

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 workers¹ 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-sindicalist 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 prostitution⁷ 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 session⁹ 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 authorities¹¹ 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 feminised¹³ 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 violence¹⁵ 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 worker¹⁶ 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 Cassandra 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 swerfy²¹ '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, HYDRA²⁶ attempted to create dependent employment relationships through a brothel GmbH;²⁷ and in Frankfurt, HWG²⁸ 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 co-operatives. 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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