‘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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