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Editorial

Sex, Work and Rights: Contested Meanings, Epistemological Stigmatization and Transformative Knowledge on Sex Work in a Globalised Europe

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Giulia Garofalo Geymonat
Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy

P.G. Macioti
Médecins du Monde, France/ La Trobe University, Australia

Giulia Selmi
University of Parma, Italy

1. The expansion of sex work research: International trends and context-specific constraints

Recent years have seen a remarkable transformation of sex work in Europe, with the increased visibility of migrants operating in the sector - some of them in situations of severe exploitation - and a move towards internet-based work (Kempadoo et al. 2015; Sanders et al. 2018). In many European countries the combined criminalisation of sex work and migration, as well as COVID-19 measures have drastically reduced street-based sex work in favor of apartments or clubs, to reduce the risk of being arrested or deported by the police (ESWA 2024; Henham 2021; Mai et al. 2022; Wast 2021). Simultaneously, the development of new technologies facilitated new spaces and forms of sex work through online platforms, such as OnlyFans (Cunningham et.al. 2018; Swords et al. 2023). In this context, issues linked to sex work and trafficking have attracted renewed attention in policy making, public discourse and research, as well as from increasingly transnational civil society and grassroots movements (Dewey et al. 2019; Garofalo Geymonat, Selmi 2019; Jahnsen, Waagenar 2018; Ward, Wylie 2017).

In spite of the persistent marginalisation and stigmatisation affecting sex workers and sex worker rights organisations, their mobilisation has become more visible and connected across Europe, and has contributed, often in collaboration with feminist, post-colonial and queer researchers, to a better representation of the diversity of sex work (Smith, Mac 2018; Garofalo

Corresponding Author:
Giulia Selmi
giulia.selmi@unipr.it
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Geymonat, Macioti 2016). Importantly, these contributions have highlighted the extent to which prostitution, anti-trafficking and migration policies, as well as the rearrangement of urban and digital spaces, impact on sex workers' lives, health and rights (Giametta et al. 2022; Fédorko et.al. 2022; Mai et al. 2021). Today, knowledge on sex work is more accessible and more sophisticated, and in particular there is increased awareness that the world of sex work encompasses a wide array of subjects and practices, spaces and working conditions - from exploitative to favorable, with a whole range in between.

This new scenario has led some authors to characterise this expansion as an 'explosion of sex work research' (Kingston, Sanders 2010) in terms of quantity, variety of issues addressed within the sex industry, institutionalization and fundings. However, while this may hold partially true in the context of anglo-american academia - which in Europe is primarily led by British universities - it is certainly not the case across different European contexts. In Italy, which is where the journal AboutGender publishes this special issue, scattered studies on sex work have not yet solidified into a field of research, and researchers working on the topic from a variety of discipines tend to remain highly fragmented and isolated, often in precarious academic positions[1]. Across most countries in Europe, the field of studies of anti-trafficking and modern slavery contributes in important ways to the knowledge on sex work, especially at the intersection of critical migration and labour studies (Palumbo 2024; Semprebon 2023; Mai et al. 2021; Abbatecola 2018; Kempadoo et al. 2015). However, large parts of the sex industry, as well as the interventions and transformations affecting them, receive little attention, as their realities are largely not fitting in the categories and framework of human trafficking and sexual exploitation. Across most European contexts, little research exists on the practices and experiences of escorting, webcamming, content production, sexual assistance, exotic dancing, as well as on the public discourse, policies, and the collective organizing around them. In this scenario, the aim of the present special issue is to give visibility to a field of knowledge that is relatively new in most of the contexts discussed by the contributing authors.

[1] To overcome this fragmentation in 2019, GRIPS (Italian Research Groups on Prostitution and Sex Work) was founded. It gathers approximately 30 researchers in social sciences, history and law, based in universities, grassroots organisations or NGOs who are committed to sharing their knowledge organizing outreach activities, and, centrally, generating a positive impact on debates and policies affecting people who engage in sex work in Italy.

2. The challenges of creating knowledge on sex work: Between epistemic injustice and epistemological stigmatisation

The large internal diversity of the sex work industry, along with social stigma and the various forms of criminalization affecting the people involved in it are likely to be a main reason why studying sex work is a very hard task. However, the difficulties that hamper producing knowledge in this field need a more accurate understanding, as they actually go beyond the complexity of accessing 'hard-to-reach populations'. These difficulties have been connected to the 'morality politics' (Foret, Calligaro 2018, Wagenaar, Altnik 2012) around sex work, as other particularly polarizing topics, such as abortion or migration, where public debates and policies are rather driven by common sense discourses and ideology than by knowledge and methodologically sound research. In our view, it is important to identify the ways in which these difficulties directly affect the field of knowledge production, drastically reducing the capacity to produce and defend 'good' knowledge. We propose using the term 'epistemological stigmatization' in order to interpret, and hopefully contribute to change, some of the dynamics that we experience and analyze as researchers and activists in this field. We use this term to indicate the mechanism of power that makes the production, circulation and scientific credibility of knowledge on commercial sex services particularly difficult. This notion builds upon both the feminist and post-colonial concept of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007; Medina 2013; McKinnon 2016) and upon the concepts of stigma and stigmatization as accurately developed, especially in recent years, within the field of sex work research and activism (Pajnic, Fabijan 2017; Benoit et al. 2018; Bjønness et.al. 2021).

Epistemic injustice is a concept used to show how the systems of oppression and the stereotypes affecting certain social groups invalidate the possibility of holding them as authoritative producers of knowledge about their own lives and recognize them as experts in public and political discourse (Fricker 2007; McKinnon 2016). Much has been written, for example, about the epistemic injustice suffered by women victims of sexual assaults in trials by virtue of the patriarchal structure that informs justice systems (Stewart 2019; McKinnon 2019). Feminist and critical scholars across different disciplines have been historically at the forefront of bringing the epistemic authority of marginalized subjects back to the center of scientific and policy debates, challenging power relationships and innovating research practices in order to grant safe space for expression (Maguire 1987; Ramazanoglu, Holland 2022). However, when it comes to sex work, the epistemic authority of the subjects directly involved in the field suddenly become precarious, especially when they appear to make sense of their experiences outside of the dominant narrative of trafficking (Dwey, Zheng, 2013). This may happen in radical ways, as through the notion of 'false consciousness' mobilized by radical feminism (Dworking 1993, Jeffreys 1997) that denies

the possibility for any woman to understand her experience of exchanging sex for money as anything else but violence. This may also happen in other less explicit ways, such as for instance when people with direct experience of sex work - individually, or in their collective organizations - get invited to join in research projects but only for their 'testimonies', denying them the expertise of analyzing the phenomenon as a whole and the ability of identifying possible solutions (GNSWP 2020). This often results in a strategically oppositional epistemic use of the experiences of people doing sex work: the stories of people selling sexual services in a situation of severe exploitation are played against the stories of those who manage to have a good margin of control over their work, in order to support positions that are increasingly seen as irreconcilable: one 'against' and one 'pro' sex work. The competition between these approaches is often as severe as to prevent researchers, activists, and policy-makers from even listening to the diversity of experiences of people involved in the industry, let alone develop analytical and policy tools taking this diversity into account.

To think about these epistemic difficulties as forms of stigmatization is to connect to the rich reflection developed within the field of sex work, in particular by activists and activist researchers. Indeed, important contributions in research and activism in the last decade documented the pervasiveness of sex work stigma. Sex work stigma is both experienced at individual level and is produced and reinforced in the public sphere across culture, media, policy and lawmaking, representing a barrier to access education, health, housing, justice, banking, the labour market (Easterbrook-Smith 2022; Macioti et al. 2021; Crowhurst 2019). Sex work scholars and activists have developed accurate reflections on stigma as both relational and structural (Bjønness et. al. 2022, Benoit et. al. 2018, Bruckert and Hannem 2013), highlighting the connection between stigmatisation processes and inequalities (Link and Phelan, 2014, Macioti, 2014).

This body of literature has started to be effectively applied also to knowledge production processes. For instance sex work stigma has been shown to affect sex work researchers. This is partially related to the institutional stigma that weighs on sexuality research more broadly, which, as Irvine (2014) argued, can be framed as a form of 'dirty work' affecting not only individual researchers' reputation, but also the broad production of sexual knowledge by limiting its scope and scientific credibility. Many scholars have underlined how their close relationship to sex workers, a highly stigmatized group, operates a 'courtesy stigma', or 'stigma by association' that transfers to researchers some of the negative aspects experienced by sex workers themselves - both in terms of sexual reputation and credibility (Chancer 1993, Mattley 1997, Bernstein 2007, Selmi 2014). As Hammond and Kingston (2014) noticed, since sex workers are considered 'undeserving victims' by virtue of stigma, sex work studies are perceived as 'undeserving topics'. At individual and relational level this is a highly gendered process that translates into the academic workplace what Gail Pheterson (1993) has called 'the whore stigma'; which undermines the au-

thority of women doing research in this field by shifting the focus to their alleged sexual availability rather than on their scientific work. This can be even more challenging and potentially harmful for those researchers who have lived experience of sex work (Armstrong 2024; Bruckert 2014).

This stigma does not operate just at the individual level, but it informs institutional and bureaucratic academic practices that affect the consolidation of sex work scholarship at large. Some scholars for instance have analyzed how research ethical boards can play a key role in the process of epistemological stigmatisation of the sex work research field. Indeed, stereotyped or moralistic understandings of the exchange of sex for money may filter into boards and lead to misperceptions of issues like risk or vulnerability (Huysamen and Sanders 2021), and boards may fail to recognize the expertise and value of community-based researchers prioritizing academic knowledge over that of sex workers themselves. Beyond the intervention of ethical boards, scholars have also stressed the systematic dismissal, in research projects, of the sources - such as blogs, fora, zines, community reports or podcasts - used by sex workers and sex workers-led organizations in order to circulate their knowledge, in the impossibility to access more mainstream academic outlets (Matos, Woods 2022). These institutional and research practices jeopardize cooperation between academic research, sex workers and sex workers-led organizations (Ferris et. al. 2021). This is particularly problematic because collaborative research, where academic researchers collaborate with sex workers at all stages of research, including study design, methodologies, analysis, dissemination, may in fact be the key tool to build alternatives to epistemological stigmatization (Connelly, Sanders 2020).

3. In search of transformative knowledge on sex work

The studies included in this special issue share a concern with producing knowledge that would challenge the epistemic stigmatization that we have discussed so far. They do so from different disciplinary approaches, different methodological perspectives and from contexts that are profoundly different in terms of regulation and knowledge production on sex work: France, Italy, Scotland, Ireland, New Zealand. Some of the studies are part of long-term collaborations involving sex workers' collectives and academics who are also long-term activists, and in some cases, have themselves lived experience of sex work. Some of the articles draw on autoethnography in the sex industry, or on the field of social interventions supporting sex workers. Some are based on forms of collaborative research across countries, such as the project SEXHUM: Sexual Humanitarianism: Migration, Sex Work and Trafficking (2016-2020) and the project Stigma, Discrimina-

tion and Sex Work Laws: An International Comparative Study (2019-2023). Despite their differences, all of the articles pay attention on how to do research on sex work, recognizing that the way we design a research process, who we involve in it and how we take care of this scientific and community cooperation, makes the difference in terms of the quality and ethical value of the knowledge we create.

Importantly, all of the articles concentrate on the importance of the legal and policy frameworks that sex work takes place in as well as to the diversity of sex workers' positionalities, therefore contributing to a complex reading of sex work as embedded in larger power relations. This is not a given. One of the most striking effects of epistemological stigmatization is that the complex realities of sex work - including exploitation, violence, economic emancipation and self-determination, and all the nuances standing in between - are often read exclusively in relation to the exchange of sex for money per se, neglecting the social, economic and legal conditions that these exchanges are embedded in. The exchange of sexual services is often seen as an exception confirming both the norm of (supposedly) equal and pure intimate relationships (Zelizer 2005) and the norm of (supposedly) non-exploitative labour market relationships (O'Connell Davidson 2015). This obscures the ways in which sex work is part of both a continuum of sexuo-economic exchanges (Tabet 1989, 2004) and a continuum of exploitative labour relationships, and contributes to misrepresent the sex industry as the cornerstone of patriarchy, capitalism and colonialism - a misrepresentation which may ironically coexist with a glorification of some of its forms as spaces of exceptional freedom for the sex workers who choose them. In order to avoid relying on such simplistic interpretations, it is crucial for research and knowledge production on sex work to recognise the ways in which it is embedded in a system of intersectional inequalities, based on gender, class, nationality, race, sexuality, disability - to name but a few of the most relevant in a European context. Such intersectional approach challenges problematic and reductive oppositions between 'against' and 'pro' sex work positions which hamper the production of 'good', that is methodologically sound, collaborative and evidence-informed knowledge. It is such knowledge what is needed to analyse and contest harmful policies that have worsened the living conditions of people engaging in sex work in Europe, through a combination of newer and older forms of criminalization of both sex work and migration. However, how to make this shift in practice remains difficult. Drawing upon different social and legal sex work frameworks, the articles in this special issue suggest ways to implement this shift.

The issue of epistemic injustice, knowledge production, public discourses, and the conflicts around them is a central focus in Fernanda Lobato's piece "Look, we actually do have a brain!" Sex Workers Challenging the Psychomedicalisation of Commercial Sex. Adopting a critical perspective of public health and science, and drawing on long-term empirical research that combines participant observation and in-depths interviews with sex worker activists, Lobato provides

an account of the way in which sex workers participate in debates around the interplay of commercial sex and mental health, offering their own definitions of sex work-related psychosocial risks. While previous political sociology literature reflected on how psychiatric arguments on sex work are mobilised in abolitionist discourses, little has been said about the ways in which sex worker activists participate in this debate and trouble the category of mental health. By examining the interplay between external political conjunctures and transformations within the French sex workers' rights movement, Fernanda Lobato shows how psychomedical ideas on commercial sex are neither stable nor hegemonic. Instead, they become the very object of credibility struggles.

Giulia Sbaffi, in her Damaged bodies: Sex Work, HIV, and Grassroots Organizing in Italy (1982–1987) explores a case study of sex workers who contributed to a radical change of knowledge regime, in particular around HIV/AIDS. Her article explores the intersection of mutual aid, community care, and public health during the HIV/AIDS crisis in Italy, focusing on how sex workers adapted grassroots organizing strategies from the 1970s to confront the pressures of emerging neoliberal governance. By examining the role of sex workers in responding to the epidemic, the author challenges traditional associations of HIV and sex work with marginality and stigmatization. Instead, she argues that these groups were at the forefront of resistance, caregiving, and collective organizing. Through an analysis of oral history interviews conducted with sex workers in 2020 in Italy, Sbaffi shows how sex workers, in collaboration with grassroots movements, navigated the tensions between state neglect and institutional co-optation to promote public health and labor rights.

The article The Intersectional Racialisation of Migrant Sex Workers in Aotearoa New Zealand is co-authored by academic researchers and researchers from the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective. The study is part of the large EU-funded comparative research SEXHUM, which included, in addition to New Zealand, also Australia, France and the United States. SEXHUM deployed a mix of collaborative methods, ethnographic work and semi-structured interviews with sex workers, in order to interrogate the ways in which some migrant groups and individuals are targeted by humanitarian concerns, policies and interventions that construct them as uniquely and specifically vulnerable in relation to their sexual behavior, which in turn legitimizes harmful anti-sex work and anti-immigration initiatives. The concepts of sexual humanitarianism and of neoliberal governance of migration management prove useful in the context of New Zealand in order to identify how the racial profiling perpetrated by immigration authorities has shifted to include gendered and sexualised criteria of vulnerability in order to target Asian migrant sex workers. New Zealand is a very important case in the study of sex work, as it is one of the first jurisdictions to introduce a form of sex work decriminalisation, which is advocated for as one of the best collaborative policy model in order to reduce stigmatisation and exploitation in the sex industry by sex workers'

right organisations worldwide, as well as by a growing number of international human, migrant right and public health organisations (ESWA 2023). The authors Calum Bennachie, Heidi Hoefinger, Jenny Lee, Nicola Mai and Annah Pickering importantly argue that the New Zealand decriminalisation model needs to be amended in order to end the exclusion of migrant sex workers on temporary visas from the protections granted to nationals and permanent visa sex workers. In the name of a presumed racialised 'vulnerability', temporary migrant sex workers, a majority in New Zealand (Macioti, 2022), are indeed deportable if found working as sex workers, which ends up making them more exploitable.

The article Chinese Female Sex Workers in Paris: Fighting Precarity Through Negotiated Interdependence is co-written by an academic researcher and a researcher from Les Roses d'Acier, an organization of Chinese migrant sex workers in Paris. Calogero Giametta and Ting Chen explore the life experiences of Chinese cis women sex workers in Paris by drawing on qualitative interviews and ethnographic observation conducted within the frame of two collaborative research projects. 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 neo-abolitionist, anti-rights law has actually intensified violence against sex workers by increasing their precarity and lowering their negotiation power with a reduced and more demanding clientele (Lebail, Giametta 2018). It also institutionalised a view of sex work as essentially rooted in violence and exploitation. As a result, people involved in the sex work sector, especially migrant women, are largely seen as incapable of understanding and making decisions about their own lives. In this context, alongside the broader criminalisation of undocumented migrants and border crossing, the authors highlight how Chinese female sex workers in Paris navigate and resist increased precarity in their daily lives. The article shows how they mitigate precarity through what the authors describe as 'negotiated interdependence' within their networks. Although such interdependence may restrict their autonomy in the workplace, it serves as a crucial strategy to combat the increased challenges they face under prostitution neo-abolitionism, such as financial instability and social isolation.

The crucial impact of the neo-abolitionist discursive context on the lives of sex workers is also at the heart of the article by Nicole Bonfanti, La costruzione del consenso all'interno del lavoro sessuale autonomo in Italia (The construction of consent in independent sex work in Italy). By means of an autoethnographic perspective, Bonfanti investigates the meanings attributed to consent and its management in the context of sex work in Italy and problematizes the processes of re-semantization of sexual consent based on sexual activity and individual reputation. The article adopts a theoretical framework aimed at highlighting how discourses on gender and sexuo-economic exchanges contribute to the qualification of the social status of those who sell sex within the specific abolitionist regime that exists in Italy. By analyzing the way clients and work-

ers position themselves regarding boundaries and demands made within the interaction, the author identifies the socio-cultural expectations related to bodies and sexualities that intervene in the production and reproduction of social hierarchies linked to gender, class, and ethnicity.

The crucial importance of outreach and peer services for sex workers emerges in the article "I've just schooled you, so you can't shame me": Stigma, discrimination, and healthcare access among sex workers in Scotland, the Republic of Ireland, and Aotearoa/New Zealand. The article, which is part of the comparative project Stigma, Discrimination and Sex Work Laws: An International Comparative Study, is co-authored by academic researchers and researchers from the National Ugly Mugs UK and from the Street Workers Collective Ireland. Drawing on interviews with 70 sex workers in Scotland, the Republic of Ireland, and New Zealand, Lynzi Amstrong, Jordan Phillips and Becky Ryan examine experiences of access to healthcare in relation to stigma, discrimination, and laws governing sex work. Although laws in these countries were historically similar, they now differ considerably. While sex work was decriminalised in New Zealand in 2003 for permanent residents and citizens, the Republic of Ireland criminalised clients in 2017 (by adopting the so called 'Nordic model'). In Scotland, where an archaic system of sex work criminalisation remains, sex work laws have been subject to ongoing debates, with a subset of politicians and activists campaigning for the Nordic model. Focusing on experiences of accessing health care services, in this paper the authors foreground the voices of sex workers, illustrating how laws impact people in tangible ways and make a case for a model of full decriminalisation, grounded in equality, rights, and social justice.

The article The challenge of rethinking social work with sex workers in Italy: a participatory research experience with the Capability Approach is also co-authored by an academic researcher and a social worker from the harm-reduction project inVisibile based in the Emilia-Romagna region. The paper is based on a participatory research project with a group of social workers, and includes interviews with sex workers, with the aim of rethinking social work in order to promote adequate and accessible non-stigmatising public services for sex workers. Eleonora Costantini and Francesca Berni suggest 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, the special issue includes two legal studies, both focused on the French context, which introduced a neo-abolitionist frame in 2016. The article by Salomé Lannier Excluding online sex work in a neo-abolitionist state: Prostitution according to the French Cour de Cassation examines a 2022 decision by the French High Court that introduces a narrow definition of prostitution, explicitly excluding webcamming. This definition is crucial for delineating the scope of neo-abolitionist measures. While some scholars have criticised the decision on moral grounds or for

creating inconsistencies within criminal law, a broader critical perspective suggests that it allows at least some sex workers to navigate around an ineffective model.

The article Does the broad criminalization of procuring in France pose a problem? A study of enforcement by police and magistrates, by Mathilde Geoffroy, Hélène Le Bail and Marie Mercat-Bruns, focuses on the question of how judges and specialized investigators navigate the paradoxes and inconsistencies of procuring under French law, and determine who are the perpetrators and who are the victims. Indeed, in French criminal law, the definition of procuring is all-encompassing and makes no distinction between supportive and coercive behaviour. The presence of coercion or abuse or a lack of consent on the part of the sex worker is not required to establish the offence of procuring. While police investigators and magistrates readily point out that the definition facilitates their work, critics deplore that it potentially criminalizes all relationships that sex workers maintain in their personal lives and in their work. Thus, the wording of the procuring offence may contribute to the isolation, marginalization, and even endangerment of people who sell sexual services. For example, this law makes finding and keeping an accommodation very difficult; it may prevent sex workers from working together; and it discourages them from seeking help from the police in case of violence and exploitation for fear of putting family or friends at risk of being prosecuted for procuring.

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