
Sex Work in Post-Socialist Europe

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Context and Aims of the Special Issue

The sex industry has grown immensely in the former Eastern bloc since 1989 with a push of socialist countries from their relative isolation into the global, marketised economy (Kligman and Limoncelli, 2005, p. 122). Despite this, sex work is still a taboo, there is a lack of reliable data on sex work, and research is limited. Moreover, post-socialist countries have received little attention in international scholarship on sex work, despite the fact that violations of sex workers' rights are widespread in the region (SWAN, 2015).

While these countries have gone through significant legal transformations with the fall of socialist/communist systems, dominant policy frameworks are the outdated frames of public security and public order and morality, while sex work discourse is almost non-existent. This is tied to the socialist legacy of understanding sex work as an unproductive, immoral behaviour (SWAN, 2019), a prominent topic in many of the articles in this collection. As a part of this legacy, most post-socialist countries still criminalise prostitution on the ground of protection of public order, as a misdemeanour (minor/administrative) offence, contrary to the international human rights standards (SWAN, 2019), which places these sex work policies into the category of repressive (in Östergren's typology, 2020). Moreover, such policies are at odds with the dominant legislative approaches in the European Union: legalisation and client criminalisation. Even in the post-socialist countries which have decriminalised selling sexual services or have legalised it, the policies are predominantly restrictive (Östergren, 2020) and the relationship with law enforcement and other state agencies strained (also discussed in this collection). There is generally a

lack of comprehensive policies and measures aimed at securing sex workers' rights and their full integration in socio-economic and public life. Moreover, there is generally a lack of sex workers' organisations and sex workers are excluded from policy-making and its implementation. This fact together with the scarcity of research in the region contribute to the status quo.

The purpose of this special issue is to address these gaps in research, with a view of challenging the current sex work policies in post-socialist Europe. We also wish to raise the visibility and accessibility of regional scholarship on sex work, as well as the experiences of sex workers. The collection presents research from four countries – two former 'satellite states' of the Soviet Union: Bulgaria and Poland, and two former Yugoslav republics: Croatia and Slovenia. Articles discuss different issues, ranging from the analysis of prostitution in its various aspects in a historical perspective, assessment of prostitution policy's impact on lived experiences of sex workers, socio-legal study of case-law related to the criminal offence of exploitation of prostitution, research on sex workers' interactions with police, a study of sex workers' professional lives, and the research on survival sex (work). While the topics are varied, as are the legal, social, economic and cultural contexts of the studied countries, certain similarities are noted across the studies. For example, all the contributors note the scarcity of research and the lack of public debates on sex work, as well as its stigmatised and tabooed nature, linked to, among other things, common historical understanding of sex workers as deviant and immoral. Moreover, all the contributions show that policies and laws are characterised by a lack of consistency and clarity and arbitrariness in application.

In addition, the contributions point to a variety of experiences of sex workers, who navigate different legal and other structural as well as personal constraints, in line with studies from other parts of the world that point at complexity in sex work policy-making and implementation, linking the research to wider scholarship on sex work. All the contributions have policy impact as they identify the problems in policy-making and implementation. In light of this, further research, as well as evaluating and revising public policies on sex work, in line with international human rights standards, is called for in the region.

Contributions

In the first article, *Prostitution and Public Policy in Post-Socialist Bulgaria*, based on qualitative and quantitative research conducted between 2008 and 2022, Georgi Petrunov gives an extensive overview of the legal and social developments with respect to sex work in Bulgaria before and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. He shows how policies on sex work in Bulgaria are outdated and calls for reforms aligned with the international human rights standards, underscoring the importance

of involving sex workers actively in the policy-making process. In her article *Sex Work Policy in Poland and Its Impact on the Lived Experience of Sex Workers*, Anna Ratecka follows with the discussion of sex work public policy in Poland. Using Östergren's typology of prostitution policies (2020), she provides a contextualised and locally situated policy analysis by exploring the key policy instruments, their aims, implementation, and the impact on the sector, in particular on sex workers. She highlights the discrepancy between the stated policy objectives and outcomes: despite being designed within the abolitionist framework, there are no specific programmes or services developed for sex workers, and the policing primarily targets them. Neža Kogovšek Šalamon, Tjaša Učakar and Mojca Frelih, in the article *Criminality of Prostitution Abuse: A Socio-Legal Study of Case Files in Slovenia*, also use Östergren's typology to analyse the case-files of six district courts related to the criminal offence of the exploitation of prostitution. Examining how the courts define 'abuse' and 'exploitation' of prostitution, how they deal with the participation of third parties, how they assess vulnerability of sex workers and the concept of consent, and whether the judges engage in moral arguments, stereotyping, and stigmatisation, the authors show that the restrictive model prevails, although there are elements of both repressive and integrative policies. Izabela Ślęzak, in her article *Officer in the Line of Duty, Client, Third Party. Female Sex Workers' Interactions with the Police in Poland*, based on her interviews with female sex workers, examines the sex workers' experiences of interaction with the police. She discusses three main roles in which police officers interact with sex workers: a client, a third party or as an officer in the line of duty, demonstrating that the disparate modes of enacting these roles by police officers reinforce sex workers' distrust and reluctance to interact with the police. Ivana Radačić, Marija Antić and Mirjana Adamović, in their article *Sex Workers' Professional Experiences in the Interplay of Structure and Agency in Croatia*, examine professional experiences of indoor sex workers in Croatia, based on interviews with them, looking in particular into sex workers' motivations, perceptions and experiences, their control and safety strategies. The study shows that despite the structural constraints all of the interviewed sex workers exercise some degree of autonomy and control over their working lives, depending, inter alia, on their economic situation, motivation and self-perception. They call for integrative policy approaches. Lastly, Marija Antić, Rašeljka Krnić and Tihana Štojs Brajković examine the topic of survival sex (work) in Croatia, based on interviews with persons selling sexual services for subsistence needs. They look at their life stories marked by difficult childhood and substance abuse, and discuss the conditions and risks associated with engagement in survival sex. Authors also discuss agency in this specific context and call for future research to be directed towards a more in-depth exploration of this issue.

REFERENCES

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