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Chinese Female Sex Workers in Paris: Fighting Precarity through Negotiated Interdependence

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Abstract

In this article, we explore the life experiences of Chinese female sex workers in Paris. In 2016, the French government enacted a law criminalising sex workers' clients as part of its efforts to combat prostitution and human trafficking. However, this abolitionist law has intensified the very violence it aimed to eradicate and reinforced the notion that in sex work, everything is rooted in violence and exploitation. As a result, people involved in the sex work sector, especially migrant women, are often not seen as capable of understanding and making decisions about their own lives. In this context, alongside the broader criminalisation of borders, we highlight how Chinese women engaged in sex work navigate and resist increased precarity in their daily lives in the French capital. Our research indicates that they mitigate precarity through what we describe as 'negotiated interdependence' within their networks. Although this interdependence may restrict their autonomy in the workplace, it serves as a crucial strategy to combat the increased challenges they face under prostitution abolitionism, such as financial instability and social isolation. We conceptualise negotiated interdependence as an affective and socio-economic bond that encompasses three key, often competing, processes in these migrant sex workers' decision-making: (1) maintaining independence, which pertains to self-preservation, safeguarding personal autonomy, and retaining control over one's life through sexual-economic exchanges and migration projects; (2) developing reciprocal reliance, which underscores the necessity for both collective and individual support; and (3) negotiation, the dynamic force that underlies the bonds these migrant women forge with each other and with third parties.

Keywords: sex work, Chinese sex workers, negotiated interdependence, migration, precarity.

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1. Introduction: Policy-makers' discourses between protection and control

In April 2016 the French government voted in favour of a law that criminalises sex workers' clients to combat prostitution and human trafficking. The majority of the French political class, from right to left, stands by the notion that sex work is in itself demeaning—particularly for women—and antithetical to the fundamental principles of human dignity (Jaksic 2016). This assumption has given rise to the notion that the demand for sex work drives human trafficking for sexual exploitation (Giametta and Le Bail 2022; Darley 2023). Despite extensive research showing that these assumptions do not reflect the lived realities of most sex workers across various countries (Crowhurst et al. 2017; Greer 2022; Levy and Jakobsen 2014; Mai et al. 2021), the French government has determined that the so-called 'Swedish model' of sex work (Ekberg 2004), which criminalises the purchase of sexual services, is the most effective approach to ending prostitution and the range of harmful phenomena it is believed to cause.

The idea that prostitution is inherently linked to violence has been a longstanding trope (Sanders 2016), especially concerning migrant women working in the sector (Chimienti 2009; Ticktin 2008). However, under France's abolitionist approach to sex work, this perception has now been codified into law. In the French context, policymakers have often treated the violence experienced by sex workers as a singular, undifferentiated issue, asserting that sex workers face violence because prostitution itself is violence (Mathieu 2014). This conflation obscures the complex ways in which violence manifests in particular social contexts, especially where the labour of these women is criminalised. Prior to the criminalisation of sex workers' clients in 2016, sex workers in France were directly targeted by laws criminalising public soliciting, which had been strengthened by the 2003 Law for National Security (Maffesoli 2008). The 2016 legislation, modelled after the Swedish legal framework, has adversely affected their autonomy as workers, their financial situation, the risks they may be willing to take, and the level of social stigma they face (Le Bail, Giametta, and Rassouw 2018). Alongside the criminalisation of clients, the 2016 law introduced a 'prostitution exit programme,' offering eligible sex workers financial aid, a temporary residence permit for six months (renewable up to three times), and support from accredited organisations to access housing and employment. Although this support aligns with the needs of sex workers wishing to leave the sector, both organisations and sex workers have criticised the implementation of the exit programme. In fact, this has been difficult to access and requires leaving sex work entirely or losing the right to the support, additionally, the financial aid offered is extremely low—only 330 per month (SEXHUM report 2021). Since the 2016 law's enactment, there has been an increase in serious violent incidents, including homicides and

thefts in sex workers' apartments in Paris, as reported by the Paris-based organisation Roses d'Acier and the Lotus Bus programme of Doctors of the World.

The rise of abolitionist agendas framing all forms of sex work and sexual exploitation (Hoefinger et al. 2020) and the formidable criminalisation of borders in France as elsewhere in the Global North (Tyerman at al. 2021) have produced practices of governance that control vulnerable migrant populations (Ticktin 2008), augmenting their insecurity and risk of deportation. This type of governance is tightly connected to 'sexual humanitarianism'—a framework used to describe how sex workers and migrants are supported and intervened upon by immigration institutions based on vulnerabilities associated with sexual behaviour, orientation, and labour (Mai 2018). Sexual humanitarianism deploys racialised and gendered categories of victimhood that reproduce xenophobic and racist hierarchies of mobility legitimising control in the name of protection (Giametta et al. 2022). Chinese women in the sex work sector in France, as other migrant sex workers, have been the targets of sexual humanitarian governance, which has amplified the construction of these migrant groups as a social problem. This has also contributed to displace the responsibility for harm away from structural factors such as poverty, exclusion, and gendered violence onto individual sex workers, framed as both victims and offenders.

In this article, we want to move beyond discussing the 2016 law, focusing instead on how a specific group of migrant women in sex work are perceived—as either (racialised) women in need of protection or as (migrant) individuals to be controlled. Since 2016, political discourse has framed migrant sex workers as either victims requiring protection or criminals. However, the women to whom we talked present a more complex reality. Whilst the law forms part of the context, our focus is on its discursive impact, which suggests that all aspects of sex work are rooted in violence and exploitation, denying sex workers, especially migrants, the recognition as experts of their own lives. Moreover, we see a shift in how violence is understood, that is, violence may have always been present, but since 2016, it has been more explicitly named and recognised, both by the research participants themselves and by NGOs (Chen 2023). This shift allows us to better understand the nature of violence and precarity within their experiences. In so doing, we will focus on how Chinese women engaging in sex work in Paris strategise in their everyday lives to resist the enhanced precarity emerging from this context by forming 'negotiated interdependence' among one another and their networks.

There is a vast literature on the concept of precarity, ranging from a labour-centric perspective to a more existential understanding of modern life (Butler 2004; Lazzarato 2004; della Porta et al. 2015). We understand precarity and its verb form, precarisation, in both economic and ontological terms—as a multidimensional process that undermines stability in our research participants' lives by altering the structures that provide a sense of security across the

social worlds they navigate. As Della Porta et al. note 'people in precarious situations often enter into their games with lousy cards in their hands, often without even knowing the rules, which have not properly been made clear to them or are constantly changing' (2015:3). Those in precarious circumstances are frequently confronted with shifting 'rules', compelling them to employ strategic and imaginative tactics to resist these challenges. Accordingly, we use the term precarity specifically to describe how Chinese migrant sex workers are impacted by the convergence of immigration rules, the heightened stigma of sex work associated with prostitution abolitionism, and wider changes in the sex work sector. This precarity influences their social realities, pushing them to adapt to rapidly changing conditions.

2. Context and methods

French media and political discourses depict particular groups of migrant women in the sex work sector as victims of human trafficking (Darley 2023). These simplistic and racialised portrayals of migrants as victims align with the framework of sexual humanitarianism. Along with migrant women from Nigeria, Chinese women involved in sex work are represented in this way (Le Bail 2015). However, the women we interviewed for this article did not describe violence in the same terms as governmental discourses. Consistent with other research in this area (Baskin 2010; Sanders 2005), they did not necessarily view violence as inherently linked to sex work itself. But they talked about the violence they suffer through discussing their relationships with different actors and institutions, may these be police officers, neighbours, husbands and partners, passers-by, landlords, intermediaries, clients, but most recurrently the municipal ordinances, the repressive legal regime, and the immigration administration.

Here we will examine two datasets. First, we elaborate on key data from Chen's doctoral research about the experiences of Chinese women in the sex work sector in Paris. Chen's focuses on 20 women's life accounts, with whom he has built a relationship over a 9-year time period (See Chen 2023). The methods used here are based on participant observation and interviews, Chen has been an active member of two Paris-based organisations providing legal, social and health support to Chinese sex workers for the past 8 years. Second, we draw on the ethnographic data and interviews with 13 Chinese women in sex work that Giametta co-conducted in Paris during the research project (March 2016 – March 2018) that led up to the publication of the report on the impact of the repressive law on sex workers in France published by Doctors of the World in collaboration with 11 sex workers' organisations across France (2018). Our methods to address the experiences of this heterogeneous group of women are based on: (a) social science

research through semi-structured qualitative interviews with sex workers, sex work organisations, and other stakeholders (Giametta); (b) the analysis of subjective life stories from a psycho-social perspective (Chen). We analysed the two datasets independently and subsequently we identified the key topics that emerged throughout the fieldworks and compared our findings. The women in these studies ranged in age from 25 to 65 years, with an average age of 52. In both samples, about 60% were aged between 40 and 65 and had migrated to France before 2010, while the remaining 40% were aged between 25 and 40 and had migrated after 2010. They did both street-based and indoor work, mostly working from rented flats in the area of Belleville in Paris. The interviews were conducted intermittently between April 2016 and May 2020, reflecting legislative changes in France as well as the initial impact of COVID-19 on the participants' work practices and increased precarity. All participants identified as cisgender and heterosexual. To protect confidentiality, all sex worker interviewees' names were omitted. Chen conducted all interviews in Chinese, as he is a native speaker, and Giametta made use of two trusted interpreters who were already well known by this migrant community through the work of Doctors of the World's support programmes addressing the needs of Chinese female sex workers.

3. Understanding the migration trajectories of Chinese women in sex work in Paris

Research participants come from different parts of China, most of these migrant women arrived in France from the North East of the country in the early 2000s. At this time the women who came to France were generally between 40 and 65 years old, identified as heterosexual, and the majority of them did not plan to do sex work once in the country of arrival, in fact most of them started off as cleaners and care workers within French and Chinese families. The initial focus on care work was due to the fact that poor racialised migrant women did not have many other options in the labour market in France (Lévy and Lieber 2008), and in most cases they did not have legal documents to seek other forms of labour (Le Bail 2015). Our research found that women who migrated between the 2000s and 2010s primarily did sex work in several Chinatown areas in Paris, including the Belleville neighbourhood. They usually operated on the streets, taking clients to nearby apartments, while a few worked in parking lots in clients' cars. During this time, these women often collaborated, sharing clients and working in the same areas.

Many of these women were connected to a younger generation, either as family members or close friends, who arrived in France after 2010. Since then, there has been a significant rise in the number of women migrating from various regions of China, both inland and coastal. We noted

that a considerable number of women migrating after 2010 were often aware that moving to France would likely lead them into the sex work sector. Further, the age range of these migrants shifted, with many being younger, typically between 25 and 40 years old. A number of them came to France specifically to do sex work, as they were already sex workers in China or in the countries where they had lived prior to moving to Europe. Unlike the older women who migrated before them, these younger women were skilled at using various online platforms to find work. These newer migrant generations have adopted a more individualistic approach to their work. Those who were students and had the legal right to work could also be found in massage parlours throughout Paris. It's important to highlight however that the older generation of sex workers has also adapted by improving their digital skills and learning basic French, enabling them to work more competitively and evade direct police scrutiny.

Women who immigrated to France in their late 50s and 60s, having been more directly affected by economic changes in China, lacked access to any social or welfare protection systems while living there. This meant that this group of older participants faced particular challenges. For instance, illness, accidents, relationship breakdowns, or divorce could swiftly render them financially vulnerable. One participant said:

> *'People my age in China don't have much security, even less so if you're a single mother with a child. I didn't want to remarry, men are really not reliable. Especially, I can't accept that while your wife is pregnant, you go off with other girls. Honestly, I wanted to make more money, so I started preparing to work abroad'. (L. 54yo, Paris 2017)*

Often migration represented an opportunity—a potential way out of poverty and destitution. Entering sex work in the process of migrating and settling in in the new country was often talked about through reflecting upon the responsibilities towards one's family. Often participants evoked a gendered notion of 'sacrifice' in relation to their families, but at the same time many wanted to meet their responsibilities quickly in order to start focusing on their 'own projects' by allowing time for their individual needs and desires.

In our separate fieldwork, we identified several common structural factors shaping participants' migration experiences that radically challenge simplistic notions of 'choice' in the sex industry. First, the lack of adequate welfare and social protection in China meant that participants often could not afford healthcare for themselves or their families, pay for their children's education, or retire due to insufficient pensions. Second, the burden on women to manage both productive and reproductive labour, especially without a husband's support (whether due to death, absence, or violence), placed many in precarious situations. This was compounded by experiences such as divorce or being the eldest daughter, which heightened the

tension between socially imposed responsibilities and internalised expectations regarding family duties. Lastly, there was a strong individual desire to change one's destiny through work, a mindset that intensified after the market reforms of the 1980s and the rise of capitalist values in China (Yun-Win Sung 1991). Many participants felt pressured to buy a good house for their male child to ensure a favourable marriage, with those unable to do so experiencing significant social guilt, particularly in the context of the one-child policy, which emphasised the need for excellence in one's offspring. This demanded a great deal of forethought and pressure, as one participant shared:

> *'My family had debts, so when I went to Japan in 2011 for eight months for work. After finishing that job, we were able to pay off the debts, and a huge weight was lifted from my shoulders. That's when I started thinking about buying a house for my family. I looked for other opportunities to work abroad, but at that time my son was getting older, he was a teenager and needed a lot of attention. He had to be supervised because he was in his rebellious phase. Plus, to work abroad, you need to have a certain amount of money as a guarantee, so I had to wait a few more years until my son became an adult'. (A. 49yo, Paris 2018)*

Migration provided many participants with the ability to quickly address social responsibilities by earning and sending money back home. At the same time, it opened up new opportunities to reshape these migrant women's life plans, such as starting a new family, building new social connections, finding joy in intimate relationships, and having more time for themselves.

4. Epistemic violence targeting sex workers under the *de-facto* criminalised environment

While sex work is not illegal in France (Darley et al. 2018), those working in the sector often feel there are no protections ensuring their rights. As a result, many come to accept that they must endure any violation of their rights as a consequence of their choice to engage in commercial sex (Bradley 2007). The Swedish model of sex work in France has contributed to the very conditions of violence, which it promised to combat through its implementation (Le Bail, Giametta, and Rassouw 2018). Additionally, this model fails to account for how violence is produced within the political economy of globalised capitalist societies in which many women (and men) live and travel to change and better their life circumstances.

Since prostitution is viewed as inherently violent and everyone is expected to acknowledge this, those who choose to engage in it are also expected to cope with its associated violence on

their own. Sex workers are often portrayed either as complete victims or as victims of symbolic violence, unable to recognise the subaltern position they occupy (Garofalo and Macioti 2016). Alternatively, they may be seen as conscious yet deviant decision-makers (Sanders 2007), implying that they bear sole responsibility for the consequences of their choices. This perception is so pervasive that many participants felt a profound sense of individual responsibility for their decision to pursue this line of work, which meant that they were not expecting any form of support.

When a violent incident occurred, our participants often felt solely responsible for what had happened to them. During Chen's fieldwork in 2018, one participant was sexually assaulted by a client in her apartment. Following the incident, she quickly began to blame herself, believing she had made a mistake in accepting this particular client. She expressed frustration with herself, as she shared: 'I've always been very selective and careful, I'm so upset that this happened to me' (T. 38yo, Paris 2018). Although she had a moment of doubt about this client, she chose to ignore her intuition. Other co-workers also criticised her for being 'careless'. After the assault, she felt she had lost her ability to choose clients wisely and could no longer trust anyone. This dynamic created divisions among the workers, as they often found themselves alone in dealing with incidents of violence and their aftermath. A similar situation was recounted by another participant in 2019, who shared with Giametta about a violent encounter with a 'bad client'. She felt ashamed for not heeding her colleagues' warnings and feared that if she told others about the incident, they would openly express their disapproval, making her feel even worse. This sense of personal responsibility and fear of judgement can undermine solidarity among women. It demonstrates that if this form of violence is not recognised as socially produced, those affected may suffer the consequences of feeling responsible for—or even deserving of—such violence.

Teela Sanders notes that 'when assessing violence against sex workers, the experiences, prevalence, and nature of violence differ across sex markets' (2016, 99). In fact, it is crucial to situate violence within the specific social context the individual inhabits, as it is shaped by their migration statuses, social resources, poverty, and scarce employment options resulting from language barriers and other forms of discrimination. Only by doing so we can aptly examine the relationship between marginalised identities and violence and understand how violence is named and produced in relation to an individual's position within a specific social context—such as being a woman of colour, sex worker, undocumented migrant, and poor in France.

Ultimately it is apparent that the current prostitution law has not changed the legal and societal structures that normalise feelings of stigmatisation and insecurity for all sex workers—i.e. the notion of 'it comes with the job'. The structural nature of social injustice for migrants and non-migrant sex workers manifest itself in the fact that violence and control are multi-sited and pervasive (Földhàzi 2009), as many of our participants revealed. Different actors and

institutions are involved in producing cyclical forms of violence, may these be the repressive abolitionist legal regime, the police, the municipal ordinances, the immigration administration, landlords, passers-by, neighbours, partners, and intermediaries.

5. Negotiated Interdependence among sex workers

Over the past two decades, research on migrant sex work has focused on several key areas which include; the working conditions and life paths of migrant sex workers, the role of border control and anti-trafficking mechanisms in regulating sex work and women's mobilities, and the damaging ways in which migration status interacts with other social factors and identities (Andrijasevic 2010; Augustin 2007; Chimienti 2009; Oso 2016; Plambech 2016).

Much of this scholarly work examines the complexity of agency and vulnerability of migrant sex workers as they face border control regimes in the Global North. Niina Vuolajärvi (2019), for instance, introduces the concept of 'precarious intimacies' to describe the relationships that migrant sex workers in Europe form with clients, husbands, or lovers to achieve stability and security in their lives. In her fieldwork with migrant sex workers in Finland, she notes that many of her participants viewed marriage or finding a wealthy lover as a significant achievement, as it could provide an easier path to obtaining a residence permit and securing a future in Europe, especially when formal employment is inaccessible (2019, 1101). She goes on to analyse these relationships—with clients, husbands, or lovers—as strategic responses to exclusion from formal labour markets and restrictive immigration policies. However, Vuolajärvi also points out that these relationships serve as both a resource and a source of precarity. This is particularly problematic due to the gendered nature of dependency these sex workers must navigate. By examining these dynamics through what we have termed 'negotiated interdependence', we aim to expand the analysis of migrant sex workers' precarious intimacies.

The concept of negotiated interdependence that we propose recognises that our participants' precarious intimacies involve a broader spectrum of relationships beyond clients, husbands, and lovers. They include other parties that impact migrants' precarity, reflecting a complex dynamics of how gendered and racialised migration policies and informal labour markets intersect with personal dependencies and decision-making. We understand negotiated interdependence among Chinese women engaging in sex work as a common and effective strategy that these migrants use to balance the pursuit of stability with the inherent risks of vulnerability and dependency. In sum, negotiated interdependence involves creating social and intimate ties to lessen the severe effects of legal and social conditions that increase their precarity. Negotiated interdependence

encompasses a broad network of mutual support and interlinked dependencies that include both economic and emotional dimensions. These women, in fact, navigate an intricate web of relationships that, besides clients, involves co-workers, and other third parties—with each connection demanding ongoing negotiation to manage both their economic needs and personal safety. One participant expressed it this way:

> *'Life here is under a lot of pressure. We all have more or less heart problems, constantly afraid of this or that, the police, people who attack us in the street, even the neighbours, because it's not easy to find an apartment to do this work. And this is really our daily life, whether you have papers or not, all women live like this'. (C. 46yo, Paris 2019)*

To tackle the enhanced precarity in their everyday lives, Chinese women engaging in sex work in Paris (Roses d'Acier 2016) enact negotiated interdependence among one another and their networks. This may reduce their autonomy at work, but it strategically counters the heightened precarity—including financial instability and isolation—they face under prostitution abolitionism. These forms of negotiated interdependence are affective and socio-economic bonds that feature three key, often competing, processes in these migrant sex workers' decision-making: (1) maintaining independence, which pertains to self-preservation, safeguarding personal autonomy, and retaining control over one's life through sexual-economic exchanges and migration projects; (2) developing reciprocal reliance, which underscores the necessity for both collective and individual support; and (3) negotiation, the dynamic force that underlies the bonds these migrant women forge with each other and with third parties.

5.1. Maintaining independence

For the majority of our participants, migrating and working in the sex industry served as a means to achieve upward social mobility (Oso 2016)—after a few months from their arrival in France, they could repay the debts they had before migrating and meet the financial responsibilities with their families in China. While acknowledging the economic and structural forces that drove their migrations, it is crucial to highlight the role of love, sex, and emotion in shaping and understanding their desires for mobility (Mai and King 2009). Despite the racism and hardship encountered in their migrations, participants often framed their decisions of migrating as enriching opportunities for re-invention, allowing them to prioritise their own desires over familial responsibilities. After living in France for 10 years and established sufficient resources in Paris, one participant said:

> *'Here in France, I can organise my day as I like, I have a glass of wine in a restaurant if I want, I enjoy a coffee at a café, if I want to work I work, if I don't, I don't. At my age, in China, that wouldn't be possible. If I went back, I'd be a grandmother and taking care of my mother. Instead, now I can pay someone to take care of her'. (A. 60yo, Paris, 2020)*

Their diaspora narratives frequently depicted the social structure they had left behind in China as restricting their self-determination through rigid gendered roles. For many, motherhood began soon after their first marriages, requiring constant productive and reproductive labour to maintain the family unit. Reflecting on their past experiences in China, many among them disclosed that love and desire were not the primary factors in their decision to marry. Other participants' stories suggested that, in their life experience in France, pursuing the ideal of romantic love by finding a husband was not seen as conflicting with their goals of achieving personal autonomy and independence.

Building on this, the work of Italian anthropologist Paola Tabet (2004, 2012) offers further insights into our participants' experiences. Tabet shows that historically the gendered division of labour and women' limited access to resources has contributed to women's use of sexuality as the most effective currency of exchange of which they could dispose. She defines the sexual-economic exchange as 'the relations between men and women involving some kind of compensation given by the man for the sexual services of a woman' (2012, 39). For Tabet, the sexual-economic exchange implies a continuum, and not a dichotomy, between the type of sexual services within the sphere of marriage and other forms of sexual services that women provide. Our participants' perspectives on their interactions with clients and the various roles they assumed reflect this continuum described by Tabet. While their methods for achieving and maintaining personal autonomy varied, a common theme emerged: the strategic use of negotiation (which we will explore further). In essence, negotiating these sexual-economic exchanges enabled them to enjoy greater personal time compared to most jobs they could access in other sectors, the chance to earn and spend more, and the ability to care for themselves and their families in China, as well as to plan a future with a romantic partner.

At times, participants' clients sought intimacy that involved activities like going out to dinner or on a trip out of Paris, as one participant described it: 'they want you to act as if you were the girlfriend' (D. 32yo, Paris 2020). Participants often felt they could provide the 'girlfriend experience' (Bernstein 2007), which allowed them to be well-compensated while enjoying the temporary benefits of a social life with a client. Some participants remarked that, from their perspective, such relationships could be seen as a 'boyfriend experience', as one of them put it. When this occurred, some women were able to let their guard down and explore other

possibilities within the relationship. However, they remained vigilant to ensure the relationship stayed fundamentally transactional to protect themselves.

During the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, as Paris prepared for its first lockdown, some of our participants chose to move in with clients they considered trustworthy. At this time, relationships between clients and sex workers appeared to shift from occasional or regular interactions to cohabiting partnerships. As analysed by Vuolajärvi (2019), we clearly noted the types of precarious intimacies that she describes in her research, which in Paris seemed to be particularly frequent during the peak of the pandemic. In fact, some participants factored in safety considerations when deciding to move in with a client, as they were not receiving state support. They found advantages in not having to pay rent during periods when they couldn't work and appreciated having someone by their side who spoke French and was more informed about the evolving health crisis and possible treatments. The lived experiences of these migrant women and the intricate nature of their social relationships expose their agency and resilience, which are fully denied by abolitionists laws based on overarching assumptions of victimhood.

5.2. Developing reciprocal reliance

During our interviews, participants who had recently migrated to France often expressed feelings of anxiety, as they could suffer from the pressure of having to repay debts at home, or might have emergency life projects for their families to attend to, or importantly, lacked sex work experience. As newcomers they often lacked language skills, knowledge of the socio-cultural context, and awareness of formal support structures. As they were newer in the streets, they were more popular among the local clientele, but they also became easier targets for assaulters. In a less competitive work environment, experienced sex workers could offer guidance to newcomers. However, when competition intensified and precarious conditions for workers increased, mutual support practices were easily hindered. Typically, seasoned sex workers would connect newcomers with trusted support organisations that could address their needs. When solidarity among sex workers diminished, newcomers risked becoming isolated and cut off from available support. This lack of support extended to interactions with the police; newer workers might not realise they could report crimes to the police even if they were undocumented. Experienced workers would usually inform them that the police and immigration authorities are separate entities, but without this guidance, newcomers may remain unaware of their rights and options for long periods of time. From our observations between 2016 and 2020, it was clear that solidarity did not simply disappear, rather it reorganised itself.

The broader context of globalisation, technological innovation, and neoliberal processes has led to increased precarity in the sex industry, reflecting trends seen in other labour sectors

(Benoit et al. 2021). Before the heightened precarity among sex workers due to the abolitionist stance framing commercial sex as immoral (Lieber and Le Bail 2021), the solidarity among sex workers involved experienced individuals supporting their less experienced peers. These collaborations involved older, more experienced workers sharing their expertise, while younger, less experienced workers contributed their client base. The seasoned workers, having accumulated extensive knowledge, resources, and practical skills from years of experience in Paris and elsewhere in France, were better equipped to select and negotiate with clients.

To counter the hardship of practicing sex work, experienced sex workers started to pair up with younger sex workers by deciding to work together. However, this form of reciprocal reliance has shifted towards an economically-driven arrangement where workers pair up primarily for financial sustenance. Both experienced and less experienced workers have sought adaptive solutions to address their financial instability, personal safety, and working conditions. This evolution in solidarity is not unprecedented; in fact historically, sex workers have had to manage their own safety and health particularly during crises such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the late 1980s (Chetwynd 1996) and the recent COVID-19 pandemic (Giametta et al. 2022).

The reciprocal reliance that many of our participants developed among one another carried significant risks due to French law, which classified their actions as brothel-keeping. As noted earlier, if two or more women worked together in a flat, the person who signed the lease could face pimping charges. Additionally, landlords might evict tenants suspected of being sex workers to avoid attracting police scrutiny. This reliance remained fragile among research participants. Trust was difficult to build and sustain, particularly when social relations are dependent on collective economic transactions. Socialising with each other was what allowed participants to build trust among themselves most effectively, and this implied that considerable part of the revenue they earned fed into their socialisation. Activities such as dining together, attending karaoke nights, shopping, and supporting one another in case of health issues were essential for strengthening their connections. When money flowed smoothly from clients to workers, their interactions were generally positive. However, during times of financial scarcity, tensions could quickly emerge. Thus, a decline in income not only affected their financial well-being but also strained their social relationships, increasing their sense of precariousness and isolation.

Participants' experiences revealed that feelings of precarity were closely linked to both financial instability and a broader sense of uncertainty—concerns about meeting basic needs tomorrow, or the potential for unforeseen incidents and whether they have the resources to cope. As their work-related precarity increased, so did their dependence on social networks. Greater precarity drove the need to expand these networks, as their existing support systems became more strained. This also meant they leaned more heavily on their regular clients or invested significant time and effort into turning occasional clients into regular ones. This shift

affected the nature of their work, as it required them to focus on building more sustainable and stronger relationships with clients. The rise in violent assaults against Chinese sex workers in Paris (Le Bail and Lieber 2021) further amplified this trend, with participants who felt a heightened sense of fear and insecurity becoming increasingly dependent on fewer and fewer regular clients.

5.3. Negotiation

Commercial sex involves a precise spatial-temporal location (Bernstein 2007), which is normally set apart from other spheres of a sex-worker's life. It is precisely this 'spatial-temporal separation and the explicit and negotiating character of sex work that make it exceptional, scandalous, socially stigmatised, and legally condemned' (Garofalo Geymonat and Selmi 2022, 10). Much research on sex work has explored the negotiating character of this form of labour by focusing on the relationship between sex worker and clients in relation to sexual health (Shannon and Csete 2010). But processes of negotiation occur at different levels and with different actors: co-workers, landlords, and third parties (people who answer the phone, who can help them find a flat, provide translation, they could be people who could do money transfers for them, ex sex workers or current sex workers). During our fieldwork, we observed that a central aspect for participants in negotiations was the pursuit of fairness and safety regarding their work. Negotiation is an active, ongoing process that demands significant energy from those involved. While this article does not allow for a comprehensive exploration of the widespread negotiating practices employed by our participants, we will focus on those that stood out as particularly important.

- *Negotiations with co-workers and landlords*: the role of negotiation in our participants' interactions with both landlords and co-workers underscores its crucial role in securing workspaces and resources (Sanders 2005; Bernstein 2007). Negotiations with co-workers mostly revolved around sharing critical resources, such as translators or apartments, which were necessary for their work. The negotiation process gave participants some power to protect themselves from exploitation and reshape their working conditions, but it also introduced the risk of exploitation. Similarly, negotiations with landlords involved balancing the participants' own safety needs with the landlord's interests, particularly when it came to discretion, security, and handling incidents such as assaults. Maintaining their workspace was vital to their livelihood, and negotiation was key to keeping that space secure. For instance, if a situation of aggression occurred in the flat, participants had to address it quietly to avoid exposing the landlord to unwanted attention. If the

landlord resisted police involvement, participants had to negotiate that decision while still protecting their workspace. When searching for a flat to work from, participants had to consider several factors. They had to be mindful of neighbours; for example, a building with a watchman or a neighbour known to complain was not ideal. The positioning of windows was also important—preferably, the flat would have at least one window with a view of the street, allowing them to assess a client's appearance before they entered. The location had to be easily accessible for clients with parking nearby but also discreet to avoid drawing attention. The building needed to offer basic security measures, such as security doors, intercoms, and access codes. All these safety requirements made it challenging for them to find a flat that met all their needs, so maintaining their current one became very important. This dependence on their existing arrangement also made them more vulnerable to landlords' whims, as both parties were aware of the power imbalance in their relationship.

- *Negotiating with third parties*: as discussed earlier, the interplay of the abolitionist law and sexual humanitarian governance targeting these migrant women compelled participants to change their ways of working. With fewer clients on the streets after criminalisation took effect, they increasingly shifted to online-based work. Further, because of language barriers, they had to find intermediaries to answer phone calls, online ads, and arrange meetings, but also to find a flat where to work, and/or advertise online. In these common-interest relationships, the division of labour was clearly defined and negotiation was essential, serving as the main distinctive trait of these socio-economic exchanges. Fundamentally, we noted that participants' labour became more reliant on the use of third parties, which at times seemed to reduce their autonomy. When working with third parties they could always refuse a client, but they would have to justify their reasons to do so—as their rejection became a collective loss of revenue for the other parties involved. Additionally, if a sex worker's earnings were stolen, she might find herself needing to explain the situation to the intermediaries, including details about where the money had gone.

More generally, sex workers would often hesitate to press charges in the event of assaults due to concerns about the potential impact on their network. According to the framework established by the fight against human trafficking, women are expected to articulate their victimhood clearly by reporting their exploiters to receive protection. However, even when the police arrested one of their intermediaries, most participants would not identify themselves as victims of pimping. Some participants only sought protection—through a competent organisation—if they felt their intermediaries were engaging in abusive practices, such as stealing money or charging exorbitant

rent. In such cases, negotiations broke down because participants realised they had been treated unfairly after the negotiation process.

6. Conclusion

As we delved into the experiences of Chinese women in sex work who face and resist precarity, it became essential to examine the less visible forms of precarisation while also challenging the myths and prejudices that unavoidably associate sex work with violence. When analysing violence in sex work, the abolitionist ideology tells us that it is expected in this type of work, as there is an equation between prostitution and gendered violence (Eckberg 2004; Sanders 2005, 2016). The abolitionist logic is founded upon the notion of prostitution being forced upon the commodified bodies of women, and yet despite its driving force, that of protecting women from exploitation, it has been detrimental to the Chinese sex workers to whom we talked (Giametta et al. 2022). Most participants shared that they wish to determine, on their own terms, when and under what conditions they will leave the sector, as they navigate the balance between their familial responsibilities and personal life goals. The migrant Chinese women we interviewed emphasised that this decision should not be made by the state. However, policymakers and public commentators frequently disregard these women's desires and personal projects, which are closely tied to their involvement in commercial sex (Garofalo Geymonat 2014). In addition to that, it is often overlooked that sex work, as an activity, holds meaning for those who engage in it. Many of our participants find sense in what they do, although this meaning-making can be fragile and easily disrupted by the stigma through which society views them (Garofalo Geymonat and Macioti 2016).

Under the current stringent immigration system in France, which produces harmful policies exacerbating the exploitability of marginalised migrants (Mezzadra and Neilson 2018), these women find themselves caught in a double bind as undocumented migrants and sex workers (Calderaro and Giametta 2019). Both these identities are stigmatised (Benoit et. al 2018; Pheterson 1993), penalised, and controlled by different institutions including the police. For Chinese sex workers in Paris, negotiated interdependence is a dynamic process shaped by the pressures of an exploitative and punitive immigration system, further intensified by the de facto criminalisation of their sector. This involves making strategic decisions about forming partnerships with other sex workers, clients, and intermediaries. These decisions are often based on safety and financial considerations as well as trust-building, all of which are in constant negotiation. For instance, working with other sex workers can provide safety and companionship

but also exposes them to legal risks like charges of brothel-keeping. Similarly, developing intimate relationships with clients may offer temporary stability or financial gain but can lead to a blurred boundary between personal and transactional interactions.

The impact of the repressive regime has been severe, leading to increased isolation, a breakdown in community solidarity, and heightened precarity and insecurity, which adversely affect their physical and mental health. The 2016 law on prostitution notably curtailed the strategies women previously employed to establish productive, mutually beneficial, and enduring social relationships with other sex workers and clients, forcing them to rely more heavily on third parties. Finally, societal perceptions of street-based sex workers as marginalised individuals often lead to impunity for those who enact violence against them. To better protect sex workers' lives, the state should decriminalise the sector, beginning with the de-penalisation of sex buyers. It is crucial to focus on effectively protecting people working in the sex industry rather than attempting to abolish the sector itself. In this context, the work of activist groups and charities is vital, as they strive to find new ways to address vulnerability and reduce exposure to violence and precarity for all sex workers.

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