

# Quality of Work in Prostitution and Sex Work. Introduction to the Special Section

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Sociological Research Online, 21 (4), 9

<<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/21/4/9.html>>

DOI: 10.5153/sro.4165

Received: 8 Nov 2016 | Accepted: 8 Nov 2016 | Published: 30 Nov 2016

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## Abstract

Increasingly, prostitution and other activities in the sex industries have been conceptualised as forms of labour, or at least as income-generating activities. As labour, these activities are exposed to particular risks with respect to health, working conditions, exploitation and stigmatisation. However, research on the actual conditions and circumstances existing in these markets, remains limited. The present article introduces some of the main issues researchers may face when studying quality of work in the sex industry, and it does so by introducing and discussing the six pieces of research published in the Special Section 'Exploitation and Its Opposite. Researching the quality of working life in the sex industries'. Four main points are discussed as being central to this emerging field of research: methodological challenges, the inclusion of different market segments, consideration of migration issues, and the role of legislative regimes. The authors stress the importance of developing precise comparisons between different types of sex work, of engaging between qualitative and quantitative approaches to quality of work, and finally of looking beyond the industry, comparing sex work to other forms of work.

**Keywords:** *Prostitution, Sex Work, Quality of Work*

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## Starting points

- 1.1 Increasingly, prostitution and other activities in the sex industries have been conceptualised as forms of labour, or at least as income-generating activities. As labour, these activities are exposed to particular risks with respect to exploitation and stigmatisation. However, research on the actual labour conditions existing in these markets remains limited. The central purpose of this Special Section is to encourage a conversation among scholars who have been studying issues of quality of working life in the sex industries, often as part of larger research projects on more mainstream topics such as trafficking, migration, health, new technologies, or prostitution policy regimes.
- 1.2 The groundwork of this Section lies in the [COST Action IS1209](#), 'Comparing European Prostitution Policies: Understanding Scales and Cultures of Governance'. This action, bringing together international scholars studying prostitution and sex work, also discussed economic dimensions of commercial sex. One outcome of these reflections was a call for thematic presentations at the COST conference 'Troubling Prostitution: Exploring intersections of sex, intimacy and labour' in Vienna (16-18 April 2015). Most of the articles in this Section were presented in a first draft version during these sessions.
- 1.3 All authors are sex work researchers in their own contexts, sharing an understanding of sex work as a form of labour as well as a commitment to understanding and reducing the particular forms of exploitation and stigmatisation experienced, in different ways, by people who sell sex, including women, men, trans-identified people, both migrants and non-migrants, and across different contexts of the sex industry. In this particular context, we choose to use both the terms 'prostitution' and 'sex work', without

necessarily indicating a difference between the two. The use of both terms is for reasons of clarity: the actual forms of sex work whose quality is discussed here are forms of direct sexual labour - as opposed to phoning, dancing or filming for instance - which many, including some of the workers themselves, would refer to as 'prostitution'. Furthermore, within public policies, these working practices are all regulated as 'prostitution'. Typically, a focus on the quality of work allows for exploration of issues such as income, job security, social protection and contractual dimensions (often called employment relations), as well as matters of work content and organisation (intrinsic dimensions of quality of work), such as autonomy, control, working conditions, quality of social relations and union support. (attempts to include multiple dimensions are discussed in [Burchell et al. 2014](#), [Leschke and Watt 2014](#), [Muñoz de Bustillo et al. 2011a](#), [Muñoz de Bustillo et al. 2011b](#)). All these areas appear to be of direct interest for sex workers, both as individuals and when they organize as a collective ([ICRSE 2016](#), [Kempadoo and Doezema 1998](#)). However, issues such as violence and abuse, psychological distress and health hazards are also part of the picture, as are forms of stigmatisation associated with the practice of sex work.

- 1.4 Measures of quality of work are as diverse as the above description suggests. Depending on the theoretical frame and the aims of the model, quite different elements of the job or work are taken into account. Although no one calls into question that wages are an important dimension of work, all contributions in this Section accept that one cannot reduce all dimensions of quality of work to the yardstick of wages. Any mature sociological theory will attempt to do justice to real agents' decision-making and valuation regarding work. When exploring larger social, economic, legal and psychological contexts, the study of quality of work is directly connected to reflections on a good life. Quality of work refers to the extent work is able to give access to a fulfilling life, in the absence of adverse effects of the activity (see [Sirgy et al. 2001](#)).
- 1.5 The production of new empirical knowledge in this field is to be particularly welcomed for a few reasons. These constitute the main contributions this Section brings to the study of sex work and prostitution.
- 1.6 First of all, studying commercial sex from a quality of work perspective is fraught with a number of methodological difficulties. For one thing, it is not easy to gain access to first-hand information about sex working practices in a field that is characterised by a high level of secrecy, shame, stigma, and criminalisation. The latter is linked both to sex work practices and to the precarious migration status of many of the workers. This group has in general indeed been considered a hard-to-reach population.
- 1.7 Secondly, the articles clearly break with the – often implicit – assumption that only one or two quality dimensions of sex work matter. In particular health issues and criminal victimisation are often debated. There is little doubt that a healthy workplace and healthy work, and the absence of hazardous situations such as violence and the threat of public authorities, are necessary conditions for a *good job*. A whole strand of the prostitution literature, often by public health scholars, considers occupational hazards in prostitution (e.g. [Cusick 2006](#), [Rekart 2005](#)). From a sociological point of view, however, a lot of issues have not been addressed ([West and Austrin 2002](#)). Only a few scholars with a sociologically informed frame of reference seem to contribute to this literature (for instance [Sanders 2004](#), [Stoebenau 2009](#)).
- 1.8 In short, this Section illustrates that other dimensions such as autonomy, income and working arrangements should receive just as much attention. Also, there are interesting discussions as to how different dimensions of quality of work interact in intriguing ways with one another. For instance, [Oso shows](#) how some sex workers in Galicia weigh risks of police arrest, autonomy, stigma avoidance and wages against one another, and [Gilmour discusses](#) how the lack of decent work opportunities in mainstream labour markets affects the decisions of members of some groups about whether to enter the prostitution market (see also [O'Connell Davidson 1998](#)).
- 1.9 Also, the contributions investigate different types and segments of sex work. This contributes to a more complete view on sex work, and reminds us that street sex work is only one among many forms that prostitution and sex work take in the contemporary sex industry. This contributes to a more complete view on prostitution, and reminds us that street sex work is only one among many forms that prostitution take in the contemporary sex industry. In addition to street work this Section brings to our attention different forms, including brothel work, escorting, or sexual assistance for people with

disabilities.

1.10 Finally, in the field of prostitution and sex work, the acceptable research questions are highly influenced by public agendas regarding public health, migration control, and control of the quantity of visible prostitution. The debates often revolve around the same issues, such as typically: is this situation subject to trafficking or not? Is this or that person free or is s/he a victim? Is this or that sex work practice safe from a sexual health perspective? Is this or that policy regime contributing to increasing or diminishing prostitution, or the money circulating in the sector? While these questions may be of relevance for policy and specific interventions, the contributions of this Section indicate that the life experiences of sex workers and their working practices can often be better understood (and supported) outside and beyond these dichotomies. Having said this, engagement with the effects of public policies, regulatory frameworks, enforcement or lack of enforcement, remain central to the work included in this Section. The contributions show the many ways in which these elements may affect occupational hazards, income, and other dimensions of the quality of working life of sex workers.

1.11 In this introduction to the special issue we discuss these innovative ideas, highlighting and comparing in more depth the main contributions of the different articles to the ongoing debates in the literature. We present the different authors' contributions to the four main points of discussion: methodological elements, discussion of different market segments, migration and legislative regimes.

### Methodologies in studying the quality of sex work

2.1 Four features in the methodological designs of the studies in this Section stand out: the strong orientation toward the viewpoint of workers in the sex industries, differing levels of involvement of organisations supporting and organising sex workers, and the struggle with ethical problems involved in conducting the research.

2.2 Authors in this Special Section show a strong interest in accounting for the viewpoint of those who actually perform sex labour. This is reflected in a variety of methodologies and methods, including in-depth interviews, ethnofiction and participant ethnography, but also online surveys and surveys distributed through activist networks, that are able to reach beyond the usual people. Indeed, qualitative approaches are particularly suited to capturing the subjectivities of sex workers. [Orchiston](#), [Gilmour](#) and [Oso](#) conducted in-depth semi-structured or open-ended interviews with sex workers, operators or managers of brothels and key informants. In short, there are good reasons to involve qualitative research methods in the assessment of the quality of working life of sex workers. On the other hand, it is striking that mainstream scholarship on the quality of working life is predominantly quantitative, something which is not very present in the research presented in this Section. Except for the survey-driven research by [Sanders et al.](#) and by [Mai](#), all other contributions are built on qualitative approaches such as ethnographic observations, in-depth interviewing, multiple case studies, and so forth. As indicated, this may be a strong point. Where quantitative approaches may be dominant in most quality of work research, the attempt to meaningfully investigate working life with the help of qualitative methodologies may yield unique results. In particular, these methodologies may have a competitive advantage when it comes to the need for a fine-grained reconstruction of sex workers' decisions and assessments of occupational opportunities and problems. Also, the more flexible setup of ethnographies and in-depth interviewing may help to overcome the difficulties in accessing respondents who, as already mentioned, have been described as 'hard to reach' ([Melrose 2002](#), [Shaver 2005](#)). Finally, using multiple sources of data and approaches helps to triangulate results with greater reliability (see, for instance, the contribution by [Orchiston](#) and [Mai](#)). We thus argue that the articles in this Special Section illustrate the advantages of making use of the full breadth of qualitative approaches to lay bare the meaning of work and the ways in which workers develop strategies based on their valuations and assessments of the context, opportunities and alternatives available.

2.3 Secondly, researchers mobilised to different degrees forms of collaboration with organisations supporting sex workers. In some studies, such as those carried out by [Orchiston](#), [Oso](#) and [Gilmour](#), a key element in the design of the fieldwork lies in the sampling design.

2.4 [Orchiston](#), based in Australia, contacted her informants through an advertisement disseminated by sex workers' organisations, offering them a small incentive for their contribution to the study. This may

have facilitated the 'snowballing' effect which led to the author interviewing 30 sex workers. To alleviate sampling bias due to self-selection, [Orchiston](#) decided to triangulate the interview data with a qualitative content analysis of 54 sex worker weblogs, as well as with the analysis of documents, including written contracts, codes of conduct, and internal notices and signs. Sociologists early on recognised the opportunities inherent in using the internet as a source of observational analysis ([Illingworth 2001](#)). Analysis of the content of websites is a growing research approach (see the work in this regard done by [Adriaenssens and Hendrickx 2012](#), [Adriaenssens and Hendrickx 2016](#), [Pajnik et al. 2016](#)).

- 2.5** [Oso conducted fieldwork](#) with 50 immigrant women sex workers, but also with six business owners, 11 clients and 15 key informants. For the author, the initial form of approaching her informants was through NGOs that work with immigrant populations, offering them legal advice. However, she also contacted her informants through a person in charge of editing the classified advertisements in a daily newspaper. This allowed her access to some in-call flats, where sex workers and flat managers were interviewed. One of the methodological reflections presented is how the researcher's gender affected the access possibilities to one or another type of sex work in Spain (clubs or in-call flats): 'Being a female researcher made access to these flats easier, as they are essentially female environments, although the clubs (run by men) access proved to be more difficult, forcing me to approach eventually immigrant women working in clubs through a country doctor '. Thus, the diversity in the form of approaching informants (small and varied snowballs, instead of one single snowball) allowed [Oso](#) access to more varied informants' profiles, beyond the initial contacts carried out through organisations.
- 2.6** Others, in particular [Sanders et al.](#), [Garofalo Geymonat and Maciotti](#), and [Mai](#), develop more far-reaching forms of collaboration with sex worker organisations.
- 2.7** [Sanders et al.](#) conducted an online survey with the participation of NUM, an organisation that has set up a project to support sex workers (mainly female independent escorts) and sex business establishments such as brothels and in-call flats. The survey was carried out online.
- 2.8** [Mai opted for a participative ethical approach](#), which consists of including sex workers and support organisations at all stages of the project (in the formulation of the research questions and in the gathering and analysis of the interview material). This author completed the survey with qualitative semi-structured interviews and participant observation. He also provides a further methodological innovation, namely the development of two experimental ethnographic films (ethnofictions), under which he sought 'to analyse and represents the ways in which specific narrative, effective and performative humanitarian repertoires are embodied and incorporated within the subjectivities and agency of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees'. Recourse to organisations working with projects supporting sex workers was also important in his survey of 500 street sex workers (migrant and non-migrant) in France. However, [Mai](#) sought to go beyond the support projects and contacted respondents through their work contacts (phone, websites, street and so on). The rationale for this mixed sampling was that it would avoid or decrease the usual sampling bias which tends towards those seeking help. This in turn would provide a more representative picture of the lived experiences of all sex workers.
- 2.9** In one contribution organisations were actually the object/subject of study. Indeed, [Giulia Garofalo Geymonat and Maciotti](#) developed their ethnographic work around a study of two cases of workers' collective actions oriented to improving the quality of sex work (a group of sexual assistants for people with disabilities in Switzerland and a group of sex workers offering workshops for sex workers in Germany). Both authors used embedded participant observation as their research method, having been immersed in fieldwork and activists' practices for three years. This methodological approach, the authors point out, is 'particularly relevant for a social sphere such as the sex industry, dominated by an ideology which positions prostitution as completely different form from other forms of labour or sex and that does not recognise sex workers as expert in their own experiences, whether negative or positive'. Nevertheless this kind of methodological approach is not a guarantee against ethical problems as this contribution points out.
- 2.10** This brings us to a final methodological reflection: ethical considerations. Ethical problems are a central concern, because we are investigating a population with irregular migration status or working informally, and because of the strong stigma attached to these activities. Thus, confidentiality and

anonymity are essential considerations to be safeguarded in sex work research.

- 2.11 These methodological concerns were applied to the full diversity of sex markets studied. The differences and commonalities between the market segments discussed in the articles are presented and compared in the next section.

### Sex work: Not just street prostitution

- 3.1 As mentioned above, scientific literature on sex work has tended to focus essentially on the quality of work within the most visible form of sex work, namely offering sex services on the street. Indeed, numerous research projects have studied this type of occupation. They highlight mainly the difficulties of this type of sex work with regard to health issues, exposure to violence, and police harassment. Analysis of quality of work in other types of sex work has largely been overlooked by empirical research. [Sanders et al., in their contribution to this Special Section](#), bring to the fore the fact that neo-abolitionist feminists generally focus on street sex work, because this is a small sector of the sex industry involving high levels of vulnerability. In the UK, literature has paid less attention to indoor markets, such as brothels, escort agencies and independent work in private rented flats. [Gilmour also highlights](#) that in the case of Australia, although street sex work has been widely studied, little research has been conducted on indoor sex work. This Special Section attempts to fill this gap, analysing the quality of work as part of a varied range of different types of sex work: internet-based workers in the UK, indoor sectors in Australia (brothel and escort work) and Spain (clubs and in-call flats), street work and indoor work (brothels, flats, escorting) in Germany and sexual assistants in Switzerland.

#### *Internet-based escorts in the UK*

- 3.2 [Sanders et al.](#) highlight that the development of digital technologies has been one of the major changes in the sex industry in recent decades ([Adriaenssens and Hendrickx 2012](#), [Cunningham and Kendall 2011](#)). It has resulted in a decrease in street sex work and also a reduction in the type of work that is channelled through brothels, flats or saunas. This has been particularly significant in the UK, due to a tightening of legislation against street work in this country. The results of the survey conducted by these authors show that independent escorts usually combined sex work with other types of employment, have a high level of control over their work and often express positive feelings about their working conditions. On the other hand, relations with customers are usually positive, so 'there is a high degree of control decision making and autonomy over their commercial everyday sex work patterns and client interactions, which suggest there are less likely to be harms associated with their work'. However, it seems that new threats related to digital technologies, such as blackmail and harassment, have developed. For instance, issues around privacy of online pictures and videos may make it difficult for workers to protect their identities within the sex industry.

#### *Indoor sectors in Australia*

- 3.3 [Orchiston highlights](#) that in Australia, although work in the brothel industry has been legalised, working conditions remain precarious for sex workers. These conditions are characterised by uncertainty; a lack of job security, labour performed on a temporary, casual or contractual basis (where there is no guarantee of ongoing work) and absence of control for the worker over the labour process. A widespread practice by brothel operators in Australia is to consider sex workers as 'independent contractors', although in the end, sex workers are 'covert employees', so brothel operators exercise control over their labour and deny them the protections afforded to other employees. This kind of 'bogus self-employment' is not limited to prostitution markets, but seems to be on the rise in other sectors as well (for instance [Kautonen et al. 2010](#), [Thornqvist and Bernhardsson 2015](#)). There are many measures of control exercised by brothel operators upon sex workers. For instance, sex workers do not receive a retainer or base wage; instead they are paid a percentage of the total rate for each 'booking' they carry out and they are not permitted to set their own prices. Brothels use a roster system to allocate shifts, there is generally no guarantee of ongoing work and sex workers are not permitted to leave the brothel during their shift. Brothels also monitor the time that sex workers spend in bookings; they impose appearance requirements and restrictions on sex workers' ability to work independently. They also maintain control over sex workers via the use of economic sanctions (fines and loss of bond, withholding wages, taking shifts away for a set period of time and permanent removal from the roster).

3.4 [Gilmour](#) argues that escort work in Australia provides a greater degree of autonomy, as compared to work in brothels, to the extent that rules are not imposed. This type of employment is also better paid. These advantages come at a cost however: there is less safety and, unlike brothels, escorting is mainly illegal.

3.5 Furthermore, [Gilmour's work](#) highlights the considerable mobility within the various sectors of Australian sex work (brothel, escort, street, BDSM and management work). Literature has traditionally focused on mobility and flexibility as one of the key characteristics of sex work ([Maher et al. 2013](#), [Sanders 2002](#), in Gilmour). Nevertheless, [Gilmour believes](#) that it is necessary to look beyond personal circumstances and to consider mobility within the context of the quest to achieve better working conditions. Sex workers move in search of establishments that offer more agreeable employment conditions, autonomy, and improved safety and sanitary conditions. Consequently, mobility may also reflect workers' attempts to bargain for better working conditions, in a context with little space for legal recourse against discriminatory or exploitative work environments.

### *Clubs and in-call flats in Spain*

3.6 The indoor sector is also studied by [Oso](#) in the region of Galicia, Spain. As street sex work has gradually disappeared from Galician cities, it has been substituted by indoor sex work. The study compares two types of female indoor sex work: clubs and in-call flats. The institutional regime has considerable effects on several quality of work aspects, with wages, power relations, skill utilisation and need, alienation, health, violence, work-life balance and stigma all differing significantly in clubs as compared to in-call flats. Work in clubs under the *plaza* system offers higher earnings, boosting workers' saving capacity. However, this comes at a price: the *plaza* system as compared to work in in-call flats involves tougher working and living conditions, as characterised by higher levels of submission and alienation. Also, there is a considerable increase in health risks, violence and stigma. The longer hours and lack of flexibility also reduce workers' potential for reasonably combining work and private life. In contrast, sex work in in-call flats generates lower earnings, but offers better working and living conditions. Working in in-call flats, thanks to their lower visibility, allows the workers to lead a 'double life'. The reduced stigmatisation and more favourable working hours guarantee a better work-life balance, making the combination with family life more feasible.

3.7 Unlike the Australian context, where sex workers feel safer in brothels than engaging in independent illegal work (due to the risks of a criminal record and a lack of police protection), sex workers in Spain suffer more violence in clubs, compared to work in in-call flats. This is essentially due to the strong competition between sex workers in clubs to attract customers, occasionally leading to fights. Concurrently risks are higher due to the presence of larger numbers of customers who are drunk or on drugs in these establishments. Finally, police raids to arrest undocumented migrant women in clubs increase the risks for migrant sex workers. In the Spanish context, the income from sex work in clubs is higher, contrary to the work of escorts in Australia, which is better paid.

3.8 The mobility of the workers is strongly institutionalised in the system of permanent rotation or 'plazas' (stays of 21 days). This system has been implemented to ensure a constant change of sex workers ('new faces'), as demanded by the sex industry and customers. Under this mobility system, women rotate, not only in search of the best working conditions for clubs or in-call flats and depending on the job offer (the presence of more or fewer clients), as is the case in Australia. An extra factor also influences the choice for certain clubs: migrant sex workers look for those places where they can avoid police raids that take place in clubs.

3.9 As in the other studies, it is clear that most sex workers perceive the working conditions in clubs negatively to the extent that they are controlled by intermediaries (club owners, managers). This control seems to be built on fines, dependency relationships, strict working schedules and labour intensity. Greater control by third parties is generally seen as one of the most negative dimensions of working life by workers in Australia, Spain and the United Kingdom. Sex workers' autonomy as a key factor in sex workers' quality of work also seems to be a central goal of collective action by organisations, as discussed by [Garofalo Geymonat and Maciotti](#), in their study of self-organisation in Germany and sexual assistance in Switzerland.

- 3.10** [Garofalo Geymonat and Maciotti](#) show that self-organised groups of sex workers in Germany and sexual assistants in Switzerland have similar concerns, and originally engage with classic concepts of consent and autonomy. In both case studies it is shown to be of central importance that there should be no rules about how to do sex work imposed by anyone else (managers, doctors, public authorities, other sex workers), so individuals can set their own rules and are able to change them. Another common point was the discussion about how much time and energy one should dedicate to sex work. In this respect, participants from both organisations studied 'appear to be particularly aware of the fact that it is better not to become a full-time sex worker or sexual assistant or to make it one's exclusive income-generating activity on a stable basis'. Finally, the third issue raised by participants is related to their professional identity and its management (self-esteem, stigma, 'coming out'). The authors interestingly explore the reasons why, even in legalised regimes sex workers are reluctant to embrace employment, collective rules, or a professional identity. While their participants call for the recognition of sex work or sexual assistance as a valuable service, they prefer to be able to decide for themselves how to provide it.
- 3.11** In short, many authors in this Special Section use comparisons between different forms of work within the same or similar institutional regimes, such as club work and flat-based work in Spain, and brothel and escort work in Australia, or online and offline work in Britain, and street, brothel and escorting work in Germany and sexual assistance in Switzerland. These comparisons, at least partially, reflect the ways that sex workers move between jobs within the industry, looking for better working conditions or income opportunities, and responding to changes in their lives as individuals and as family carers.
- 3.12** Asking sex workers to compare jobs in the industry is an effective way to build conversations about working conditions. This is especially fruitful because sex workers often feel compelled to protect their industry ([Orchiston, Garofalo Geymonat and Maciotti](#)), which makes it harder to talk about exploitation and working conditions. Also, workers often have other working experiences, and many practice sex work only for a while, and along with other activities. This is a new area of research: the comparison is also with other jobs and income generating activities - in particular as developed by theorists of intimate work ([Boris and Parreñas 2010](#)) and body work ([Wolkowitz et al. 2013](#)), categories which encompass sex work as well as domestic and care work. In particular we find this reflection in [Garofalo Geymonat and Maciotti's paper](#).
- 3.13** The diversity of contexts, both in terms of countries and of sector of the sex industry, allows for reflection upon both positive and negative conditions, focusing on the radical differences but also the recurrent issues - in particular autonomy and control. On the other hand, for sex workers who choose to work in brothels due to the advantages they offer the conditions vary considerably depending on the management approach. In this sense, the sex workers particularly appreciate the possibility of being able to assert their rights within the client-worker encounter; the ability to choose clientele and not being pressurised by the owners / managers to offer unsafe sex or unwanted sexual services ([Gilmour, Orchardson and Oso](#)).
- 3.14** Authors in this Special Section also take into account complex differences between sex workers and their clients, along lines of gender, sexual identity, race/nationality, and dis/ability. The papers explore the particular ways in which, along these different lines, workers may resist forms of exploitation and stigmatisation both collectively and individually, through organising, professionalisation, mobility, autonomy, and so on. Issues of collective organising, as well as subjective resistance, are particularly present in the work of [Garofalo Geymonat and Maciotti, Oso and Mai](#).

### Migration as a key element

- 4.1** In different ways, the contributions of this Special Section work to deepen our understanding of how sex workers try to improve their working and living conditions through mobility and migration. This Section is innovative in the way the authors account for the experiences of migrants in the sex industry. In all the countries addressed in the papers, migrants constitute a relevant part of the labour force, and they appear to endure the worst working conditions and the worst forms of stigmatisation and criminalisation. This vulnerability is often grounded in the combination of being a sex worker and having an irregular migration status ([Oso Casas 2010](#)). For instance, [Gilmour states](#) that in the context of

her research in Australia, irregular migrant workers on average have less autonomy in their work in brothels, and are more often pushed into offering unsafe sex, along with people who use drugs and older sex workers. As an example [Garofalo Geymonat and Maciotti](#) discuss the forms of exclusions that migrant sex workers experience within the legal system in Germany.

- 4.2 Within this scenario, the originality of the papers of this Section is encapsulated in the way they criticise the 'trafficking paradigm'. This paradigm, as has been evidenced by migration, feminist, and sex work scholars and activists (for instance [Agustín 2007](#), [Andrijasevic 2010](#), [Doezema 2010](#), [Weitzer 2007](#)), is constructed upon a clear dichotomy between 'freedom' on the one hand and 'exploitation' and 'force' on the other. It is argued that this sharp binary distinction does not correspond to the experiences of the subjects involved in migration and in sex work ([Skilbrei and Tveit 2008](#)). In particular, as Oso stresses, a 'trafficking perspective' tends to conceal central characteristics of migrants' means of providing and mobility. Furthermore, anti-trafficking and anti-exploitation discourses tend to legitimise repressive interventions in migration and sex work that may restrict the limited opportunities of migrants in the sex industry and – paradoxically – exacerbate their vulnerability to being exploited.
- 4.3 In particular [Oso's study](#) in Galicia, and [Mai's in France and Britain](#), illustrate well how this critique can be applied in research, and the way in which the quality of work among migrant sex workers can be understood by concretely taking into account 'the complex and dynamic understandings and experiences of agency and exploitation of migrants working in the sex industry' ([Mai](#)).
- 4.4 [Mai interestingly demonstrates](#) the ways in which the Nigerian women he talked to in Paris 'tend to recognise themselves as victims of trafficking and to avail themselves of anti-trafficking initiatives and legislation depending on whether the exploitation (suffering) they meet abroad becomes 'too much'. This, in turn, depends on whether the working and economic conditions they meet abroad match the original agreement they made back in Nigeria, and ultimately, and most importantly, their migratory project.'
- 4.5 Also in the work of [Oso/a> the migratory projects of sex workers emerge as central to the way they experience working conditions in the industry](#). 'These projects', Oso writes, 'are often of a collective nature and include maintaining the transnational household, or are designed to accumulate considerable financial resources in the shortest possible time (a savings and return project).'
- 4.6 [Oso's article](#) shows the extent to which policies regarding migration and prostitution impact on the quality of work of migrant women in Spain, generating a large number of undocumented migrants and leading to the worsening of immigrant sex workers' working and living conditions, especially for those repaying a debt. The author reveals how the harshest form of working in clubs (living in the club and rotating in the *plaza* or 'place' system) is articulated by Latin-American women in Spain with respect to their migratory and social mobility strategies. Indeed, many women, freed from the repayment of a debt but subject to the pressures of sending remittances or saving enough money to return, opt to work in clubs under the *plaza* system, even though this involves accepting far worse working conditions.
- 4.7 As we have noted more than once, policies regarding prostitution have a clear impact on the quality of work of different groups. The policy regimes will be discussed in the final section below.

### **Prostitution policy regimes**

- 5.1 The papers in this Section also contribute to the body of research that discusses the interaction between different models of sex industry regulation and sex workers' working and living conditions ([Crowhurst et al. 2012](#), [Pitcher and Wijers 2014](#), [Wagenaar et al. 2013](#)). The countries under study are some of the protagonists of the policy innovations that have impacted upon the industry in the last decade, and some of these changes were taking place as the researchers wrote their pieces. This applies in particular to Germany and France. In the former, stricter forms of state control on sex work, including compulsory registration as a sex worker, were introduced as part of the reform ([BMFFSJ 2016](#)). In France client criminalisation was introduced as part of the 'Law to reinforce the fight against the system of prostitution' ([Assemblée nationale 2016](#)). Interestingly, the pieces in this Section allow us to develop critical perspectives on all kinds of regulation, exploring the specificities and the limits of different models. This includes those that are generally thought to guarantee access to labour rights for sex



workers, namely decriminalisation and legalisation. **Orchiston clarifies**: "decriminalisation" refers to removing criminal penalties attached to an activity, leaving it regulated under laws of general application; "legalisation" refers to making an activity "legal", subject to specific state controls such as licence/registration requirements.' As **Garofalo Geymonat and Maciotti show** (in relation to Germany and Switzerland), legalisation enables workers to organise collectively, which is discouraged under abolitionism and criminalisation due to measures against pimping and 'facilitating' prostitution and trafficking. Similarly, abolitionism and criminalisation hamper the development of cooperative forms of work, and consequently also discourages the sharing of better working practices. However, even in legalised contexts, working conditions often remain poor, and forms of public control over sex work are seen by these collectives of workers as problematic for their working and living conditions. In particular, compulsory registration, which has recently been reintroduced in Germany and exists in some Swiss cantons, reinforces forms of exclusion for migrants, and more generally represents a block for many sex workers who are too afraid of being 'outed' as such. Indeed, even in contexts where prostitution is legal, stigma continues to have very real effects on people's private and public lives. Being out as a sex worker affects, together with other effects, the opportunities for alternative employment, which, as many of the authors find in their research, is often practiced alongside prostitution. Therefore speaking out in the media or reporting abuse or lack of implementation of labour rights is still very rare. As both **Orchiston** and **Gilmour** observe with respect to Australia, this is one of the reasons why owners and managers of legal brothels get away with abusive practices. The dominant recourse of workers is the 'exit' strategy at the level of employers: they keep moving from one workplace to another looking for better working conditions. Indeed, as the New South Wales and Queensland comparison shows, legal brothel work 'remains precarious and substantively excluded from the protective mantle of labour law irrespective of the regulatory approach taken' (**Orchiston**). As **Orchiston** importantly demonstrates, enforcement plays a central role: 'key determinant of conditions in the legal brothel sector is the extent to which the state enforces formal labour protections, as distinct from the underlying regulatory model adopted'.

**5.2** **Gilmour** points out that escort work in Australia provides sex workers with a greater degree of autonomy, compared to those that work in legal brothels, to the extent that working rules are not imposed. This type of employment is also better paid. Indeed, 'the higher rate per job also means that private workers need to work less, are better to choose reliable hours that suit them, and are more able to be choosy in terms of selecting clients'. However, escort work has a number of drawbacks, such as safety and, crucially, the fact that this type of work, unlike that in brothels, is mainly illegal. 'The ideal option for several participants was to work independently in co-ops or in pairs'. Nevertheless, it is difficult to carry out this type of sex work legally in Australia.

**5.3** The rest of the articles look at contexts, in Spain, France and Britain, in which abolitionism is the main rule, in other words all forms of organisation and publicity (at least in France and the UK) of prostitution remain illegal, while, again in principle, sex workers are not criminalised. In addition, France and Britain have seen the tightening of legislation, in particular repressive measures against street work and brothel work where migrant workers are more present.

**5.4** As already pointed out, and as stated by **Sanders et al.**, this has resulted in a decrease in street work and in brothel work, flats and saunas, in the UK to the advantage of online work. From their online survey, while independent escorts online usually have a high level of control over their work and often feel satisfied about it, abuse remains and '[h]alf the sample felt unconfident about reporting crimes to the police suggesting the current criminalised climate is detrimental to access to protection and justice'.

**5.5** In addition to discussing the centrality to the working conditions of specific measures around prostitution and sex work, as well as of migration policies, many of the authors also discuss the centrality of other policies, in particular regarding welfare state retrenchment and labour market policies. Interestingly, **Gilmour** identifies the role played in the life of sex workers, and in how they relate to sex work, by (the lack of) support and employment opportunities for single mothers, university students and people with mental health problems. These groups indeed appear to be overrepresented in the sex industry in Australia, and probably far beyond it.

## **Suggestions for future research**

**6.1** The articles in this Special Section suggest that the adoption of quality of working life frameworks to

study workers active in different forms of prostitution may be a fruitful way forward. It allows for the inclusion of perspectives and possibilities relating to exploitation, trafficking and predatory working conditions, while some sex industries may concurrently show better working conditions. Also, given the labour market opportunities some women, men and trans people have, sex work may be a rational decision, not because it has such attractive qualities, but because alternative options are even less inviting from the perspective of the needs and preferences of the worker.

- 6.2 What next? We see a limited number of approaches that are worth pursuing. First of all, this Section initiates at some points a comparative approach of quality of work in prostitution. For instance: [Garofalo Geymonat and Maciotti](#) compare cases of collective organisation in different institutional settings and for different purposes; [Oso](#) and [Gilmour](#) compare sex work in different institutional and organizational settings. One way of organising more robust research, where the effects can be identified in a more reliable way, is to follow up quality of work levels through time. This way, the effects of policy changes, of economic shocks or of technological changes, can be better observed.
- 6.3 One opportunity for future research is to organise a more explicit discussion about the outcomes of qualitative and quantitative approaches. The above argument that a triangulation between outcomes of different qualitative approaches may yield better results, applies *a fortiori* to the triangulation between quantitative and qualitative approaches. Strengths of one (set of) techniques may compensate for the weaknesses of another. For instance, with qualitative approaches it is harder to generalise findings, rigidly compare segments, and make benchmark comparisons of quality of working life between the overall labour market and sex work.
- 6.4 The resurgence of real communication between different research traditions is all the more pressing, because the sharp divide between qualitative and quantitative literatures risks creating 'closed citation communities', cliques that hardly connect to the other group while they deal with similar problems. If this conjecture holds true, it implies that the interdisciplinary debate is silenced, as quantitative approaches are strongly preferred by public health scholars and economists. Both disciplines have relevant things to say about working conditions, especially as regards health (see, for example, [Cunningham and Shah 2014](#), [Mc Grath-Lone et al. 2014](#)) and workplace violence (see, for example, [Deering et al. 2014](#), [Shannon et al. 2015](#)), which could inform and invite criticism from broader sociological analyses of quality of work. In short, different methodological designs have a variety of comparative advantages. In an ideal world, scholars would be able to develop confrontations and comparisons between approaches, research protocols and results. Today, this engagement is not very well developed.
- 6.5 We expand on the possibilities for comparing prostitution with other types of work. There are a number of reasons why this may be a fruitful research aim. First of all, it would make the starting point of this Special Section more tangible: it started from the idea that it would help to compare how well or poorly sex workers score on one or another quality of work indicator (for one rare example, see [Vanwesenbeeck 2005](#)). Also, it may allow for reconstruction of the choices made by sex workers, provided one is able to compare the relevant dimensions of the quality of work of jobs that are within reach for groups of workers. In the same vein, it may also lay bare why sex workers combine jobs inside and outside prostitution, or decide to enter or leave commercial sexual markets.
- 6.6 We therefore see this Section as a potential invitation to scholars to keep developing research that sheds light to prostitution and sex work from a quality of working life perspective. This research should aim for precise comparisons between different types of sex work, to further engage in debates between qualitative and quantitative approaches to quality of work in this sector, and finally to look beyond the sex industry, comparing sex work to other forms of work, in particular, yet not exclusively, those available to sex workers.

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## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to all participants of the 'Quality of Working Life' sessions in the COST conference

'Troubling Prostitution: Exploring intersections of sex, intimacy and labour' in Vienna (16-18 April 2015), where most of these papers were presented in a first version. Thanks also to the COST Action IS1209, 'Comparing European Prostitution Policies: Understanding Scales and Cultures of Governance' funding the proofreading of the articles of this Special Section, and to the editors of Sociological Research Online for their support in bringing together this special section.

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