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Thematic article

The Challenge of Rethinking Social Work with Sex Workers in Italy: A Participatory Research Experience with the Capability Approach

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Abstract

In Italy, the legal status of sex work is defined by the 1958 Merlin Law, which does not consider sex work itself to be illegal. Rather, the law prosecutes those who exploit or facilitate it, and prohibits indoor exercise. In the broader context of the Italian legislation and in the absence of further regulation, forms of indirect criminalisation of the activity and stigmatisation of those involved have developed. This includes the enactment of ordinances for urban decency. These conditions have been exacerbated by the emergence of phenomena such as trafficking and sexual exploitation (Garofalo Geymonat 2014). The Italian sex work field is thus characterised by a very strong crystallisation of power exercised by clients, pimps and public authorities. This power is fueled by a specific social stigma attached to sex work, which is frequently mediated by factors such as class, race, ethnicity and gender (O'Connel Davidson 1988; Mozzini 2002; Carchedi et al. 2003; Garofalo Geymonat 2014; Abbatecola 2018). Moreover, an evident dichotomy has emerged between anti-trafficking and pro-sex workers' rights policies in the public discourse, academic debate, and among practitioners. Social work with sex workers has been deeply affected by this polarisation. This paper is based on a participatory research project and addresses two main research questions: (1) how to rethink social work in order to promote adequate and accessible non-stigmatising public services for sex workers, and (2) to what extent the Capability Approach, as developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, can provide a robust theoretical framework for this rethinking. The research was developed as part of the evaluation of a project supporting sex workers in Emilia Romagna, inVisibile, which has been promoted and funded by the Emilia-

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Romagna Region since 2008. The evaluation was carried out with the involvement of social workers and sex workers, within a participatory research framework (Bergold and Thomas 2012), and has contributed to problematising the condition of sex workers in terms of deprivation, understood as “the lack of freedom to pursue one's own well-being”. The findings demonstrated that this deprivation is multifaceted and intersectional and reinforced by the social labelling processes associated with sex work. A qualitative analysis of interviews with sex workers and focus groups with social workers was conducted with the objective of identifying potential domains of well-being, in accordance with the list of basic human capabilities proposed by Martha Nussbaum. A non-exhaustive list of potential functionings was then proposed for each of these domains. This study suggests that social work practices need to start from the assumption that there is no universal experience of sex work. Consequently, it is crucial to understand the autonomy that sex workers have in determining their own well-being, beyond any social or political labeling. Finally, it is important to understand the resources and the opportunities available to sex workers and their (cap)ability to access these resources freely.

Keywords: social work, sex work, freedom, capability approach, participatory research.

1. Introduction[1]

The Italian sex market is largely populated by women selling services to men. However, since the 1970s there has been an increase in male and transgender subjectivities, and since the 1990s there has been a significant increase of migrant subjectivities, many of whom are also victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation (Abbatecola 2006; Costantini 2010; Adriaenssens et al. 2016).

In Italy, the legal status of sex work is defined by the 1958 Merlin Law, which does not consider sex work itself to be illegal. Rather, the law prosecutes those who exploit or facilitate it, and prohibits indoor exercise. In the broader context of the Italian legislation and in the absence of further regulation, forms of indirect criminalisation of the activity and stigmatisation of those involved have developed. This includes the enactment of ordinances for urban decency.

These conditions have been exacerbated by the emergence of phenomena such as trafficking and sexual exploitation (Garofalo Geymonat 2014). The Italian sex work field is thus characterised by a very strong crystallisation of power exercised by clients, pimps and public authorities. This power is fueled by a specific social stigma attached to sex work, which is

[1] This article is a part of the more extensive research work contained in the freely-downloadable book Costantini, E. (2023) *inVisibile: intervento sociale nel mondo della prostituzione indoor*, Milano, FrancoAngeli (https://series.francoangeli.it/index.php/oa/catalog/book/915).

frequently mediated by factors such as class, race, ethnicity and gender (O'Connel Davidson 1988; Mozzini 2002; Carchedi et al. 2003; Garofalo Geymonat 2014; Abbatecola 2018).

Moreover, an evident dichotomy has emerged between anti-trafficking and pro-sex workers' rights policies in the public discourse, academic debate, and among practitioners. Social work with sex workers has been deeply affected by this polarisation. On the one hand, it is defined as intervention with victims of exploitation with the aim of changing their conditions. On the other hand, it is directed towards those who freely engage in sex work and, as a result, are not the primary focus of policy initiatives, with the exception of those pertaining to health concerns, which are often justified on the grounds of public health. In both cases, the need of sex workers is assessed by 'others' according to a particular conception of well-being and a particular understanding of sex work.

This paper is based on a participatory research project and addresses two main research questions: (1) how to rethink social work in order to promote adequate and accessible non-stigmatising public services for sex workers, and (2) to what extent the Capability Approach, as developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, can provide a robust theoretical framework for this rethinking.

The research was developed as part of the evaluation of a project supporting sex workers in Emilia Romagna, inVisibile, which has been promoted and funded by the Emilia-Romagna Region since 2008. The project is designed to provide support to sex workers, operating within indoor settings, such as in private residences, nightclubs, and massage parlors. inVisibile is aligned with the overarching framework of harm/risk reduction and aims to offer assistance in the following areas: health and legal protection, harm reduction and leave from forms of deprivation, trafficking, and exploitation.

The evaluation was carried out with the involvement of social workers and sex workers, within a participatory research framework (Bergold and Thomas 2012), and has contributed to problematising the condition of sex workers in terms of deprivation, understood as "the lack of freedom to pursue one's own well-being". The findings demonstrated that this deprivation is multifaceted and intersectional and reinforced by the social labelling processes associated with sex work.

A qualitative analysis of interviews with sex workers and focus groups with social workers was conducted with the objective of identifying potential domains of well-being, in accordance with the list of basic human capabilities proposed by Martha Nussbaum. A non-exhaustive list of potential functionings was then proposed for each of these domains. This study suggests that social work practices need to start from the assumption that there is no universal experience of sex work. Consequently, it is crucial to understand the autonomy that sex workers have in determining their own well-being, beyond any social or political labeling. Finally, it is important

to understand the resources and the opportunities available to sex workers and their (cap)ability to access these resources freely.

2. Social work and prostitution: New research directions on old issues

According to Wahab (2004, 139) “the practice of social work with women exchanging sex for material goods dates back to the beginnings of the social work profession”. However, despite this long-standing relationship, research remains very limited, as highlighted in a recent literature review (Grittner and Wash 2020), which reports that only four articles were published between 2008 and 2018 and are easily accessible in English. Although situated in a North American context, Wahab's contribution lies in reconstructing the historical stages of social work with sex workers and the

> *variety of ideological and theoretical orientations [that] ruled their [women's] involvement from the evangelical desire to rescue fallen women from the clutches of male sexual aggression to the insistence that women control their own bodies and sexuality (Sloan and Wahab 2000, 457).*

Wahab identifies three principal constructs that have shaped social work responses to sex work over time. These are: the idea that women require protection for “their own good”; social control and competing class values; the fear of sex, particularly female sexuality.

The concept of protecting women for “their own good” is grounded in the sexist assumption that women are inherently less capable than men. The more a woman diverges from the established norms of female conduct, the more she is perceived to exhibit a lack of morality and the weaker her position is deemed to be. Despite the majority of individuals engaged in sex work being women and their clients being men, historical and contemporary social and legal reform efforts have almost exclusively targeted women. The regulation and control of women's bodies has been a consequence of social concerns about sex work. The role of social workers has been crucial in this process, contributing to the social control of women's bodies through their exclusive targeting in reform and rescue efforts. This, together with the fact that the majority of social workers are women, has reinforced the perception that women are at the core of the 'prostitution problem' (Sloan and Wahab 2000; Wahab 2002).

The imperative to 'protect victims', as well as the role of women as actors of social interventions to protect sex workers, is a key theme in Agustín's well-known work on the “rescue

industry" that has grown up around sex trafficking (Agustín 2008). A wide range of actors, in the UK and across Europe, have assumed the role of anti-trafficking advocates, unified by a shared objective to enhance the quality of life for trafficked women. In this rescue industry, "social helpers" seek to rescue women from sex slavery. However, in doing so, they effectively confine women, particularly migrant women, to the role of 'passive victims' (ibidem).

With a particular focus on migrant women, and based on the assumption that sex work is morally wrong, the distinction between care and control in terms of improving the lives of "trafficked victims of sexual slavery" (O'Connell-Davidson 2006; Connelly 2015) becomes blurred. The social construction of the 'passive victim' serves as a justification to the rescue industry's intervention in the lives of migrant women and to control their body. The 'victim' label thus becomes a tool to control subaltern women, namely those who are socio-economically, politically and geographically marginalised and oppressed. Their agency is denied, their mobility largely confined to the non-Western world, and their bodies subjected to scrutiny. The label of 'victim' conceals the mechanisms that the EU and its Member States have implemented over the past decade to regulate migration (Agustín 2005).

A more recent comparative study (Mai et al. 2021) demonstrates how the integration of this humanitarian sexual rhetoric into increasingly "extreme border policies" impacts the lives and rights of migrant sex workers. This research examines the strategic role of racialised and gendered criteria of victimhood in the construction of sexualised humanitarian targets that are particularly vulnerable to 'extreme border' rhetoric and policies at national and global levels. The research findings indicate that there is an inverse relationship between the levels of criminalisation faced by migrant sex workers, including those in trafficking situations, and their ability to access justice, assert their rights and lives against increasingly extreme and racialised forms of bordering (Mai 2018).

Although the aforementioned studies adopt different perspectives, they all identify three central points that constituted the preliminary knowledge upon which this study was based. First, there is no such a thing as the universal experience of sex work; differences arise from heterogeneous social positions of individuals and their different working conditions. Secondly, while race, class, and education privileges resulted in unequal access to certain resources, even those women with the most limited access to resources and the most difficult life circumstances demonstrated to possess agency, being able to exercise some degree of power in both their professional and personal lives. Finally, the process of challenging negative stereotypes and prejudices against sex workers requires an openness to sex workers' accounts of their experiences from their own perspectives.

Furthermore, based on an analysis of various feminist theories, Sloan and Wahab (2000) identify several recommendations for social work that can be considered as areas where social

workers, regardless of their orientation, can work for justice (Wahab and Panichelli 2013). In this context, it is pertinent to recall the authors' suggestions, which are particularly relevant to the discussion that will be presented in the following paragraphs. Firstly, there is a need to prosecute individuals who exploit or abuse sex workers or force women into sex work. Secondly, there is a need to promote economic justice, employment opportunities, and education for all women, while also destigmatising and depathologising sex work. Finally, there is a need to provide support for women who wish to leave sex work.

To the best of our knowledge, there are no historical studies that provide detailed insights into the specifics of social work with sex workers in the Italian context. However, numerous academic and practitioner studies have examined policy approaches at the national and/or urban level (Danna 2001; Associazione On the Road 2002; Perin 2021; Selmi 2016). Some researchers attempted to reconstruct the rhetoric behind the various policy initiatives and the attitudes adopted by social work (Abbatecola 2018; Rinaldi and Nothdurfter 2021; Garofalo Geymonat and Selmi 2022). However, they not deeply questioned the possibility of an alternative theoretical approach to social work with sex workers.

Moreover, a dichotomy has emerged between two dominant political rhetoric in Italy. On the one hand, there is a pro-sex rhetoric that acknowledges the autonomy of sex workers in their decision to engage in sex work; on the other, there is an anti-trafficking rhetoric that victimises sex workers, all perceived as victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation (Garofalo 2014; Abbatecola 2018; Garofalo Geymonat and Selmi 2022). The social work approach to sex workers, even in Italy, appears to be oriented towards normalising their condition in accordance with a criterion of social acceptability. It is, therefore, a condition that is hetero-defined through regulatory devices that do not correspond to the real needs of the people involved, but rather to the socially constituted idea of sex work.

3. Purpose and method of research

This article presents part of the results of an extensive research project carried out by the "Marco Biagi" Department of Economics of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia in 2020, at the request of the Emilia-Romagna Region. The aim of the research was twofold: firstly, to analyse the inVisibile Project for sex workers, reviewing the activities carried out over ten years from an evaluation perspective; secondly, to use the knowledge gained from this process to inform any future replanning.

The inVisibile Project is funded annually by the Emilia-Romagna Region, which delegates its implementation to the nine capital cities. A variety of contractual arrangements are employed by municipalities to delegate Third Sector Organisations to actually implement all the activities. The regional project's framework is constituted by four core activities: monitoring, establishing direct contact with the target group, facilitating indirect contact and providing access to services. Regarding the monitoring activities, inVisibile Project has been provided with a single regional database. Information is collected at the local level by aggregating data from online sources and newspapers related to the sex market. The archived data serve as a repository of knowledge about the phenomenon and its dynamics, as well as a crucial resource for subsequent contact with sex workers. Indeed, the telephone number published is the key to storage. The principal action for direct contact with sex workers is the telephone call, which can be followed by assistance in accessing public services, particularly health services. Between 2011 and 2019, a total of 71,000 adverts were placed and approximately 25,000 calls were made in the nine municipalities. In order to adequately address the needs reported (termed "indirect contact"), the inVisibile Project placed significant emphasis on networking with counseling centers, infectious disease units, and other institutions that assist individuals living in poverty.

Participatory research was identified as the most appropriate methodology for planning a reflexive analysis (Bergold and Thomas 2012). Indeed, the implementation of policy programmes represents a crucial stage in the policy-making process, with the various actors involved playing a central role. This is in accordance with a processual view of policy-making which suggests that policy objectives undergo inevitable adaptation during the implementation phase. (Stame 2004; Costantini 2018).

This approach necessitates researchers being completely immersed in the practice, language and context in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of how a policy is developed by practitioners. At the same time, practitioners need to adopt the aims, tools and language of the research project to facilitate the integration of the two fields. This requires a mutual understanding of the generative potential of reflexivity, which can support the uncovering of the mechanisms of social reproduction (Tarsia 2020).

In the context of participatory research, practitioners and researchers engage in collaborative activities at various stages, with the aim of generating knowledge and/or action (Wahab 2003). Participatory methods conceive research as a process of knowledge co-creation rather than as a means of discovering objective truth. Moreover, they validate the intersubjective relationship between the researcher and the topic under investigation (ibidem).

In alignment with this methodological approach, this research project positioned social workers at the core of the process, engaging them in the definition of pertinent indicators and measurement techniques, as well as in the validation of findings. The research design was

outlined and discussed during three meetings attended by the entire operational team, constituted by 16 members. The purpose of these meetings was twofold: firstly, to determine the various stages of the process, including the identification of key stakeholders, their roles and responsibilities, together with the selection of the appropriate tools and the definition of the desired outcomes; secondly, to construct the relevant tools - namely the focus group outline and the target interview outline - through a collective design process.

The University research team consisted of two female researchers, supervised by Professor Tindara Addabbo. The research tools, methodology and research questions of the overall project are summarised in the following table (Table 1).

Research tool	Methodology	Recipients	Research Questions
Focus group	Qualitative	Social workers	Why and how do sex workers experience deprivation? To what extent do the needs of sex workers inform the design of interventions?
Questionnaire	Qualitative and Quantitative	Social workers	What are the age and socio-economic characteristics, motivation and difficulties of those engaged in social work with sex workers?
Interview	Qualitative	Sex Workers	Why and how do sex workers experience deprivation? Why and how do sex workers experience «well-being»? To what extent do the needs of sex workers inform the design of interventions?
Documentary analysis	Qualitative	-	What are the key terms and concepts that recur in social work with sex workers? Is there a pattern emerging from the social work practice with sex workers?
Database analysis	Qualitative and Quantitative	-	What are the demographic characteristics of those engaged in sex work in the region? What are the defining characteristics of this phenomenon within the region?

Table 1 – Research tools, approach and research questions

We held a total of nine focus groups with the nine territorial teams. All meetings were virtual and audiovisual recorded. We also sent a questionnaire to all operational staff. In addition, we carried out a documentary analysis of the regional funding decisions (10 documents), the annual reports of each territory (period 2011-2019 for a total of 80 documents) and the annual coordination reports (10 documents). Finally, the data from the regional database for the period 2011-2019 were processed.

A further purpose of the research project was to facilitate the creation of knowledge through a collaborative process involving sex workers, with the aim of identifying key learning and insights that can enhance social workers' practice. As reported in Wahab (2003), sex workers have frequently been denied the legitimacy of their voices by researchers and social service providers. Moreover, the needs of sex workers have been persistently defined and represented by non-sex workers throughout history, both in society and within academia (Desyllas 2013). To address this issue, twenty sex workers were interviewed (Table 2).

Interview Identifier	*Genre*	*Age*	*Nationality*	*Years in Italy*	*In touch with the project inVisibile since…*
Int_1	T (MtoF*)	48	Brazilian	27	8 years
Int_2	T (MtoF)	45	Brazilian	23	Less than 1 year
Int_3	F	46	Chinese	10	6 years
Int_4	D	31	Dominican	2	1 year
Int_5	T (MtoF)	27	Colombian	3	2 years
Int_6	F	40	Sudamericana	6	4 years
Int_7	F	52	Polish	25	1 year
Int_8	T	48	Peruvian	22	-
Int_9	T	25	Albanese	13	-
Int_10	M	25	Nigerian	3	1 year
Int_11	F	45	Colombian	20	2 years
Int_12	F	26	Romanian	6	Less than 1 year
Int_13	F	51	Italo-Brazilian	2	Less than 1 year
Int_14	T (MtoF)	29	Colombian	2	Less than 1 year
Int_15	T (MtoF)	26	Brazilian	2	Less than 1 year
Int_16	T (MtoF)	46	Italian	-	-
Int_17	T (MtoF)	65	Brazilian	14	1 year
Int_18	F	45	Italian	-	Less than 1 year
Int_19	F	19	Romanian	1	Less than 1 year
Int_20	M	23	Gambian	5	Less than 1 year

Table 2 - Detail of interviews
* MtoF indicates persons who are in transit from male to female gender

The interviews were conducted by social workers in order to guarantee the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, who were all active sex workers, while simultaneously

fostering a trusting relationship with the research project. A variety of tools were employed to conduct interviews, including telephone calls, online chat message exchanges, face-to-face and remote interviews. This was due to the necessity of addressing the pandemic situation at the time, which constituted an obstacle to the usual interview procedures. With the participants' permission, the interviews were recorded (where possible) and then transcribed, ensuring the anonymity of the sex workers.

The interviews with the sex workers represented the most integrated operational approach between social intervention and research, combining the strengths of both fields. The social workers/interviewers indicated that this approach proved to be the most fruitful learning experience.

With the aim to respond to each research question, collected data were used to integrate the perspectives of social workers and sex workers as much as possible (Gioia et al. 2013). Subsequently, six validation meetings were conducted with the social workers and the regional officials responsible for the inVisibile Project, following the initial formulation of the theoretical frameworks (in this case, the Capability Approach). It was not feasible to conduct validation meetings with sex workers due to the ongoing pandemic and the necessity to allow more time to create a safe context to safeguard their privacy.

In this article, the data gathered from the focus groups with social workers and interviews with sex workers, as previously shared during the validation meetings, are employed for analytical purposes. In particular, two key themes were deeply investigated with the social workers: (1) sex workers' agency, understood as their freedom to make autonomous decisions about their well-being, and (2) stigma, understood as a persistent constraint on their autonomy. The following sections explore the relationship between these two concepts from a theoretical perspective and in the specific field of social work, in order to provide an appropriate context for the subsequent description and discussion of the findings.

4. Social work with sex workers: The concept of agency as a key theoretical lens

From an economic perspective, Bettio, Della Giusta, and Di Tommaso (2017) acknowledge that the theoretical and political discourse surrounding labour in sex markets is largely characterised by a false dichotomy between agency and stigma. However, the relationship between the two is not as straightforward as this dichotomy suggests. Rather, agency and stigma operate along a continuum of contractual behavior that masks a high degree of market segmentation. The

comparative studies conducted by the authors (Bettio et al. 2017; Di Tommaso et al. 2009) reach the common conclusion that there is an inverse relationship between stigma and agency. Moreover, the authors contend that the dichotomy between fully autonomous and fully exploited sex work is an oversimplification. Instead, they argue that stigma and agency are two facets of a continuum, with the impact of stigma on individuals engaged in sex work varying according to the specific circumstances of each case.

The concept of agency is employed to describe a spectrum of strategies that sex workers use to negotiate various aspects of their work, including the terms of the exchange/reward relationship, the working conditions and hours, and the choice of clients and services. Conversely, the stigma associated with sex work is not only a consequence of its physical nature; it is also a consequence of the system in which it is performed. In this system, social status, especially for women, is often ruled by social norms (ibidem). In conclusion, it can be stated that the higher the social stigma attached to a particular segment of sex work, the lower the agency of the person working in it. Consequently, any policy that seeks to influence the agency of people (in a particular segment of the sex market) will also influence the stigma attached to them, and vice versa.

In a recent contribution to the debate, Abbatecola (2018) presents a compelling argument with specific reference to the Italian context. The author's historical reconstruction of the phenomenon identifies an original opposition (Koken 2010; Costantinou 2013). This opposition characterises the sale of sex as either a form of "sexual objectification, complicit with patriarchy and inherently coercive" or, alternatively, as a "voluntary and legitimate form of sex work". Abbatecola does not align with either position, claiming that:

> *The juxtaposition of alternative categories does not allow us to grasp the porosity of the boundaries between coercion and agency, which very often coexist in exploitation, as well as the thousands of combinations and geometries that are not always linear between freedom to exercise and freedom to choose, in which social inequalities play a prominent role by drawing trajectories and opportunities (Abbatecola 2018,13, translation by the author).*

The issues raised by Abbatecola also have implications for policy. If the contradiction between these two visions is accepted, policies are directed either at the victims of coercion and exploitation – with the consequent imperative of removing them from the conditions that make them vulnerable – or at women workers who, in the free exercise of their activities, are not necessarily the recipients of policy interventions, except in the context of health and safety. Abbatecola (2018) notes that the criminalisation of those involved in the sex market (high stigma)

increases vulnerability (reduced agency) by reducing the visibility of the phenomenon and those involved.

Considering the provision of services, particularly in the context of healthcare, stigma can act as a significant barrier, particularly for sex workers (Grittner and Wash 2020). Lazarus and colleagues (2012) confirm that this is due to both the process of social labelling (Goffman 1963) to which sex workers are subjected, and the process by which stigmatised individuals develop a negative self-identity (Hallgrimsdottir et al. 2008; Treolar et al. 2021). Furthermore, they highlight the necessity to move beyond individual-level conceptualisations of stigma, in order to understand the important role that power and structural conditions play in the social exclusion and devaluation of certain groups of people. Stigma is frequently directed at those with diminished power and is often mediated by factors such as class, race, ethnicity and gender (Kinsler et al. 2007).

Following Emirbayer and Mische (1998), agency can be considered "as a temporally embedded process of social engagement" that is informed by the past (in its iterative or habitual aspect), but also oriented towards the future (as a projective capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) as well as the present (as a practical-evaluative capacity to contextualise past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment). In the specific context of sex work, agency can thus be understood as an "informed involvement in a complex system" (Bettio et al. 2017) which is the (cap)ability to make informed choices within forms of constraint.

This enables individuals to move from a stigmatised status to a future condition that is aligned with their own concept of well-being (Burnes et al. 2018). The notion of agency, when understood in this way, provides a foundation for the concept of freedom. Freedom is not merely a context-embedded phenomenon; it is also a function of the resources that are available to individuals and their capability to define their "own (conception of) good" (Sen 1990, 1995).

Beyond political rhetoric, the recognition and legitimation of sex workers' agency implies a rethinking of social work as a space for action and transformation based on people's real needs. In this way, social work becomes an integral part of the policy implementation process: not just a means to deliver resources or services decided by others, but a genuine policy-in-practice action. However, this reconfiguration requires a robust theoretical framework to provide support. In this context, the application of the Capability Approach is proposed (Sen 1995).

The Capability Approach is a rich, multi-dimensional intellectual discipline that questions justice and inequality. It places a strong emphasis on the assessment of an individual's freedoms in accordance with their actual capacity to pursue well-being. It is not intended to provide a causal or explanatory account, but rather to offer an interpretative perspective (Robeyns 2005). This makes it a valid theoretical framework for rethinking social work with sex workers, as well as for a more general re-evaluation of social work practices. This paper presents a detailed overview

of the 'non-optional core of all capability theories' (Robeyns 2017). These concepts were subjected to extensive discussion with the social workers during the collaborative research project.

Sen employes a positive interpretation of freedom (Berlin 1969; Sen 1985), which is understood as the actual possibility of action (and not, in a negative sense, as the absence of external constraints and limits to individual action). This implies a social context that can facilitate (or hinder) the dimensions of an individual's life (Monteleone and Mozzana 2009).

In this context, Sen's concept of freedom can be understood as “freedom to acquire”, which refers to the ability to pursue personally meaningful goals and values. The author posits that the ultimate objective for all humans should be the pursuit of well-being. Agency and well-being are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are interdependent (Sen 1995). The pursuit of well-being may represent an important goal for an individual, yet it may never be fully realised.

Sen (ibidem) argues that the pursuit of well-being is constituted both in the individual declination of agency goals and in the effective freedom that people have to pursue their well-being. Sen defines an individual's well-being in terms of the quality of his or her being, or “feeling well”, which encompasses both states of being and doing. These states of being and doing, which Sen refers to as "functionings", represent the fundamental units of analysis for understanding an individual's well-being. The relevance of functionings ranges from basic needs, such as adequate nutrition, to more complex ones, such as happiness and self-respect. Nevertheless, they are integral to an individual's existence and to each person's assessment of his or her own sense of well-being (the “own good” in Wahab’s words).

The capability to function is thus represented by a set of functionings (i.e. a set of states of being and doing) that the person is able to acquire (also given the context allows such acquisition) and reflects the (effective) freedom to live a particular kind of life rather than another. The term “conversion factors” is used to describe the elements and characteristics, both individual and contextual, that influence the accessibility of functionings and the transformation of resources and goods into opportunities for individuals to achieve their value (or agency) goals (Sen 1985, 1990).

In his work, Sen identifies three main categories of conversion factors: (1) personal characteristics, such as health status, gender, age, and character; (2) social characteristics, such as social norms and conventions (on which, for example, stigmatisation processes are based); (3) environmental or contextual characteristics, which include infrastructural endowments as well as public institutions (and the policies they promote). The relevance of conversion factors thus lies in their capacity to integrate individuals and contexts in a simultaneous and integrated way (Sen 1995).

The social context, and the institutions that inhabit it, assume a fundamental role in enabling, preventing or promoting the various dimensions of an individual's life. Furthermore, they are capable of either facilitating or impeding the exercise of an individual's capabilities. Consequently, although capabilities are individual in nature, their development requires a collective, social, and institutional dimension. As Bifulco and Mozzana (2011) observe, an individual's capabilities are contingent upon the system of socially available opportunities, that is, the opportunities offered by the social environment, and in relation to the network of institutions and contexts to which he or she belongs.

In this contextual dimension, the term “conversion factors” is employed to describe the elements and characteristics that enable individuals to transform resources and goods into the actual possibility of achieving their value goals. It can thus be argued that public policies can be considered as “contextual” conversion factors, understood as the processes that take place between the initial conceptualisation and design of interventions and their subsequent implementation (Salais 2009). These processes are situated in concrete contexts and relationships, such as the interaction between a social worker and a sex worker.

Sen does not present a comprehensive list of functionings or capabilities that should be pursued by all individuals. Consequently, capabilities need to be regarded as the most appropriate domain within which to assess the quality of life. However, it is important to note that quality cannot be evaluated using a single criterion; rather, it is necessary to consider the judgement of each individual regarding their own sense of well-being, which constitutes a fundamental aspect of this evaluation. In her theoretical development, the philosopher Martha Nussbaum proposed a list of ten “central human capabilities” that are considered as “universally fundamental to people's well-being” (Nussbaum 2000, 2002)[2].

However, she also acknowledged that each capability’s value is contingent on the context in which individuals find themselves. Nussbaum's list is intended as a guide to the institutions essential to enable individuals to function and realise their capabilities. Indeed, both Sen and Nussbaum emphasise that the way in which social opportunities are conceived and primary goods are distributed is of the greater importance. It is fundamental to individuals to achieve the full exercise of their freedoms and thus to 'be well'.

[2] These are: Life, Bodily Health, Bodily Integrity, the Development and Expression of Senses, Imagination and Thought, Emotional Health, Practical Reason, Affiliation (both personal and political), Relationships with Other Species and the World of Nature, Play, and Control over One’s Environment (both material and social).

5. Why do sex workers feel vulnerable?

The principal objective of both the focus groups with social workers and the interviews with sex workers was to understand why and how sex workers experience deprivation and well-being - how and why they feel vulnerable - and the extent to which their needs inform the design of social interventions.

The Focus groups were collectively designed to facilitate a reflection on two key themes: the characteristics of the sex workers in touch with the inVisibile Project, with particular attention to the social dimensions affecting their vulnerability, and how the expressed needs of sex workers were managed within the organisational processes. In the interviews, the sex workers were invited to reflect on their relationship with the project, identifying both positive and critical aspects. Furthermore, they were asked about their autonomous access to city services and, finally, to describe whether and how they felt 'exposed', at risk and disadvantaged.

How often a particular area of deprivation occurs in each interview was quantified. Then, for each area, the social dimensions that each sex worker explicitly identifies as affecting their lack of well-being were taken into account. Then the collected data were grouped into three macro areas of deprivation: health care, access to rights and socio-economic conditions. Furthermore, a set of six recurring social dimensions that appear to influence their perception of vulnerability was identified. These dimensions are gender, age, nationality, knowledge of Italian as a means of understanding the organisation of services, work in the sex market and work in the indoor sex market.

The Figure 1 presents a summary of the results obtained from the initial stage of the analysis. For each macro area of deprivation (top) and for each of social dimension (bottom), the number of occurrences in the interviews is provided as a percentage (Figure 1).

Of the 20 respondents, 18 reported that they felt vulnerable as a result of their work. When asked about their vulnerability factors, all referred to health issues, many to issues of violence from clients, stigma and discrimination (because of their work or because they are migrants), lack of alternatives in the labour market (especially if they are undocumented), and poverty in terms of access to food and housing because of the pandemic.

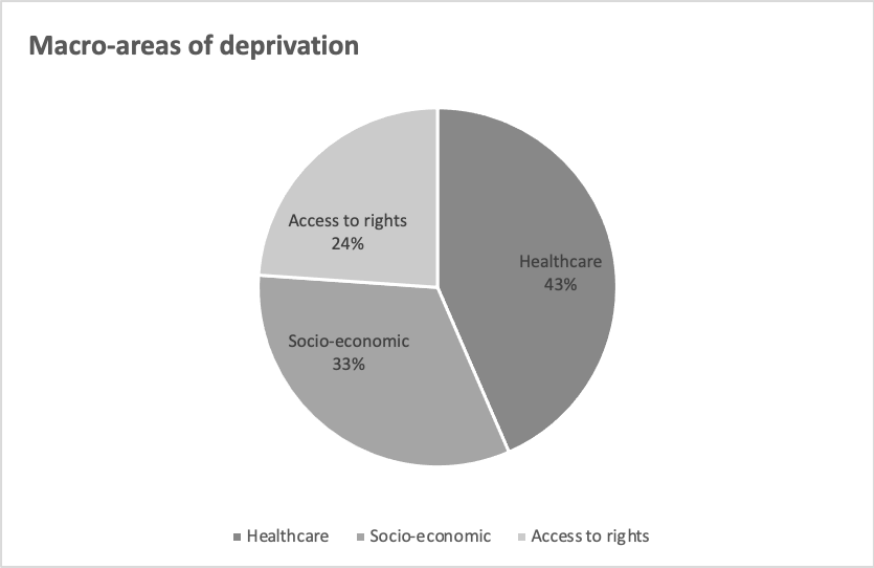


Figure 1 – First step: macro-areas of deprivation and dimensions of social vulnerability.

The analysis clearly showed that each social dimension has a specific weight in determining individual conditions of deprivation. However, it also showed that some dimensions have a greater weight than others and have an impact on more than one area of deprivation identified. Deprivation was thus identified as a multifaceted phenomenon, encompassing both personal and contextual/social characteristics. The following figure illustrates the relative weight of each social dimension within each macro area of deprivation, expressed as the number of occurrences across all interviews (Figure 2).

We conducted a thematic analysis on the data collected during the focus group with social workers, and subsequently, all the collected material was integrated through a second thematic analysis (Gioia et al., 2013). This provided a more nuanced understanding of the interactions between the different social dimensions and helped to identify the mechanisms of deprivation.

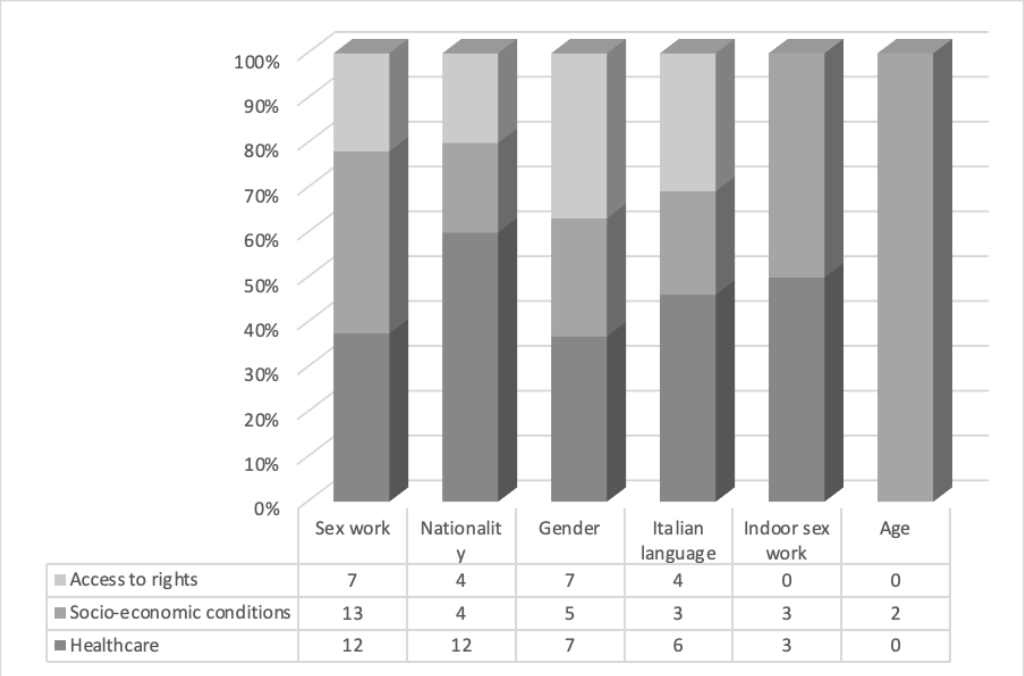
Firstly, the dimension 'nationality' emerged as a recurring factor in the macro-areas of 'health' and 'access to rights'. This is because, as social workers and sex workers have explained, residence status (in other words, whether or not a person has a residence permit and what type of permit it is) combined with the experience of migration affects access to services and benefits[3].

> *"As far as health is concerned, I feel fragile mainly because I come from another country" (Int_3)*

[3] For the purposes of this paper, all materials were subsequently translated into English, seeking to maintain the nuances of the source language.

"Yes, yes I needed the medical examination, it took a while, because I had no documents" (Int_9)

"I had a health problem and not having the documents I did not know how to do it" (Int_12)



	Sex work	Nationality	Gender	Italian language	Indoor sex work	Age
Access to rights	7	4	7	4	0	0
Socio-economic conditions	13	4	5	3	3	2
Healthcare	12	12	7	6	3	0

Figure 2 – Second step: the weight of the social dimensions

The dimension 'nationality' also affects social status, albeit in different ways for migrants and Italians. Being a migrant is often associated with stereotypes and prejudices that can be linked to other stereotypes and prejudices about sex work (as if to say: if you are a foreigner, it is naturally possible that you are also a sex worker). On the other hand, Italians are more likely to experience stigma associated with sex work due to their nationality (as if to say: sex work is normally only done by immigrants). In this respect, social workers believe that Italian women who engage in sex work are the most likely to internalise the stigma (Goffman 1963; Vender 2005).

"I was ashamed to even go to my own hospital, then to the consulting room in my village, where I had several pap smear recalls, they are very cold and mechanical […] Also, because I am convinced, especially with regard to private gynecologists, that they have a lot of prejudices and I don't know how they would react to someone who says she is a prostitute, I don't think they would treat me neutrally" (Int_18)

The dimension 'working in the sex market' has a greater impact on all macro-areas of deprivation (health, access to rights, socio-economic status) than the dimension 'working in the indoor sex market'. This supports the hypothesis that sex work has a greater impact - for example, in terms of social stigma or discriminatory access to services - than the specific segment in which it is carried out.

> *"I was not in any difficulty, only that of going to a doctor because of the work we do we are ashamed" (Int_11)*

> *"For the kind of work I do, there is a lot of discrimination" (Int_13)*

However, 'indoor sex work' is subject to specific forms of economic vulnerability, such as high rents, which often become a source of debt, or increased forms of control and violence when criminal organisations are involved.

> *"I had a problem with expenses, house rent, electricity and gas […] I felt fragile because I never liked prostitution, I always did it out of necessity […] In my opinion we need more housing, because my problem is that I am afraid of eviction and in case I am evicted I have no possibility to have temporary housing. So, more housing assistance" (Int_16)*

The dimension 'gender' has a significant impact on all macro-areas of vulnerability, although in different ways for women and trans people. A similar effect is observed for the dimension 'age'. In some cases, the combination of the two dimensions influences individual vulnerability across the three macro-areas. For example, transgender people over the age of 50, especially those who are migrants, are vulnerable in terms of health (access to specialist care) and access to rights (e.g. pension or forms of income support). This consequently affects their socio-economic situation (social stigma prevents them from finding alternative employment).

> *'I am trans and HIV positive and I am often discriminated for that […] You seemed to me from the start to be people who could have helped me as a foreigner. My rights are not protected as a trans person, I do perform because I cannot do anything else and I suffer because I have never been recognised: I have never had a contract, I have always done sex work or performing under the table, no one pays me regularly and I am discriminated against as a trans person. We trans people are often abandoned" (Int_1)*

Finally, access to health services and recognition of one's rights is particularly affected by the knowledge of the Italian language.

Therefore, these findings reveal a complex and multifaceted phenomenon of deprivation that is both multidimensional and intersectional in nature. Sex workers experience a sense of vulnerability as a result of different interrelated factors, as well as the way in which these factors interact with each other. In particular, deprivation is often described or experienced as 'non-freedom to acquire self-defined wellbeing', in accordance with Sen's approach.

The social stigma associated with sex work further exacerbates the deprivation experienced by sex workers by limiting their individual agency (Giammarinaro 2022). For example, discriminatory attitudes towards sex workers in accessing services (health services, but also job search services) or regulatory constraints that stratify access to these services (for example, in reference to migrants) represent significant limitations to their self-determination and autonomy. Furthermore, the research indicates that those engaged in the sex market tend to internalise the associated stigma, which Goffman (1963) terms 'felt stigma'.

The social process of labeling has a profound impact on the lives of those to whom it is applied (Hallgrimsdottir et al. 2008). This can result in the limitation of potential opportunities to acquire the resources necessary to achieve one's own concept of wellbeing (Appadurai 2004). This is particularly evident in the case of sex workers, who are also denied the autonomy to define their "own good" (Wahab 2002). Social work should therefore seek to challenge these boundaries and create spaces of possibility where the wellbeing of sex workers can be legitimately defined and addressed.

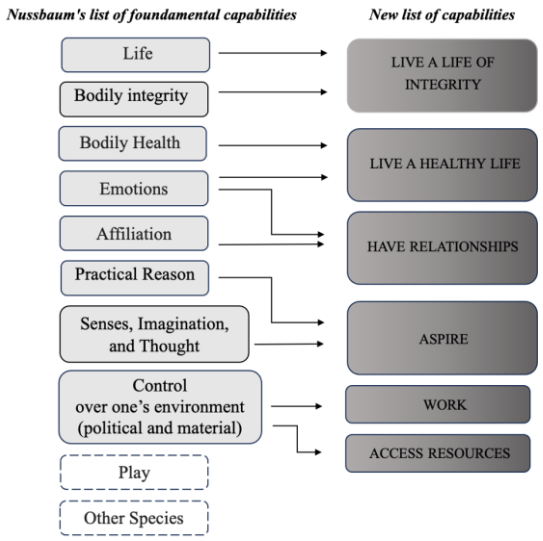
6. The capability to function: A new perspective on agency

After defining the macro-areas of deprivation and the mechanisms underlying the perceived vulnerability of sex workers, Sen's theory was employed to formulate possible functionings and capabilities to function, which were subsequently validated by social workers. The analysis of the 20 interviews with the sex workers was conducted with the aim of recording the quotes in which they described their sense of well-being, the actions within the project that had generated these feelings, and the possible interventions that could have generated them. The codified material was compared with the "central human capabilities" described by Marta Nussbaum (Nussbaum 2000, 2002).

This first step of analysis led to the identification of six domains of well-being that were considered as pertinent to the sex workers who were interviewed. Some of Nussbaum's

dimensions were fully represented, while others manifested in combination and still others did not emerge directly. The following figure illustrates the capabilities deemed relevant to the interviewees (Figure 3).

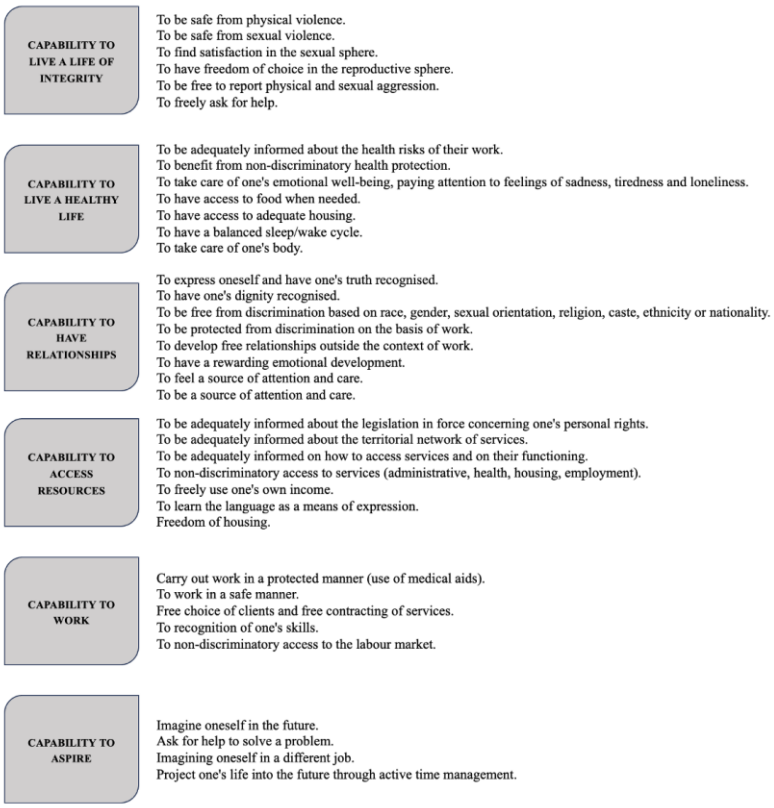
Figure 3 – Domains of sex workers' well-being



Through a further analysis of the interviews, a non-exhaustive list of potential functionings was identified for each domain, taking into account the contextual factors. The aim was to formalise the Capability Approach. To this end, the list proposed by Nussbaum was used as a starting point to develop a new configuration of social work, that could provide a guide to the institutions on which sex workers' functionings and capability to function depend (Figure 4).

Finally, the list of capabilities and functionings was discussed and validated in one of the assembly meetings with the social workers. This final stage was extremely challenging for the social workers, as it required them to re-evaluate their existing work routines. By discussing the different dimensions of capacitation, the social workers were able to adopt a different perspective, that of the sex workers, and engage in reflexive processes of transformation. This encouraged them to re-examine their own work practices and their current and potential impact.

Figure 4 – Non-exhaustive list of functionings for each well-being domain



The social workers engaged in the discussion achieved a consensus on two critical issues that should be taken into account when rethinking social work with sex workers. It was agreed that it is crucial to promote a real consideration of sex workers as full individuals, beyond any social categorisation or political rhetoric associated with their work. This objective can be achieved by ensuring the pursuit of a set of basic human capabilities that serve to enhance social policy as a conversion factor.

Secondly, social work must refrain from reducing the complexity of individual needs into fixed categories. Instead, social work should seek to develop a dynamic map of potential pathways to well-being, which can be employed by social workers in their interactions with sex workers. In this sense, social work intervention can serve as an effective space for agency.

The debate surrounding two of the proposed capabilities is particularly illustrative. The first is the “capability to live a life of integrity” for transgender people, while the second concerns the practical translation of the “capability to aspire” for sex workers (Appadurai 2004).

With the objective to maintain their chosen gender, transgender people often have to undergo invasive physical changes (hormone therapies, surgical procedures, and lengthy administrative processes), which often require constrained decision-making (due to the financial burden of the surgeries or the availability or lack of documentation for migrants). During the discussion, it became evident that their well-being depends on a specific notion of integrity, namely the capacity to align their physical body with their chosen gender identity. This objective can only be attained through transformative interventions, which frequently entail the pursuit of contextual value objectives, such as fundraising for surgery through sex work. Conversely, achieving the desired bodily integrity means confronting the social stigma associated with transgender identity, which creates discriminatory barriers to accessing the labour market, for example.

The issue of stigma was a crucial point of discussion in the debate surrounding the "capability to aspire". The conditions of indoor sex workers are frequently described by social workers as one of 'living in the continuous present'. This is characterised by difficulties in inquiring about one's health status, attending the second appointment to collect the results of a health test, and pursuing alternative employment opportunities.

The ‘lack of freedom to project themselves into the future’ is also a recurring theme in the interviews with sex workers.

> *"I am trying to change my life. I would like to do a different job and have a house but I am afraid that I will not be able to change anything and that everything I have done is useless. If I failed, I would feel disappointed. Fragile is something I have never allowed myself to be. Sad and disappointed, of course” (Int_2)*
>
> *"I want to live like everyone, I am not asking for a skyscraper. To live, work like everyone, without being afraid to say tomorrow who knows what happens and where I go” (Int_9)*
>
> *"I continued because for the first time I had been helped and I thought it was help that could continue” (Int_10)*
>
> *"But I am getting to know the service and I know that in the future, if I need, you I can rely on you" (Int_17)*
>
> *"So, in that sense if I hadn't had this phone contact I would have procrastinated again, although really the infectious disease test was something I had wanted to do for too long" (Int_18)*

In conclusion, as Appadurai (2004) suggests, the capability of a person to pursue their aspirations for the future represents an essential aspect of their freedom. It is, therefore, incumbent upon social workers to promote this capability.

7. Discussion and conclusions: Recognising (mechanisms of) deprivation to promote capabilities in social work with sex workers

As part of the inVisibile Project, the "Marco Biagi" Department of Economics of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia conducted a participatory research experience with social workers in 2020, employing a range of qualitative research tools. This article presents the principal findings from interviews with sex workers and focus groups with social workers, addressing two main research questions: (1) how to rethink social work in order to promote adequate and accessible non-stigmatising public services for sex workers, and (2) to what extent the Capability Approach, as developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, can provide a robust theoretical framework for this rethinking.

The collected data enabled the condition of sex workers to be accounted in terms of deprivation, understood as the 'non-freedom to pursue one's own well-being'. It became evident that deprivation is multifaceted, intersectional and reinforced by social labeling processes that result in the stigma attached to sex work.

The findings confirm that there is no universal experience of sex work and that the roots of these differences lie in the different social positions and working conditions of sex workers (Wahab 2002, 2004). In light of the diversity of experiences among sex workers, it is imperative for social workers to move beyond the political rhetoric and the processes of social stigmatization. Instead, they should identify and address the real needs of sex workers, rather than "their own good" as defined by others.

With regard to the concept of stigma, it is not only a deeply discrediting attribute, but it has also been defined as a social process (Goffman 1963). This is particularly pertinent to social work, as stigma frequently targets individuals with diminished power and is often mediated by factors such as class, race, ethnicity and gender (Hallgrimsdottir et al. 2008).

The results also suggest that even those sex workers with the most limited access to resources and the most challenging life circumstances possess agency, which enables them to exercise a degree of power in both their professional and personal lives. In this context, agency can be understood as a means by which people can freely negotiate their power in a highly stigmatised environment. Denying this agency, even in the context of social interventions, carries the risk of further entrenching processes of criminalisation and stigmatisation.

In response to the research question, a definition of agency has been proposed, as the ability of sex workers to formulate and act on informed choices, using different resources and coping with structural contextual factors that influence their availability. The concept of agency possesses a dynamic intrinsic dimension, characterised by a tension between the value of the

individual and the possibility of modifying their circumstances. This tension can be seen as underpinning the effectiveness of public intervention.

The legitimisation of sex workers' agency allows social workers to identify their real needs and to develop more effective interventions in the present. Consequently, it also allows sex workers to freely envisage and pursue their future aspirations. In this regard, the interviews suggest that the "capability to aspire" is contingent upon a state of freedom that enables sex workers to formulate goals. It is therefore imperative to create a space for action that is legitimised (Sen 1990, 1995) and enables sex workers to pursue change.

The provision of social interventions in the form of information, knowledge and awareness, as well as facilitating access to services, particularly health services, helps to enhance the agency and capabilities of individuals. It is only through the active involvement of sex workers in social intervention that a participatory perspective can be adopted with respect to social work. This implies the recognition that the achievement of a goal depends on the active involvement of individuals and their freedom to pursue it.

Building on this, Nussbaum's list of central human capabilities was considered and six domains of well-being were identified. A non-exhaustive list of potential functionings was then proposed for each of these domains, and it was argued that these should be promoted by public policy and the social work through which it is implemented.

This study is not without limitations, that provide opportunities for further research. Firstly, this article does not explore how rethinking social work can feed back into governance processes and inform policy at national level. Secondly, further research is needed to explore whether the Capability Approach can serve as a robust theoretical framework for a comprehensive rethinking of social work, particularly in relation to other policy areas characterised by a strong social stigma (e.g. homelessness or mental illness).

From a methodological perspective, there are two major limitations. Firstly, it should be noted that sex workers were not involved in the validation meetings. Secondly, there is a dearth of a monitoring process to assess the impact of the research on social work practice. Participatory research is an effective method of co-generating knowledge; however, it necessitates time and space, which are not always available due to resource constraints and the necessity to be involved in policy-making processes.

These limitations should motivate researchers to develop new tools and methods for engaging social workers and policy recipients, with the aim of firstly legitimising their knowledge.

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