and respectful approach that will present the complexity of the sex industry and the diversity of the lived experiences of sex workers. Lastly, the organisation SWAN (2019) has produced recommendations for both researchers and policy-makers.

Conclusion

Pragmatism, complex thinking, and considering sex workers as whole, complex, and unique human beings are complementary methods that support each other. Pragmatism, by focusing on usefulness instead of deontological ethics, invites us to overcome the taboo surrounding sex work and to consider people's lived experiences in order to find what is useful for their welfare. The concepts of *I-Thou, world-travelling, loving gaze*, and *care respect* support pragmatism by offering clues on how to embrace the diversity of lived experiences in a way that aims to improve well-being. This approach is, in itself, complex thinking: instead of stigmatising, thereby seeing only one part of a being through judgement, *world-travelling* welcomes the contradictions and multiplicities of the person's experience. Complexity overcomes the binary thinking of reductionism. Sex workers are then seen neither as the threat of deviance nor as inherent victims. An intersectional approach is in essence complex

thinking, as it invites the acknowledgment of the confluences of multiple aspects of one's identity. Finally, complex thinking and systemic thinking help to incorporate a pragmatist approach and a *care respect* attitude into a study of the multiple dimensions and interdependencies existing within the sex industry. Facing this complex reality helps in deciding what needs to be done, shown, and researched.

Avoiding harmful narratives, representations, decisions, and projections in research, politics, and media has the power to encourage the public to challenge their own prejudices and embrace a more complex and humanistic view of sex workers – seeing them as human beings with different backgrounds, motivations, and individual lives beyond their profession. This hinders stigmatisation, discourages violence, and gives a voice to the silenced. Policy-makers, scholars, journalists, writers, and film-makers can amplify sex workers' voices by promoting messages, writings, and art created by the community.

This combination of pragmatism, *care respect*, *world-travelling*, and complex thinking can be applied to any discriminated group. It is a method and a philosophical stance that aims to thoroughly articulate a complex situation, while not losing sight of what it is all about: neither statistics, nor curiosities, nor abstract objects, but whole, complex, and diverse people living their lives, with agency, and whose challenges can be lessened.

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Defund the Police, Promote Mutual Aid

Sofia Del Vita

Gallant, C., Lam, E. 2024. *Not Your Rescue Project. Migrant Sex Workers Fighting for Justice*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.

Not Your Rescue Project, by Chanelle Gallant and Elene Lam, with a foreword by Harsha Walia and a postscript by Robyn Maynard, explores the mutual solidarity work and theoretical framework underpinning the Butterfly Project, an initiative formed by sex workers, social workers and legal and health professionals to support the rights of Asian and migrant sex workers in Canada, the US and internationally. This is therefore a work grounded in empirical foundations drawn from a vast array of lived experiences. Published by Haymarket Books in 2024, the book serves as a guide to understanding abolitionism in the broadest sense, opposing criminalisation and punitive and carceral systems, and interrogating the role of anti-trafficking policies in amplifying state and police violence against migrant sex workers.

As the title itself highlights, the book's objective is to deconstruct the victimising narrative surrounding sex workers and to critique its harmful effects. The work thus challenges the dominant discourse that frames every sex worker as a victim in need of rescue, offering instead a perspective that recentres the notions of agency and collective organising. The book proposes a paradigm shift: the goal is not to 'save' sex workers but to guarantee their rights, safety, and autonomy. It argues that the primary issue in the condition of migrant sex workers lies not in trafficking per se, but rather in migration control, the criminalisation of sex work, and labour exploitation under capitalism. Sex workers are often required to prove they 'freely chose' their profession, while no such scrutiny is applied to others forced into exploitative work under capitalism. The authors argue that under capitalism, work, particularly for precarious workers, is rarely a matter of free will. Through this analysis, the book illuminates how anti-trafficking rhetoric, while ostensibly expressing concern for racialised migrants, in fact, reproduces models of 'aid' that perpetuate the very systems of oppression they claim to combat. To deepen this critique and also contextualise the EU context, it is worth reading the critical scholarship on humanitarian aid, such as the works of Laura Agustín (2007), Martina Tazzioli (2021), and Mariam Ticktin (2011).

The authors aim to demonstrate, and they do it powerfully, that the struggle for migrant sex workers' rights should not be treated as an exception but as an integral part of broader struggles for labour rights. From this perspective, the text underscores the need to foster a discourse that recognises how sex workers' battles are

intertwined with other social justice movements, such as anti-racist, anti-carceral, and freedom-of-movement struggles. In fact, the violence that undocumented migrant sex workers face stems from their juridical irregularity and the racialised regimes structuring economic stratification. Consequently, their demands must be situated within the broader struggles for undocumented migrants' labour rights. For this reason, the authors call for the recognition of legal status for all migrant workers, along with adequate labour protections.

The book opens with an introduction to its key themes, which are subsequently developed in later chapters. It is structured into three parts, each subdivided into subchapters and interludes. These interludes consist of biographical accounts that enrich and illustrate the discussed topics, alternating between first- and third-person narratives of migrant sex workers who have engaged in Butterfly's activities.

Most individuals featured in the book, though from heterogeneous migratory paths, live and work in Canada. As such, the case studies are primarily situated in North America, with particular attention paid to the Canadian context. Therefore, while extraordinarily rich in empirical data from the Canadian and North America context, the book lacks data from the perspectives of the Global South and Eastern Europe.

Part 1: Migrant Sex Workers Realities

This section examines the factors that lead many migrants to engage in sex work as a means of survival. Unlike other forms of employment, sex work provides an immediate and accessible source of income, requiring no formal education, professional credentials, or fluency in the local language. For migrants facing economic instability or legal precarity, it becomes a viable option, allowing them to sustain themselves, finance their journeys, and maintain financial independence regardless of their immigration status.

The book does not invisibilise how the sex industry reproduces dynamics of exploitation and structural inequalities. Migrant sex workers, for instance, are often paid less than their white, Anglophone counterparts and are more exposed to unstable and dangerous working conditions. However, the authors argue that these disparities are not exceptions unique to sex work but reflect broader economic and racial injustices endemic to capitalist labour markets.

From this perspective, the narrative that isolates sex work as a singular phenomenon distinct from other precarious labour sectors is challenged. The struggles migrant sex workers face, such as lower wages, exploitation, lack of protections, are no different from those of other precarious workers and should thus be recognised and addressed within broader labour rights struggles.

Part 2: Migrant Sex Workers and State Violence: Introducing the Anti-Trafficking Industry

This section analyses the anti-trafficking industry and its role in amplifying the criminalisation and repression of migrant sex workers. Here, the text exposes how anti-trafficking laws and policies, far from protecting victims, operate to justify escalating state violence and reinforce control over the bodies and labour of those in the sex sector.

A particularly striking aspect of the anti-trafficking industry, as analysed in the book, is its ability to conceal its true objective, punishing sex workers under the guise of 'victim protection'. The text scrutinises the 'end demand' (or Nordic) model, adopted in Sweden, Norway, France, Canada, and Maine, which presents itself as a form of 'partial decriminalisation' but, in practice, penalises both the sellers and buyers of sexual services. Though liberal and radical feminists promote this model as targeting only clients, sex workers continue to be criminalised for work-related activities such as sharing spaces, exchanging contacts, or collaborating to identify safer workplaces. According to the book, the criminalising and anti-migrant effects of these laws are not collateral effects but inherent to their design. In fact, one of the book's key arguments is that laws criminalising third parties in sex work produce harmful and often violent effects. By preventing sex workers from collaborating, these laws obstruct mutual aid networks and make it more difficult for workers to organise for safety and support. Moreover, the moral panic surrounding trafficking functions as a tool of isolation, discouraging anyone from associating with migrant sex workers out of fear of being linked to individuals under state surveillance. In practice, criminalisation leads to exploitative labour conditions, such as wage theft, unsafe workplaces, and employer abuse, since reporting violations or forming labour unions remains inaccessible to those targeted by these laws.

Through an intersectional lens, the book highlights how oppression is particularly acute for trans migrants, who are often framed by police as 'dangerous aggressors' rather than victims. This occurs, for example, when carrying tools of self-defence is interpreted as aggression, leading to severe legal consequences. Rather than offering 'rescue and rehabilitation', the state exercises control by excluding them from formal labour markets, denying legal recognition, and restricting access to public services, making it nearly impossible to find alternative employment.

The book reconstructs how, between 1995 and 2000, US Republican strategists merged white carceral feminism with Christian right campaigns to generate a humanitarian alarm around 'modern slavery', which revived old alliances between evangelicals and 1980s anti-pornography feminists and was markedly xenophobic. In this context, the anti-trafficking industry functions not as a social justice movement but as an apparatus that facilitates and legitimises state violence. Many anti-trafficking

NGOs, in fact, operate in close alliance with conservative and carceral feminist forces thus undermining principles of racial, social, and economic justice. This sector encompasses a vast network of actors, ranging from white-supremacist Republicans to anti-union corporations, from police to immigration officials, and from reactionary religious groups to weapons manufacturers.

Through 'rescue' campaigns and training programmes targeting governments, businesses, and private citizens, these organisations create a market predicated on the criminalisation of sex workers. Major corporations, by supporting these initiatives, seek to cleanse their public image and divert attention away from their own roles in perpetuating labour exploitation. Moreover, the appropriation of feminist anti-violence language, with NGOs branding themselves as 'survivor-led', reinforces a discourse that, while appearing progressive, consolidates state control.

One of the most visible effects of the policies of criminalisation and 'rescue' is the expansion of power granted to institutions like the police, resulting in heightened state control and surveillance. The book argues that police, far from representing an effective response to migrant sex workers' struggles, constitute one of the primary threats to their safety. Even those who seek help risk being flagged as trafficking suspects, triggering investigations that implicate not only victims but colleagues, friends, and family members. The authors thus assert the need to defund policing institutions, since even if trafficking laws were repealed, state control would persist through other means, such as housing regulations and zoning laws.

For instance, anti-trafficking measures are weaponised to intensify migrant control through the collection of personal data and racial profiling by border authorities, which demand detailed information far beyond standard immigration procedures. The authors claim that 78% of arrests made under anti-trafficking policies target Black and Indigenous women and that this finding should reshape transfeminist debates. The book, centred on the North America context, offers as an example a pointed critique of the US Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) and the distinction it makes between 'good' and 'bad' trafficking victims. This legislation grants immigration protections only to those recognised as victims of 'severe sexual trafficking', but excludes those deemed voluntary sex workers. It also rigidly distinguishes 'sexual trafficking' from 'labour trafficking. This removes any acknowledgment of 'work' or 'labor' within the sex industry, undermining the legitimacy of sex work as work and isolating it from all other labor sectors. Moreover, this framework reinforces the narrative that 'modern slavery' is no longer a crime perpetrated by white individuals but by Black men identified as sexual predators.

Part 3: Migrant Sex Workers Fighting for Power

This final section focuses on the role of collective organising in countering repressive policies and anti-sex work feminist paternalism. The authors critique anti-sex work feminists' identification as 'abolitionist', arguing they would be better defined as prohibitionists. The authors contend that while true abolition seeks to dismantle carceral systems and border controls, these feminists do not pursue an end to exploitation but instead reinforce criminalisation and state control. The core problem with the prohibitionist approach, the book argues, is not the idea that sex work can be exploitative, because many sex workers themselves acknowledge the difficulties of their profession, as is true of other labour sectors. The problem is that prohibitionism seeks to abolish sex work by actively opposing grassroots organising, obstructing the fight for better working conditions and enabling state repression. This prohibitionism manifests in police operations that target racialised women, seize their earnings, arrest them, and deport them. A key example analysed, always in the North America context, is the negative impact of the *SESTA/FOSTA* laws, which criminalised online sex work advertisements and shut down platforms used to screen clients safely. The book argues that the true motive behind these laws was not to protect sex workers but expand state surveillance and repression.

This section also offers a compelling critique of how social and labour movements often treat sex work as an exception to labour exploitation. While leftist activists typically acknowledge capitalist exploitation, they frequently frame sex work as uniquely oppressive, rather than recognising it as labour subject to the same economic forces as other sectors. Similarly, white-led sex workers' rights organisations often overlook the specific dynamics of racial capitalism. For instance, when migrant sex workers charge lower rates and work longer hours, they are often assumed to be trafficking victims, disregarding how these wage disparities mirror the racial hierarchies present across all labour sectors.

According to the book, the most effective strategy to combat exploitation in sex work is not through criminalisation or state regulation, but by building a collective movement against patriarchy and white supremacy. The book challenges the notion that legalisation, like in the Netherlands or in Germany, offers a viable solution, pointing out that, in many cases, it has paradoxically led to increased criminalisation by imposing regulations that further marginalise sex workers.

The authors therefore advocate for an approach that recognises sex workers as political agents rather than passive victims in need of rescue, while working to dismantle the stigma and repression they face. This approach also calls for granting all migrants worker protections and legal status. The authors stress that no migrant worker, sex

workers included, should be bound by precarious temporary visas or have their mobility tied to their employment. They argue that simply decriminalising sex work is insufficient without also addressing the need to dismantle policing and repressive institutions that disproportionately target racialised communities. Ultimately, the goal is not to eliminate sex work, but to establish a system in which the rights of migrant workers are protected, regardless of their industry.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Not Your Rescue Project* is a foundational contribution to intersectional strategies that addresses the needs and demands of migrant sex workers. The text does not merely expose the contradictions of current legislation but serves as a call to promote research and practices that move beyond criminalising frameworks. This work makes three crucial interventions: it recentres migrant sex workers as knowledge producers rather than victims; it exposes the racial capitalism embedded in anti-trafficking industries; and it challenges anti-sex work feminists to confront their own carceral tendencies.

A useful reference for deepening the understanding of *Not Your Rescue Project* is the book *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights* by sex worker activists Juno Mac and Molly Smith (2018). Both texts adopt a feminist, abolitionist stance against criminalisation and state repression but differ in thematic focus. *Revolting Prostitutes* offers a comparative analysis of regulatory models, from criminalisation to legalisation to decriminalisation, and their consequences for sex workers' lives. Notably, the authors highlight how criminalisation not only penalizes sex workers but also exacerbates violence, surveillance, stigma, and barriers to healthcare and support.

Not Your Rescue Project is therefore a call to integrate social and economic justice in fights, urging sex workers to self-organise and assert their own rights and needs, while rejecting carceral 'protection' rhetoric that imposes paternalistic control over them instead of recognizing their autonomy. The authors skilfully demonstrate how this logic is deeply embedded in patriarchal, racial capitalism, perpetuating exclusion and exploitation. The strength of the text is limited by the lack of perspectives from the Global South, but the book remains essential reading. A fundamental contribution of this text is therefore its ability to connect and bring into dialogue the struggles of sex workers with prison industrial complex abolitionism, emphasising how, in our lives, we do not need more police, but more empathy, mutual aid, and solidarity and a common struggle against patriarchy, capitalism, and white supremacy.

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Zpráva z II International Congress on Media, Gender and Sexualities: Representations, Literacies and Audiences (Benasque, 2025)[1]

Lukáš Samek

Ve dnech 8.–12. června 2025 se v prostorách Pedro Pascual Science Centre ve španělském městě Benasque konal *II International Congress on Media, Gender and Sexualities: Representations, Literacies and Audiences*. Na kongresu se sešlo výzkumnictvo, pedagožstvo a lidé z nejrůznějších uměleckých i aktivistických kruhů, aby se prodiskutovaly aktuální otázky spojené s mediálními reprezentacemi genderu a sexualit v globálním kontextu.

Kongres úspěšně navázal na první ročník z roku 2023 a potvrdil svou pozici důležité mezinárodní platformy sdružující výzkumnictvo z oblastí mediálních studií, queer teorie, kulturních studií a teorií genderu. Program nabídl celou škálu aktivit – přesněji tři keynote speakery, tři workshopy a šedesát osm jednotlivých konferenčních příspěvků. Vzhledem k celkem šestnácti jednotlivým panelům ve dvou jazycích (angličtině a španělštině) nebylo možné navštívit všechny, a zpráva tak představuje průřez anglickými panely napříč všemi dny, v nichž zazněly příspěvky lidí nejrůznějších národností, věku, genderů a akademických zázemí. Každý jednotlivý panel přinesl jedinečnou perspektivu a představil témata, která leckdy mohou uniknout pozornosti lidí mimo dané obory. Tematické zaměření skrývá kongres ve svém názvu – média, gender a sexuality. Nejčastěji se tak příspěvky zaměřovaly na utváření národních identit (převážně katalánské), nové i ustálené genderové (stereo)typy objevující se ve filmech pocházejících z Indie a Číny, queer přístupy k umění a v umění a také výzkumy seznamovacích aplikací, pragmatiky online seznamování a komunikace, heterosexuality či fenoménu manosféry.

Na úvod vystoupila s přednáškou keynote speaker Susan Stryker, jedna ze zakládajících osobností transgender studies. V příspěvku nabídla inspirativní sondu do propojení trans teorie a mediálních studií. V jejím pojetí je vývin médií spojený právě s přechodem mezi různými formami, přičemž oněmi formami jsou nejspíše zamýšleny umělecké formy a postupy, které Stryker vidí jako postupy aplikovatelné při analýze utváření vlastní identity a tělesnosti. V případě trans lidí se tak jejich tělo – v nejmenované návaznosti na teorii Judith Butler – stává stejným médiem, jako jsou např.

[1] Zpráva je výstupem grantu SGS07/FF/2025 – „Problém identity v literatuře 20. a 21. století" Filozofické fakulty Ostravské univerzity.

plátna, filmové snímky, zvukové vlny a jiné. Na příkladech osobností z historie audiovizuálních technologií (Stryker uváděla Wendy Carlos či Christine Jorgensen) ukázala, jak se trans těla a identity stávají médii i metaforami mediální transformace – obzvlášť Christine Jorgensen stojí ve středu zájmu Susan Stryker, jelikož o svém životě, těle a identitě promlouvala jazykem filmařů. Stryker pojala trans tělo jako „plastickou formu" v procesu neustálého přetváření, čímž položila základy pro formální i neformální diskuse o trans reprezentacích. Po její řeči začaly kongresové panely.

V prvním panelu Marcin Bogucki (*Is Pierrot queer? Bruce LaBruce's interpretation of Schoenberg's melodrama*) analyzoval queer estetiku v reinterpretaci klasického díla *Pierrot Lunaire* v podání Bruce LaBruce. Přes kombinaci experimentální hudby a explicitních queer motivů autor ukázal, jak performance rozkládá nejen hudební strukturu, ale i genderové a afektivní kódy klasického repertoáru. Teatrologie a kinematografie měly své velké zastoupení a opakujícím se jménem byl španělský režisér Pedro Almodóvar. Sergio Rodríguez-Blanco a Edwin Culp (*Veiled images and queer obliteration*) se zaměřili na koncept „vymazání" v díle Pedra Almodóvara. S využitím konceptu queer paměti argumentují, že filmy jako *La piel que habito* či *Dolor y gloria* pracují s „obliterací" spíše než s reprezentací – queer těla jsou sice viditelná, ale prostřednictvím vizuálních strategií (zamlžení, stíny, fragmenty) z pozice kamery zůstávají neuchopitelná hegemonnímu pohledu.

Další velkou součástí panelů byla porn studies a star studies, tedy sekce kulturních studií zaměřujících se na slavné lidi, jejich pozici v (populární) kultuře, jejich vliv na kulturu, diváctvo atd. Panel přinesl pohledy, které by mohly být značně inspirativní i pro české prostředí, zejména vzhledem k současné politizaci memů a parodických profilů na sociálních sítích. Prezentace tak představily např. španělskou umělkyni, zpěvačku a performerku Samanthu Hudson (*"I'm so grotesque, it's like a joke". Samantha Hudson in the public eye and the negotiation of queer visibility and neoliberal issues on MasterChef Celebrity*) jakožto exemplární případ queer estetiky. Nejenže sama popírá genderové role, ale také se hlásí k tzv. trash aesthetic (estetika nevkusu). Příspěvek komentoval, jak její subversivní přístup k soutěžení v MasterChef podrýval neoliberální předpoklady úsilí a z něj plynoucích zásluh. Její prezence v reality show ukázala, jak různé narativy hrdinství prorůstají tímto žánrem, který zdánlivě příběhovost postrádá a cílí na určitý „vítězný mindset" (*the attitude of the winner*). Smýšlení Samanthy Hudson je ale založené na glorifikaci selhání, jak sama tvrdí – „Já nechci mít talent ani nic podobného; chci být průměrná a chci být fiasko" (*I don't want to have talent or anything; I want to be mediocre and be a disaster*) – není pro ni v soutěži místo a musí být nutně vyloučena (Villegas Simón, Anglada-Pujol, Sánchez-Sorian 2025).

Jedním z nejvíce rezonujících příspěvků celé konference byla prezentace Celie Martínez (*"Cuntalunya Triomfant": Reimagining the Catalan nation in global times through a new feminine star system*), v níž představila utváření katalánské identity mladých

generací v popkulturním, internetovém prostředí z pohledu feministických a queer studií. Příspěvek rozkryl značnou mezeru mezi tzv. „katalánským snem" (*Catalan dream*), představeným na příkladu popové zpěvačky Juliety – jakožto hegemonní feminity, popové senzace –, a protikladem katalánského snu, tzv. „Cuntalunye" (slovní hříčka spojující „cunt", vulgarismus v online queer kruzích používaný jako vyjádření obdivu, a „Catalonia"). Výraz „Cuntalunya" zde slouží jako určitý druh digitální utopie, mikropolitické exprese, jež však stojí na hranici mezi digitálním prostorem a reálnými problémy, s nimiž se katalánské občanstvo a katalánská kultura potýkají. Sama Martínez tuto identitu shrnuje takto: „‚Cuntalunya' je liminální identitou, jež rozrušuje tradiční nacionalismus, institucionální mainstreamový feminismus, digitální/analogové prostory, nebinární femme prostory." (*["Cuntalunya is"] A liminal identity that disrupts traditional nationalism, institutional mainstream feminism, digital/analogical spaces, non-binary fem space*.) (Martínez 2025)

Následující příspěvek Anny Iñigo a Debbie Ging analyzoval fenomén tzv. „manfluencerů". Fenomén není nový, ale v posledních letech se zintenzivňuje a radikalizuje. Tito influenceři volají po návratu k „tradiční" maskulinitě, odmítají feminismus a ideje, jež shledávají jakožto „woke". Příspěvek se zaměřil na španělského influencera a fitness trenéra Amadea Lladose (*"Llados, quiero ganar": A cross-platform analysis of the Spanish manfluencer Amadeo Llados' content on social media*) a představil různé typy marketingových komunikací, které vede na sociálních sítích v sedmi různých kategoriích: „1) Physical Fitness, 2) Mental Health, 3) Financial Advice, 4) Misogyny/Sexism, 5) Faith, 6) Societal Frauds, and 7) Uncountable" (Iñigo, Ging 2005). Oproti předchozímu příspěvku byla manosféra vykreslena jako politicky motivovaná simulace radikalizující mladé muže na internetu.

Posledním panelem, který jsme v průběhu tří dnů navštívili, byl panel *Online Identities and Narratives*, který vzbudil velký zájem zkoumaným materiálem – zaměřil se totiž na videohry, stránku Reddit, seznamovací aplikaci Grindr a ballroom culture na sociálních sítích. Doron Mosenzon (*"I'm straight, but…": Affect and rhetoric of heterosexual anxiety*) představil výzkum týkající se heterosexuální úzkosti či úzkosti z heterosexuality. Výzkum si dal za cíl analyzovat fórum *r/sex* na stránce Reddit a sledovat příspěvky shrnuté pod jednoduché heslo „Jsem hetero, ale…", přičemž právě ono „ale" se stalo pro výzkum zásadním. Příspěvek přinesl nový vhled do vnímání (sexuální) identity heterosexuálních lidí a silné pnutí myšlení, jež se ukázalo jako silně spjaté s pohlavními orgány, které jsou vnímány jako hrozba. Příspěvek Ony Angladd-Pujol (*"I love sapphic stories, they give me hope for the future": femslash of the video games Gone Home and Unpacking*) představil fandom videoher *Gone Home* a *Unpacking*, z nichž hráčky vytvářejí fanfikce typu femslash – příběhy o romantických či sexuálních vztazích fiktivních ženských postav. Tyto příběhy přetvářejí herní narativy a nabízejí emocionální prostor pro queer identifikaci a naději, čímž konstruují kontra

narativy k „misery literature" nebo „misery narativům", tedy příběhům zakládajícím si na utrpení a mizérii queer lidí v soukromém životě a vztazích. Izabella Tyborowicz (*From Harlem, New York, to Instagram*: *Contemporary ballroom culture – Mainstreaming and functioning in the age of social media*) zmapovala současnou ballroom scénu jako globální fenomén, který se přesunul z newyorských sálů do digitálního prostředí Instagramu. Autorka ukazuje, že digitální prostor sice nabízí nový způsob viditelnosti, ale zároveň může přinášet komodifikaci a ztrátu komunitního rozměru, jelikož jednotlivé domy už nejsou lokální, ale mezinárodní. Jednotliví lidé z těchto metaforických rodin se pak nikdy nemusí potkat. Tyborowicz taktéž ukazuje, že jednoduchým šířením subkulturních jevů – v tomto případě tanečního stylu voguing – může docházet k jejich dekontextualizaci a ztrátě jejich bohaté historie. Značnou diskusi vzbudil příspěvek *From "discreet only" to "only masc": An exploration of visual representations on Grindr from rurality* Antonia A. Caballera. Použitá metodologie se pohybuje na hranici orální historie a auto-etnografie a základní otázkou se tak stal moment sebe-odhalení jakožto vědce, nikoliv jen jako uživatele aplikace Grindr – a tento moment se ukázal jakožto metodologicky problematický. Autor příspěvku analyzoval profily na aplikaci Grindr v rurálním prostředí a zaměřoval se jak na (sebe) reprezentaci pomocí profilu, tak i na způsob, jímž jednotlivci následně komunikují. A právě ve výzkumu samotné komunikace v chatech byl viděn kámen úrazu – řešily se otázky, zda má být informace o výzkumu uváděna v profilu výzkumníka, zda má informaci sdělit při začátku komunikace či může v zájmu výzkumu tuto informaci zatajit kompletně. Každá ze tří navržených možností teoreticky pozměňuje výsledky výzkumu a Caballerovi bylo doporučeno obrátit se na etickou komisi své univerzity.

Mezinárodní kongres tak ve svém druhém podání stvrdil, že mediální reprezentace genderu a sexuality zůstávají zásadním prostorem politických bojů, afektivní kreativity i epistemického odporu. Příspěvky nejenže analyzovaly celou škálu fenoménů, ale taktéž reprezentovaly palčivé sociální problémy současnosti. V tomto kontextu byla pozornost věnovaná queer strategiím viditelnosti, afektu a tělesnosti o to podstatnější – pomohla totiž ukázat, že teorie i praxe se neustále transformují stejně jako identity, které zkoumají. A to pozoruhodně bez ohledu na to, zda jsou tyto identity nahlíženy jako queer, anebo ne, čímž kongres překlenul binární opozici queeru a normativity. Kongres nejenže reflektoval aktuální stav výzkumu, ale také otevřel nové cesty pro budoucí mezinárodní spolupráci. Třetí ročník je plánován na rok 2027 s předpokladem stejného místa konání ve Španělsku. Zážitek tohoto kongresu vřele doporučujeme začínajícím i zkušeným akademikům*čkám.

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PáSoNetka – drobná reflexe z víkendové konference „od mladých pro mladé" lékaře a lékařky

Josef Vošmik[1], Šárka Tomová[2], Barbora East[3]

Jak to začalo

Před několika měsíci nás oslovila lékařka, s níž spolupracujeme na projektu Kultimed neboli kultivace vztahů, prostředí a podmínek medicíny (https://kultimed.soc.cas.cz). Zajímalo ji, zda bychom v rámci znovuobnovené tradice víkendových konferencí – či spíše setkávání plného příspěvků, seminářů a sdílení – s názvem PáSoNetka, kterou pořádá Sekce mladých lékařů (a lékařek) České lékařské komory (ČLK), nepřipravili seminář určený profesně začínajícím odbornicím a odborníkům v medicíně. Téma mělo být zaměřeno doslova na „soft skills", protože právě v této oblasti mají podle

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jejích slov „mladí" největší rezervy. Samozřejmě jsme souhlasili a začali přemýšlet, čím bychom mohli přispět.

První den konference, v sobotu 22. listopadu 2025 ráno, proběhlo stručné představení projektu Kultimed, který autorský tým tohoto článku spojuje. Prezentovali jsme nejen hlavní myšlenku celého projektu, ale také jednotlivé výstupy z výzkumů a dalších aktivit projektu, které máme zatím k dispozici (viz https://kultimed.soc.cas.cz/cs/vyzkumy-data). A že bylo o čem mluvit. Zejména téma diskriminace a různých forem nevhodného chování především ke studentkám lékařských fakult, nedostatek příležitostí a podpory pro lékařky a určitá forma „oborové" (horizontální) diskriminace/segregace žen ve zdravotnictví se setkaly se značnou odezvou ze strany publika, které právě o těchto problémech mnoho ví a často je zažívá. V neděli 23. listopadu pak proběhly dva samostatné workshopy zaměřené na téma úskalí aktivního naslouchání ve vztahu k pacientům a pacientkám z pozice lékařek a lékařů.

V sobotu stručně prezentovala projekt kolegyně Barbora East (1. LF UK) před zhruba stovkou zúčastněných, včetně vedení České lékařské komory a některých ředitelů a ředitelek nemocnic či děkanů a děkanek tuzemských lékařských fakult. V neděli se pak uskutečnily dva samostatné workshopy zaměřené na úskalí aktivního naslouchání pod vedením Šárky Tomové (2. LF UK) a Josefa Vošmika (SOÚ AV ČR, v. v. i.). Ranní workshop měl nižší účast (8 osob), patrně proto, že sobotní část programu byla zakončena neformálním večírkem. Dalšího nedělního workshopu začínajícího před polednem, se pak už zúčastnilo 16 profesně juniorních lékařek a lékařů napříč obory. Dodejme, že každý z workshopů trval jednu hodinu.

Níže nabízíme nejen malé zamyšlení či reflexi bezprostředně po této akci, ale i výsledky improvizovaného mikrosociologického šetření, které jsme na místě stihli prostřednictvím několika „otázek do pléna" během uvedených dvou seminářů zrealizovat.

Malé zamyšlení nad společným setkáním

Aktivní naslouchání je naprostý fundament každého rozhovoru v pomáhajících profesích bez ohledu na bližší oborové určení či situační kontext. Je to základna, na které lze (a mělo by se) stavět při rozvoji dalších komunikačních dovedností. Jde o prosté, ale zdaleka ne jednoduché, vyjádření onoho: *„Jsem tu s Tebou a pro Tebe, poslouchám a slyším (tedy vnímám), co mi říkáš."* Zdá se to být málo, ale je to mnoho. Vědomá, soustředěná a ideálně i nepřerušovaná pozornost věnovaná druhému člověku je více, než se může zdát. Tím spíše ze strany tak vytížených osob, kterými lékaři a lékařky mnohdy jsou.

Bylo až dojemné pozorovat, jak bylo pro přítomné mladé lékaře a lékařky podstatné rozvíjet se nejen v kompetencích, jež jsou nezbytné pro výkon lékařské profese v oblasti diagnostické či léčebné – ty tvořily většinu z nabízených workshopů během

dvoudenní víkendové konference – ale právě i ve vedení pomáhajícího rozhovoru prostřednictvím aplikace základních technik aktivního naslouchání. O to více alarmující bylo slyšet, že většina z nich o aktivním naslouchání během dosavadní odborné přípravy (zahrnující kompletní studium medicíny) příliš neslyšela, natož aby měla možnost osvojit si je prakticky. To zmínilo opravdu jen několik jednotlivců a jednotlivkyň, např. v rámci absolvování modulu orientujícího se na paliativní péči, kterou si lze bez aktivního naslouchání jen sotva představit… To ale platí pro všechny lékařské obory, jejichž součástí je komunikace s pacienty a pacientkami a jichž je kromě rozličné laboratorní či výzkumné práce většina. Nemluvě o tom, že tento typ komunikace by měl být součástí pregraduální přípravy všech mediků a mediček, jelikož v této fázi studia nelze předpokládat jejich následné pracovní směřování a uplatnění.

A není jistě třeba zdůrazňovat, že aktivní naslouchání a komunikace v medicíně je soubor kompetencí, které si lze osvojit pouze prakticky, skrze pravidelné používání – nejprve ideálně v bezpečném prostředí nácviku na modelových situacích, následně postupně v samotné praxi.

Co ale brání aplikaci technik aktivního naslouchání a jejich osvojování v praxi, pomineme-li skutečnost, že dosud patrně není či nebylo intenzivněji zahrnuto do kurikula studia medicíny? Když jsme položili tuto otázku přítomným lékařkám a lékařům během seminářů, zaznívalo nejčastěji: čas neboli jak je možné věnovat se všem a současně každé/mu z pacientů či pacientek plně a koncentrovaně, když máte na každého/každou z nich třeba jen 15 či 20 minut v ordinaci a potřebujete daného člověka nejen „vyslechnout", ale také si zapsat vše podstatné a provést i příslušné diagnostické či léčebné úkony?

Tento problém představuje další kruciální moment, který efektivní profesionální komunikaci v lékařství ztěžuje a limituje, ale ne nutně zcela vylučuje. Tento poznatek jsme se přítomným lékařům a lékařkám snažili předat prostřednictvím stručných tipů, oblastí a chyb, které se v aktivním naslouchání a komunikaci podle našich zkušeností i odborné literatury často vyskytují. A patří sem i různé formy kognitivního zkreslení a předpojatostí různého druhu.

Aktivní osvojování a změna mindsetu v této oblasti komunikace však vyžaduje ochotu ke změně, čas a praktický nácvik. Pokusili jsme se tak předat něco, čeho se sami lékaři a lékařky musí nyní sami chopit a zahrnout do své komunikace, aby se stalo realitou a přineslo kýžené výsledky. Ostatně jeden ze starších zdrojů (Myslivcová 2011) poukazuje na skutečnost, že v případě stížností adresovaných lékařské komoře bylo až 90 % z nich zdůvodněno nedorozuměním mezi lékaři/lékařkami a pacienty/pacientkami – jakkoliv tento údaj uvádíme spíše pro zajímavost a se značnou metodologickou opatrností.

Epilog

My jsme na víkendové akci logicky nereprezentovali „ty mladé", kteří sdíleli navzájem svoje zkušenosti v souladu s mottem celé PáSoNetky („od mladých pro mladé"), nýbrž spíše ty praxí či různými zkušenostmi už trochu „ošlehanější". O to více milé bylo, že nás mladí lékaři a lékařky mezi sebe přijali, alespoň takový byl náš pocit. Bylo potěšující, že stále platí, že zkušenost je nejvíce ceněné zboží a mladí lékaři a mladé lékařky si to s pokorou uvědomují. Za to jim patří náš dík.

Je jen škoda, že příslušná sekce České lékařské komory nadále nese jméno „Sekce mladých lékařů" a lékařky tak v tomto názvu trochu opomíjí. Je to sice v souladu s pravidly českého jazyka (viz tzv. generické maskulinum), avšak v příkrém rozporu jak s probíhající feminizací tohoto oboru, zejména během studia medicíny a v některých specializacích, tak s tendencemi ve společnosti, která se chce považovat za demokratickou. Podle aktuálního interního šetření České lékařské komory (2025) přitom ženy představují v posledních letech 65 % až 66 % všech osob absolvujících studium všeobecného lékařství v ČR.

V daném kontextu se vynořuje otázka, zda nemůže být dosud limitovaný prostor týkající se rozvoje komunikačních dovedností mezi studujícími medicíny spojen nejen s inkrementalizací vzdělávací politiky, ale také s dnes již zcela překonanou předpojatostí, že když mezi studujícími i praktikujícími medicíny stále více převládají ženy, není nutné se speciálně zaměřovat na profesní rozvoj komunikace, poněvadž ženy (na rozdíl od mužů) komunikovat přece umí? Ve spojení se skutečností, že ve vedení nejen lékařských fakult nadále převažují muži (srov. Třísková 2022), je toto hypotéza, kterou zde nemůžeme rozhodně zamítnout, nýbrž spíše nabídnout jako jedno z možných zdůvodnění.

Ostatně jsme toho názoru, že i – a dost možná především – rozvoj komunikačních schopností lékařů a lékařek (a zdravotnického personálu vůbec) vytváří úrodné pole pro posilování inkluzivního a nepředpojatého přístupu ke všem pacientům a pacientkám. Třeba i k těm z řad sexuálních pracovnic a pracovníků při diskutování jejich situace a potřeb nejen v rámci profylaxe, ale i případné navazující diagnostiky a léčby zdravotních obtíží, které taková práce může obnášet. I v tom spatřujeme aktuálnost našeho zamyšlení v kontextu speciálního tematického zaměření vydání časopisu Gender a výzkum.

Komunikačně, (sebe)kriticky a reflektivně vybavení profesionálové a profesionálky jistě představují předpoklad pro partnerský vztah s pacientkami a pacienty napříč všemi lékařskými obory, tím spíše v prostředí, kde je supervize na rozdíl od některých jiných pomáhajících profesí, jako je sociální práce či psychoterapie, stále spíše výjimkou než pravidlem. Úcta, respekt a pokora jsou základním stavebním kamenem, který nelze ignorovat.

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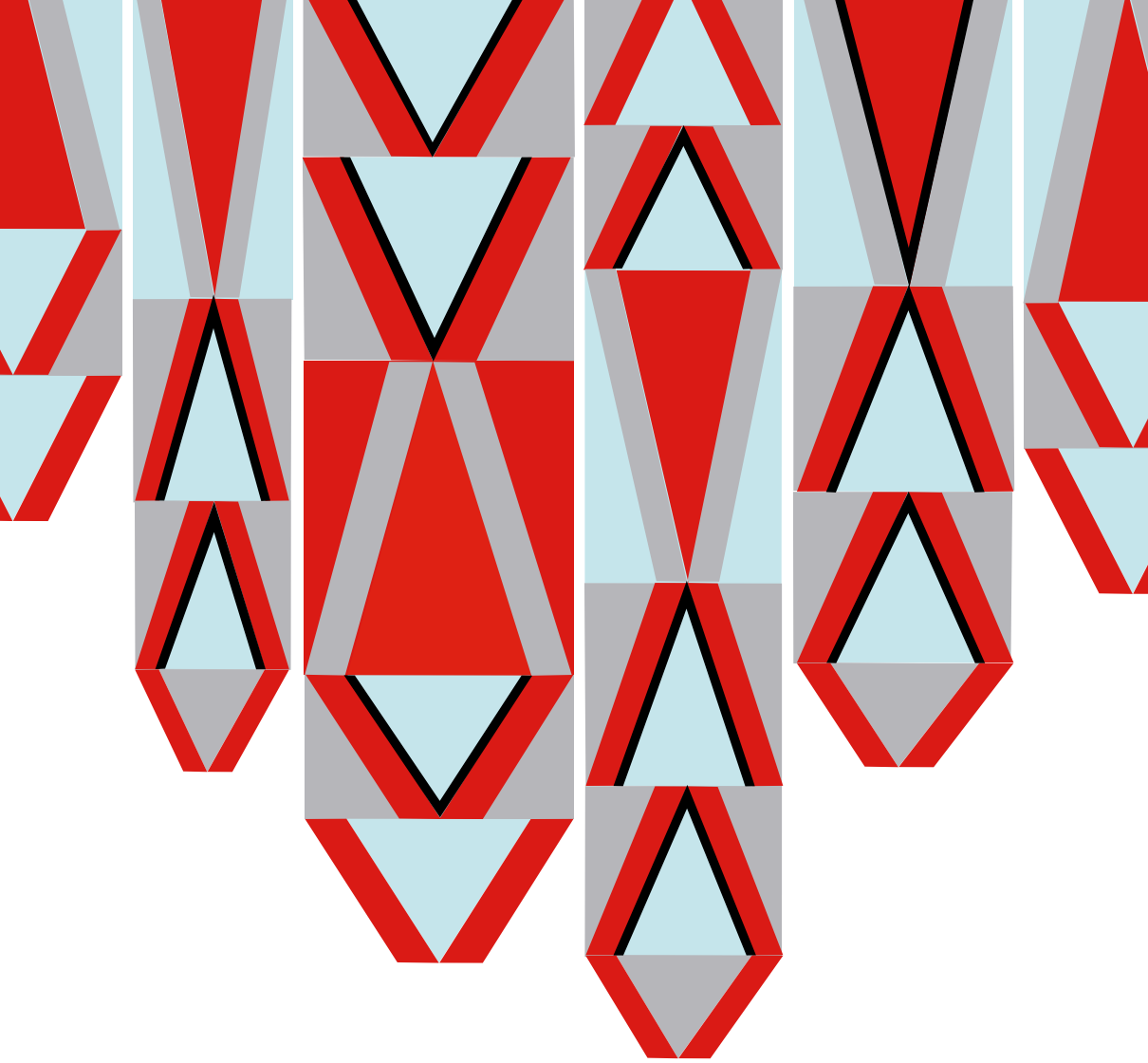

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