

Officer in the Line of Duty, Client, Third Party. Female Sex Workers' Interactions with the Police in Poland

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Summary

The purpose of the article is to analyse the experiences of sex workers in Poland in terms of their encounters with police officers. Much as the very provision of sexual services is not criminalised or penalised in Poland, binding legal regulations (criminalising third parties who organise, coordinate, and facilitate the provision of sexual services for financial gain) bring sex workers within the purview of the operational activities of police officers. This factor sets a specific backdrop for all interactions that occur between sex workers and police officers.

In this article, I discuss the three main roles in which police officers interact with sex workers: as a client, as a third party or as an officer in the line of duty. I set out to demonstrate that the disparate modes of enacting these roles by police officers reinforce sex workers' distrust and reluctance to interact with the police.

I discuss the aforementioned issues drawing on qualitative interviews conducted with female sex workers providing a range of sex services in Poland.

Keywords: Sex Work, Police, Qualitative Interviews, Stigma, Poland

Introduction

As evidenced by research results, violence (physical, sexual, emotional, or economic) against persons providing sexual services inflicted by various interactional partners (clients, other sex workers, third parties, intimate partners, police) (Kloek and Dijkstra, 2018) is seldom reported to the police (Campbell and Sanders, 2021; Sanders *et al.*, 2022; Struyf, 2022). Offenders are well aware of this fact and act with impunity, thereby aggravating the risks associated with sex work (Katsulis *et al.*, 2010; Kloek and Dijkstra, 2018; McBride *et al.*, 2020; Struyf, 2022). One of

the reasons why sex workers are reluctant to report offences is their negative attitude towards the police that, consequently, inhibits them from interactions with law enforcement (Katsulis *et al.*, 2010; Klambauer, 2018; Stardust *et al.*, 2021; Stelko and Radačić, 2017; Struyf, 2022). It is, therefore, critical to review the dynamics of sex workers' encounters with the police to understand where these sentiments come from.

The article aims to analyse the interactions between female sex workers in Poland and police officers. I shall limit the scope of my research to encounters in which the following three criteria were met: the woman's role as a sex worker was clearly defined (it was known to the police officer that she was a sex worker), the encounter took place in the context of sex work (not as part of the woman's personal life), and the police officer overtly disclosed his profession. On the strength of the interviews collected, I want to answer the question of how sex workers perceive police officers in the various social roles they enact (a customer, a person involved in organising sex work, and an officer on duty). I also want to discuss the behaviours displayed by police officers in encounters with sex workers and how they affect women's willingness to interact with the police in the future. Thus, in this article, I focus on the micro-level interactions of sex workers and police officers that took place within the settings of the Polish legal system. In Poland, sex work is neither criminalised nor penalised, so it is of interest whether sex workers tend to regard police officers differently than in more harshly criminalised settings.

I open this article with a review of the literature on the interaction of sex workers with police officers and a presentation of the research background, that is, the legal status of sex work in Poland. I then characterise my three research projects that yielded the data for this analysis. In the following sections, I put forth a typology of roles assumed by police officers in the interactions with sex workers (a client, a person involved in organising sex work, an officer on duty) and examine the role of a potential interaction partner. The article concludes with a discussion of the results and conclusions, indicating suggestions for measures that could contribute to a positive change in the relationships between sex workers and police officers in Poland.

Relationships of Sex Workers with Police Officers – Literature Review

Many studies concerning violence against sex workers were preoccupied with the search for the reasons sex workers avoid contact with the police. Drawing on a systematic review of the available international literature, Struyf (2022) identified four main motivations for not reporting victimisation by sex workers: fear of punishment, fear of maltreatment, fear of exposure, and fear of the aggressor's impunity. It is noteworthy that this was the case across countries with different legal systems. Stardust *et al.* (2021) reached a similar conclusion in their investigation of police

encounters with sex workers in Australia (with sex work regulations varying by region). They established that sex workers were discouraged from reporting crimes by such disincentive factors as 'police inaction, identification, entrapment, disbelief, and minimisation of sex workers' experience' (*ibid.*, p. 144). It was also shown in other studies that sex workers are afraid of maltreatment at the hands of the police. This is true primarily in locations where sex work is fully criminalised (e.g., in most US states – Williamson *et al.*, 2007). However, the tendency is no different in countries where it is only partially criminalised (e.g., in Great Britain – Kinnel, 2008; Klambauer, 2018) or decriminalised (for example, Slovenia – Frelj, 2017). Sex workers are anxious they will be maltreated by the police also if sex work is legalised (e.g., in Mexico [Katsulis *et al.*, 2010] or the Netherlands [Kloek and Dijkstra, 2018]). Even if criminalisation is limited to customers or third parties (applicable to Northern Ireland – Ellison, Dhónaill and Early, 2019), sex workers are less likely to report crimes since most of them distrust the police and suspect they could get into trouble as a consequence (for instance, they might get arrested, deported, denounced as a sex worker in front of particular persons).

Sex workers' concerns are fuelled by the ubiquitous 'whore stigma' (Stardust *et al.*, 2021). In recognition of how they are perceived, sex workers were confident the police would not extend the same protections to them as they would to other women (Benoit *et al.*, 2016; Frelj 2017; Klambauer, 2018; Stardust *et al.*, 2021). In numerous studies, sex workers pointed out that police officers used dehumanising language, physical violence, bullying, and sexual abuse toward them (encouraged by sex work criminalisation – Dewey and St. Germain, 2014; Kinnel, 2008; Klambauer, 2018; Smith *et al.*, 2020; Stardust *et al.*, 2021; Williamson *et al.*, 2007). Sex workers took it for granted that the police would not show sympathy for them if they came forward with a notification about a crime (Kinnel, 2008; Klambauer, 2018). They were afraid of being blamed for the incident (Ellison, Dhónaill and Early, 2019; Kinnel, 2008) or treated as if they deserved the violence (Struyf, 2022). Sex workers were also anxious that the police would not record their notification (Ellison, Dhónaill and Early, 2019; Frelj, 2017; Klambauer, 2018; Williamson *et al.*, 2007) or, upon recording, detain them for an extended period and question them about matters that have nothing to do with the incident (Kinnel, 2008). They also feared that the investigation might lead to others finding out about their sex work and have such grave consequences as losing their accommodation (Ellison, Dhónaill and Early, 2019). They also believed that they would be denied credibility as witnesses (Klambauer, 2018), consequently never having the aggressor prosecuted (Katsulis *et al.*, 2010). Regrettably, as evidenced by data from multiple countries, this sense of the aggressor's impunity is a corollary of institutional discrimination. It is borne out by low conviction rates for violent crimes against sex workers (Struyf,

2022). It hardly comes as a surprise that several studies found low levels of trust in the police among sex workers (Ellison, Dhónaill and Early, 2019; Frelih, 2017; Klambauer, 2018; McBride *et al.*, 2020), lower than in the general population (Benoit *et al.*, 2016). In view of the foregoing, the decision to report crime offences is by no means a default choice. Rather, it is a daunting ‘cost-benefit analysis’ (Stardust *et al.*, 2021). Many sex workers admitted to trying to avoid the police (Katsulis *et al.*, 2010), expecting that the interactions would be negative (Klambauer, 2018).

Notably, however, interactions with police officers fall on a spectrum, and their picture is far from uniform. Some sex workers who reported victimisation to the police described the experience as positive. They underscored that the police officers were helpful, friendly, and concerned about their safety (these observations pertained to police officers in countries across different law systems – Benoit *et al.*, 2016; Dewey and St. Germain, 2014; Klambauer, 2018; Struyf, 2022). However, experiences with the police were more likely to evoke mixed reactions (also in locations where sex work was decriminalised – Frelih, 2017), with sex workers perceiving the behaviour of the officers as arbitrary and unpredictable (Klambauer, 2018).

Research indicates that the outcome of sex workers’ encounters with police officers is contingent on the intersectional and personal characteristics of the former (i.e., gender, ethnicity, migration status, ability, and type of sex work) (Benoit *et al.*, 2016; Smith *et al.*, 2020; Struyf, 2022). ‘Protective factors’ in dealing with the police feature whiteness, class, heterosexuality, as well as a cisgender identity, employment outside the sex industry, English-speaking and working in a decriminalised jurisdiction (Stardust *et al.*, 2021, p. 153). It may also be gleaned from the research that indoor sex workers had far more positive experiences with the police than outdoor sex workers (Benoit *et al.*, 2016). Maltreatment by the police affected especially transgender (Smith *et al.*, 2020) and migrant sex workers (Kinnel, 2008), particularly those threatened by deportation (Klambauer, 2018; McBride *et al.*, 2020; Stardust *et al.*, 2021). Thus, a worrisome trend may be seen as respective factors of discrimination and isolation of sex workers are subject to superimposition and crossover reinforcement.

To systematise the diverse interactions between the police and sex workers revealed in her three consecutive studies on street-level sex work in a mid-western city in the USA, Williamson *et al.* (2007) discerned six types of police officers’ behaviours: friendly cops, non-responsive officers, police officers as protectors, police officers as perpetrators, cops as paying customers and fringe benefit cops. Based on interviews with indoor and outdoor sex workers in England, Klambauer (2018) put forth another set of three broader and simpler categories of sex workers’ interactions with the police: positive, negative, or non-responsive. In this article, I have adopted a different analytical key by distinguishing the different roles in which police officers

interact with sex workers (as clients, third parties, and officers on duty) to highlight the fact that a medley of these roles can be an additional compounding element in the relationship between police officers and sex workers.

Research Context: Law vs. Sexual Services in Poland

In Poland, providing sexual services for financial gain is neither a crime nor a petty offence. Nevertheless, there are provisions in the Criminal Code and the Code of Petty Offences under which selected aspects of sex work are criminalised and penalised (Mozgawa, 2014). It is of note, however, that they apply only to 'prostitution' to the exclusion of other types of sex work (e.g., striptease, erotic cameras and chat rooms, erotic massage). What is deemed to be a crime is primarily organising and facilitating the provision of sexual services, as is soliciting, facilitating, and profiting from the prostitution of others. Thus, third parties who organise and facilitate sex work may be held criminally liable, while all labour relations in which a sex worker is involved are illegal. This compromises the safety of sex workers, who, for instance, are barred from legally providing services on the same premises as a team.

The Code of Petty Offences does list several provisions that the police may use to punish (by fine up to detention) sex workers (primarily active outdoors) and sometimes customers. Although it is not illegal to offer sexual services in public space (e.g., standing in the street or by the side of the road and waiting for a client), offering sexual services for financial gain in an 'intrusive, imposing or disruptive manner' is (Grzegorzczuk *et al.*, 2010; Mozgawa, 2014). The evaluation of whether the behaviour classifies as 'intrusive' is at the discretion of a police officer. So is the severity of the punishment. Similarly, in the case of yet another offence, that is, 'lewd conduct' and disturbing public order, it is the officer who assesses whether the behaviour of the sex worker in question meets these prerequisites. As a result, some police officers may levy a fine based on 'indecent' attire. Other grounds for fining sex workers include polluting and littering in public places (streets, parks, or forests), as well as parking a car in a forest in an unauthorised location (outside of a forest parking lot), which also affects customers of outdoor sex work.

Apart from the aforementioned scenarios, sex workers may come into contact with the police as a result of their routine inspections or operational activities (performed in conjunction with other uniformed services) in escort agencies, clubs, in the street, or by the road. On such occasions, police officers check sex workers' ID cards and look them up to see if they are wanted and what their migrant status is.

To gain a full appreciation of the context, it is worth noting that the sex industry in Poland has changed in recent years. Outdoor sex work (both in cities, in the streets, in the area of train stations, and near roads and parking lots) and indoor sex

work in the form of escort agencies were still developing intensely at the beginning of the 21st century. Over the years, the scale of outdoor sex work has decreased while indoor sex work has dramatically evolved. Third-party-run escort agencies and massage parlours are marginalised by individual entrepreneurs who operate alone or in a group (renting an apartment together and providing services therein, bypassing the need for a manager). Online sex work is also developing very dynamically. This migration to residential housing has reshaped the nature of encounters with the police, who have less power to inspect private residences than public venues or streets.

Methods

The results presented in this article are derived from the analysis of unstructured, qualitative interviews I conducted as part of three research projects. The first was an ethnographic study carried out between 2007 and 2013 in four escort agencies in a large city in Poland (Ślęzak, 2019). It aimed to investigate the process of social construction of sex work in escort agencies. I was interested in the professional tasks of the employees of these venues (female sex workers, but also managers, security guards, barmaids, telephone operators and janitors) and their mutual relationships. The interviews with escorts primarily revolved around the course of interactions with clients, as well as regarding safety on the job. I conducted the interviews and overt observations on the agencies' premises during working hours.

Another project I carried out addressed the social organisation of sex work in small venues and individually (practised both indoors and outdoors) in large Polish cities. In this case, too, I was primarily interested in the interactions of female sex workers with clients. However, the main topic raised by the interviewees turned out to be the violence they suffered at the hands of others (clients, but also significant others and the police, Ślęzak, 2016). I conducted interviews with sex workers between 2014 and 2016 in venues chosen by the interviewees (public places, restaurants).

The third project I have been running since 2019 is about the stigma experienced by women providing different types of sex work in Poland.¹ This research involves interviews with sex workers (escorts, strippers, erotic masseuses, cam girls, porn actresses) and members of organisations set up to support them. The research questions concern how sex workers in Poland experience social stigma and what strategies they develop to deal with the stigma. I set out to interview participants face-to-face in public venues indicated by the interviewees. Due to the Covid-19

¹ In 2019-2020 the grant was subsidised by National Science Center, Poland (DEC-2018/02/X/HS6/02419); approved by University of Lodz Research Ethics Committee (approval number 5-IV/KBBN-UŁ/IV/2019), continued from 2021 onwards as funded by the Grant Fund of the Dean of the Faculty of Economics and Sociology, University of Lodz.

pandemic, I conducted some of the interviews via videoconferencing and on the phone (Ślęzak, 2023).

Although only one of the three projects specifically targeted violence, this topic was frequently brought up by the interviewees in all of the projects, as was their experience of encounters with the police.

I analysed the interactions of sex workers with police officers based on 87 interviews with female sex workers doing different types of sex work (56 interviews held as part of the first project, 16 – the second and 15 – the third). The interviewees were aged 18-56, worked in large cities in Poland, and occasionally travelled to work abroad (to the west and south of Europe). They were involved in sex work for a period from one week to almost 20 years. The prevalent form of sex services offered by these women is direct indoor sexual services provided in organised forms (escort agencies) and individually. Fewer women work in an outdoor environment as well as in striptease clubs, massage parlours, on webcams, and porn films. It should be borne in mind that many of the interviewees changed the type of sex work on multiple occasions in pursuit of a mode of work that best suited them at that moment in their lives. Seven of them were immigrants in Poland (mostly from Eastern European countries), two of whom had a poor command of Polish. Most of the interviewees were married or in a partnership and concealed the fact of involvement in sex work from at least some members of their immediate social circle.

Interviews with sex workers form the core of the data analysed, as I aimed to focus on their experiences with the police. I included interviews with seven men who worked as security guards for escort agencies in one of Poland's major cities² as complementary information on the perspective of the parties involved in facilitating sex work. They were knowledgeable about acts of violence that took place on the premises of the venues as well as interactions with the police (both as part of routine proceedings and in connection with interventions). They were aged 35-55. Their length of service in this type of position ranged from two months to nine years. Three of them were former police officers.

Interviews with twelve activists³ from five organisations (two Catholic, two secular, and one sex worker-led) that support sex workers served as yet another source of information about officers' interactions with sex workers. As part of pursuing their activities (outreach, supporting sex workers in dealing with various types of difficulties), members of the organisations both witnessed the interaction of officers with sex workers and listened to accounts of such encounters. Three organisations also cooperated with officers in cases of violence against sex workers.

² The interviews were held as part of the first research project.

³ The interviews were held as part of the third research project.

I held interviews exclusively with women, except for one man (which also reflects their prevalence among members of these organisations). The interviewees ranged in age from twenty-odd to sixty-odd (mostly around thirty). They had a record of long-term engagement in the actions of third-sector organisations of various profiles. Six of them had the experience of providing sexual services.

All interviewees were familiar with the details of the study and gave their informed consent. Most of the interviews (which lasted from an hour to nearly four hours) were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Whenever an interviewee was unwilling to be recorded, I took notes during the interview, which I promptly transcribed and arranged in order afterwards. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the participants.

I analysed the collected data using the grounded theory procedures (Charmaz, 2006). I conducted initial open coding using NVivo11 software. Then I focused on selectively coding categories related to encounters with police officers. Only selected categories are presented in the article, the ones related to the outcomes of the interactions between sex workers and police officers. The analysis was executed in compliance with the guidelines of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 2007), with a focus on the processes of defining situations (social roles, course of interactions) during encounters with police officers. In view of the adopted theoretical perspective, the micro-social level, the level of interaction, is thus analysed in the article.

Results

Based on the analysis of the collected data, I discerned three social roles in which police officers interacted with sex workers: as a client, as a co-organiser of sex work, and as an officer on duty. Each of the roles is described separately, but in practice, they could intermingle so that the policeman could have (e.g., sequentially) taken them on in a single encounter. Alternatively, he could activate them alternately depending on how the situation unfolded. This made it even more difficult for sex workers to interpret how a police officer might treat them and how they should behave.

Police Officer as a Client

Virtually all interviewees working in escort agencies and outdoors chanced upon a customer who declared to be a policeman.⁴ In contrast, women whose work did not entail direct contact with clients (e.g., work via webcams) or who performed their

⁴ There were surely police officers who withheld or concealed their profession (e.g., undercover police officers collecting evidence against the heads of the premises) among the clients of the research participants. These interactions (and the associated suspicions and conjectures of sex workers) shall not be investigated in the article.

work in other types of venues (massage parlours, striptease clubs) were unlikely to have such experiences. It is worth noting, therefore, that police officers primarily approached as customers those interviewees whose work was eligible for police surveillance because they worked either for a (criminalised) third party or individually, but in a manner readily subject to police involvement (e.g., under the provisions of the Code of Petty Offences).

The police officers usually wore civil clothes, but would reveal their profession at a specific moment in the interaction with sex workers; some would even show their badges. The interviewees raised no doubts about their client's affiliation with the police. It is possible that some of the men only claimed to be officers to gain an advantage over the sex worker. However, it is possible that genuine officers had no grounds to fear the disclosure of their profession, as they were confident that sex workers would not be able to use this information against them. In some cases, the client's identity was confirmed by security guards working on the premises, who knew them as fellow police officers from their previous workplace. There were also instances when police officers who came to the premises on duty for checks also visited as private persons after working hours. Sebastian, a security guard at an escort agency, recalls:

Sometimes the boss would simply invite them to make friends with them and not to have them as enemies. When they came for a check, he would take them to his place, chat for a bit, and then tell me to give them alcohol and all if they ever came again. Everyone who had worked for a long time knew they were police officers.

Some interviewees praised the officers for being 'good customers' and recalled the encounters with them in positive terms. They did not interpret the client's disclosures as attempts at coercing them to provide services free of charge or to gather information on the operation of the premises.

Jolanta: I used to work at a place close to a police station. To make matters more interesting, I had a police officer from that police precinct visit me. He was a loyal client; he used to come every week for two years.

Researcher: Would he be completely clear about it and say: I am a policeman?

Jolanta: Yes, he would show his badge. But he must have stopped working there. His visits came to such an abrupt stop. And he definitely had to make a lot of money. He would come every week and spend two hours with me. He was very nice.

It is worth noting that the seamless operation of the premises in the vicinity of the police precinct and the positive interactions with customers who purported to be police officers had additional implications for the interviewees. They saw it as legitimisation of sex work and escort agencies:

Beata: Some say it's not legal. But it is, too, it's just not registered. It's legal, all right. The police come themselves, so it's legal.

Researcher: Do they come in the capacity of clients?

Beata: Yes, there are such occurrences. Once, I had a client flash his badge in front of me in the room. They really come by. And I don't believe it's illegal, no matter who says so. How could the police officers not be in the know, with a venue like this just two blocks from their precinct?

Such interactions served as basis for the belief that the police as an institution and individual police officers alike are comfortable with sex work and display a positive attitude toward female sex workers, which may have contributed to a willingness to turn to them for help when needed. On the flip side, it could also have led the women to harbour misconceptions about what legal solutions are in place in Poland.

Some interviewees recounted negative experiences with police officers who approached them as sex work customers. Paulina shared that sometimes they would abuse their position of power and breach the rules of the encounter (e.g., by not paying for the service, extorting sexual services to which she did not want to consent, and using violence):

I remember that once policemen came to the agency. They had already had booze but ordered themselves a round of beers and some vodka in their drinks. Then, they just wouldn't leave, they didn't want to pay, I don't know if they ran out of money, I don't remember. Well, things got ugly then. [...] They were having a brawl, and a girl who accompanied one of them ran out of the room to lament to the boss that they wouldn't pay, and their time was up. And the boss said: 'These are policemen, you know'. And the girl retorts: 'So what, am I to come out penniless?! Just because they're policemen!' Maybe they had some kind of an arrangement? I don't know. Maybe it was about protection or something like that? Perhaps. But why am I to hassle with a drunkard?

The experiences recounted by Paulina manifest the complexity of the situations that unfold when a police officer acting in the capacity of a customer crosses boundaries. No solution is readily available to interrupt a perilous encounter without compromising the outlooks of the premises or the people working there. Workers subjected to various types of violence at the hands of clients who are police officers may feel disempowered because they cannot rely on support from their manager, nor do they see the possibility (or the point) of calling the police. In some venues, the manager disbursed the women whenever police officers did not pay for the service, thus making up for the financial losses of the workers. However, the experiences of violence or the loss of trust in the police can hardly be said to be compensated for, with the police perceived as a source of violence and abuse rather than help.

The interviewees also recalled situations (both in indoor venues and outdoors) of providing sexual services to police officers for free, supposedly making an 'investment' towards their security at work, as in the case of Kasia:

I have a police officer coming in. Whenever he does, he doesn't pay anything. He says that he'll look after me if I get into trouble, that he'll say a word about me to his colleagues. But who am I to know if he's actually going to do that? Never mind, it doesn't change a thing. I can't just decline to be with him.

The relationship with the customer-police officer, as described by Kasia, is an example of the abuse of the position of power towards sex workers (especially outdoor sex workers, as in this case). Such interactions reinforce the sex workers' feelings of helplessness as they grow to be convinced that they have no way to oppose or negotiate the rules of such an encounter.

Police Officer as a Third Party

Interviews and conversations with women who provided sexual services in escort agencies and outdoors revealed the stark reality of police officers (also former officers) who were actively involved in organising sexual services, the very same activities that are criminalised in Polish legislation. Several interviewees from various escort agencies spoke of cases where a police officer (or former police officer) was a co-owner of such a venue. The interviewees were not sure if it was true or hearsay, but such was common knowledge circulating among the venue workers and clients. This piece of information served to instil discipline in both groups. Magda discusses it thus:

A policeman was said to co-own that agency. He had kept the business running for many years. You know how it goes. Someone else actually ran it and was present on site. And he never even showed up. He just collected the money and saw to it that no police or gangsters would come in with requests for protection money. Well, as to be expected, it was peaceful there, no brawls, not a single fight. Everyone knew that they wouldn't get away with any of this.

The interviewees consider working at such a venue to be a favourable solution as they are not bothered by either the police or aggressive customers. All things being equal, the interviewees can identify the risk of such a setup in the event the manager of the agency would inflict violence (physical, sexual, economic). There would be no option then for calling the police for help:

Natalia: The agency where I worked previously was run by a policeman. And could anyone so much as even touch him? No one!

Researcher: Right, but the police would have reacted if the workers had been mistreated?

Natalia: I don't think so. [pause] But it's fine there. At least there's nothing to fear when working there [laughs].

During my research, on several occasions, I came across former (e.g., retired or dismissed) police officers working as security guards at an escort agency. This was the case for Mariusz:

I make no secret of the fact that I worked in the police for many years. I know the city; I know the people and many of them still recall having to do with me. I also knew the boss running this place and when I left the police I thought, why not, I can work here for a while. It's more exciting and better paid than being a security guard in a shop.

During the interviews, these men praised the opportunity to earn extra money on top of the police pension. They stressed what good guards they make because they can recognise an aggressive customer and pacify him before the situation escalates into a threat. The sex workers judged their presence on the premises somewhat differently (as the quote below indicates). They suspected the venue managers did not recruit these guards for their skills alone. The real payoff from hiring such a person was to use them to establish a relationship with the police (on terms unknown to the interviewees) so that the agency could continue to operate without any disturbances. According to Beata:

How are they to protect us? They've sported large bellies; they are not athletic at all. That's what I say. A young chap, a buff one, is another thing altogether. When a client eyes his bulging muscles, he knows better than to act up or else. He'll just get a whack. But the background story here is supposedly that Adam has some connections with the police. He knows someone there, and I don't know much about how that works, but supposedly, as long as he works here, we are at peace with the police.

Last but not least, it was not uncommon for interviewees to mention rumours that some venue managers and people who organise outdoor sex work give money to police officers or become their informants in exchange for the police paying no heed to their activities. None of the interviewees could produce evidence for this. However, they were convinced that this was the case based on their observations of the local sex industry, such as the aforementioned operation of a venue close to a police precinct or the long-standing operation of specific venues and the short track record of others closed due to a criminal case against the owners (analogous to persons organising outdoor sex work). As Sandra notes, some agencies may fall into trouble unleashed by the collaboration of other venues' owners who denounce competitors to the police:

I heard about one such man who used to be a policeman or informant. In any case, he knew them very well. I don't know if he denounced perpetrators to the police. But he knew what was going on in the city. And he ran a venue but without much success. The girls quit and went on to work somewhere else, where they enjoyed better conditions. What he did was just cue the police in on the other venue, and the court recognised a case. They got a conviction, probably for pimping. And he continued to operate, although he was doing the same thing, offered the girls even worse conditions. But he has ties to the police. He takes in police officers as clients for free. That's why the police protect him, and there are no police controls, and no one takes him to court at all. If you lack police support, they'll be after you.

As made clear by Sandra, police controls are (at least in part) a tool deployed by the police for the surveillance of those areas of sex work that are criminalised. Nonetheless, according to Sandra, the law is enforced selectively, with police disregarding the operation of those with whom they have various kinds of 'dealings'. The way officers behave may thus be a derivative of a showdown between the police and those in charge of organising sex work, in which sex workers are mere pawns.

Police Officer as an Officer on Duty

Regardless of the nature of their experiences with police officers on duty, interviewees tended to question the point of police 'meddling' in sexual services, which they saw as a source of problems rather than support. Hence, the main rule adopted in dealing with the police was to avoid interactions. In cases of violence (irrespective of the identities of the perpetrator and the victim), none of the interviewees working in an organised sex work venue called the police to intervene. Security guards assumed the role of the police in some venues (where managers saw the need to take care of the safety of sex workers). Their job was to prevent acts of aggression against sex workers and punish customers upon committing such acts:

Irena: Whenever there's a brawl, an intervention group of security guards rushes to the site. Our security guard on site calls them right away. Three to four men drag the client out into the hallway, and that's it [with satisfaction]. There was an incident once. The client in one of the rooms was really bent on something, and the security guard called reinforcements. They came in in a foursome, grabbed the guy, shoved him out the door, and that was it.

Researcher: Does the police come in as well?

Irena: No, we never had trouble that would warrant the visit of the police. They managed on their own. The police never come in here unless they're clients.

Thus, venue managers established an enforcement system alternative to the official one. They resorted to such measures because each call to the police could

jeopardise the venue's survival. The preceding setup is financially unattainable to solo workers. For this reason, some interviewees lacked such support altogether. Others relied on barter relations of various kinds. Basia may serve as an example:

Whenever we stood in street X, our colleagues watched us at the gate. They took notice of who drove up to us, in what kind of car, and what was the registration number. They also knew where our go-to place was to spend time with clients, and they helped us out whenever something happened; they did so on multiple occasions. Well, we either bought them vodka or repaid them in some other way.

Interviewees employed in escort agencies pointed out the cases of violence perpetrated by the managers of some of them. The most extreme situation I learned about during my research was the case of one escort agency where violence against women employees gradually escalated over several years. None of them reported any problem to the police. The most they did was to try to quit working at the venue as soon as the opportunity arose. Robert, a security guard from a rival agency, described the events thus:

At the [name] agency, the manager used to beat these girls; they would leave and come to work for us because he swore at them, allowed the clients to do everything, well, that was a madman. He's in prison now, he got a 10-year sentence. He broke one girl's hands, battered another, didn't let the girls go outside the agency at all for a few weeks, drugged them, and took their money. All of them knew, but none of them called the police. It was some client who did call, and that's how the manager got caught. But no one knows who that client was. Agencies play dirty tricks on one another to get their competition shut down and out of play. There are various stratagems.

This is how Patrycja, one of the former employees of this agency, explained her and other sex workers' inertia in this situation:

The girls were just afraid to report this [to the police]. [...]. The girls who worked there until the very end had to visit the police all the time; they had to testify, and they discovered some drugs there. So, I knew when to quit that agency. I wasn't there when it got ugly.

In this case, the key reason for not reporting the violence was the sex workers' fear of being involved in a lawsuit. Nonetheless, several solo workers did call the police or report a crime. Hania's experience may serve as an example of an interaction that was brought to a favourable end:

I was standing in the street when they wanted to take me away in a car, me and a friend, but I didn't give in to them. We reported this incident to the police, so they

pulled them over, and they didn't drive up to us again. And the police went to and fro, patrolling, they always checked there. That was fortunate because, you know, if something happens, you can call out and ask them to stop by.

However, other workers were critical of the effectiveness of such assistance. While they brought up no significant misgivings regarding the behaviour of the police officers accepting the notification, they did not see any results, i.e., the guilty parties were not punished. At the same time, the affected person, as was the case with Sylvia, suffered further problems:

I arranged sex with a guy who taped me. He had access to my Facebook account out of my stupidity and started blackmailing me. And I was past my ability to cope. I had to take this to the police. And then what happened? They seized his laptop for three months, I went to a facility, and they dropped the case because there was no evidence [...] and I turned 18 in an orphanage.

As a result, Sylvia became convinced that approaching the police would do nothing to help, so it was better to avoid them.

Police Controls

Evading police encounters is not always possible, however. Research participants who worked in agencies and in the street had to deal with regular police controls. As Iga (a sex worker who also conducts outreach in a sex worker-led organisation) notes, during these controls, police officers looked at general law adherence. They verified compliance with, for instance, the migration law. Identifying minor violations could have hindered or prevented the operation of the venue and they were easier to prove than, for example, pimping:

In many agencies, the police come in and perform an inspection. In larger agencies, controls are held on a mostly regular basis. The police visit the site, take the details of the workers, and determine who the workers are. The police simply know about the existence of these venues. They are not surprised by their detection. They are only interested in whether the workers can produce permits, required visas and suchlike (Iga).

In effect, police checks became a staple of the job for some interviewees. The workers just need to grow accustomed to them. As remarked by Helena, if both parties understand this much and behave professionally, the controls can run smoothly and not cause any nuisance to the workers (at least not to the ones who are below the radar):

The police maintain records. I have a record with the police already. Most girls who work in agencies are checked up because this is their duty. The thing is that

no one has access to these records. That's how this department operates. [...] I have always told them: 'I have a family. I have a lot to lose. I don't want this to be disclosed later to somebody.' And they said: 'Trust us, this is for the restricted purposes of the department only.' Because many lost girls and many wanted clients surface in those agencies. That's why they must carry out these routine inspections. The manager doesn't need to know any of this. He's not interested in my criminal record, or if the police are looking for me, he is just looking for a worker.

Notably, however, the police officer did not explain who specifically has access to the data collected and how the data are stored.

Record-keeping of the workers' personal information by the police raised concerns among many interviewees. In particular, women whose stay permit proceedings were not finalised and sought its legalisation were afraid that this would impede obtaining a work permit or citizenship. Criminal record was something to avoid at all costs for the interviewees who concealed their involvement in sex work from their close ones. According to Paulina:

I once witnessed a situation with police officers. I remember there was a young girl who had not yet turned 18 at the time. She was a minor, and when the police came to record the girls, the manager hid her in a closet. I also hid in the closet, but fortunately, they never started taking any records. They just walked in, looked around to see if everything was okay, and left.

Other interviewees recalled fleeing from the officers through a window or the back door. This demonstrates their determination to avoid an encounter, even if they faced no formal threat.

In some cases, the police visit was prompted by a notification from a third party, such as neighbours. Nina's statement provides yet another example of the sex workers' belief in the crucial importance of good relations with the police. All things being equal, the course of an intervention is determined by the individual decision of specific police officers:

This woman lives here. She had called the police two or three times already because the girls were clattering with their heels too loudly, or odd noises could be heard from this room [laughs]. When she called the police, they sure came, but they were friends of these security guards [laughs], so they just sat there [laughs], but you know, if some other officers had come, they might have done something.

In some cases, police visits were closely linked to operational activities against those running the venues. As showcased by the predicament of Gosia, who is cited below, the police are well-versed in the local sex market. Although she advertised herself as an independent sex worker, she worked for men who took a portion of her

earnings. Police efforts were aimed at gathering evidence against them. As Gosia (who, by the way, has a negative opinion of the police) notes, the officers repeatedly tried to obtain information from her, undeterred by her lack of cooperation:

Once police officers arrived at the apartment where I worked. And they checked my record, asked me how I got there since I'm from another city, and: 'Didn't anyone bother you to pay some kind of protection money here?' I say: 'No, it's peaceful and silent here.' He: 'But if something happens', and I say: 'Well, write down your phone number for me, I'll call if anything happens.' Well, when I later moved to another place, they came again and went: 'Whom have you been lately travelling with in a black BMW.' I say: 'I don't know what it's about, maybe I was driving with some client, I have no clue.' And they say: 'Tell us who it is.' I say: 'I don't know.' So, they took photos of me facing forward, and sideways, photographed my tattoos, and one of them said: 'Come on, give it a rest; she won't tell you anything anyway.' They slammed the door and left, but there in [city name], they were really inquisitive. [...] Is there something going on there, maybe? There is also a police school there, a cop hatchery, and maybe they are more meticulous there; they take photos of everything. After a longer time had passed without my putting up an ad, they would call me and ask why there was no ad, if everything was okay, or if something was wrong. They were worried. That's how the police took care of you.

As Gosia points out, police operations differed across respective cities, as driven by diverse assumptions and goals of local police authorities. Iga, a sex worker who is also a peer streetworker, noted that even at the level of different precincts in the same city, police officers' behaviour can vary dramatically:

One of our acquaintances, who is a sex worker, has the support of the police, and in fact, the police have explained to her very carefully that if a client solicits what she doesn't want, then that's what she has the contact details to the police for, so she can make the call. There was once a man on the prowl, a client with a knife, who had already inflicted some wounds on sex workers. This particular person also came across this client, and in fact, the police immediately detained him; it was such a quick response. Yet elsewhere, when I was on my shift by the road, the police totally oppressed the girls and gave fines for indecent attire, pulled the clients over as they entered the forest and levied disproportionately high fines. The girls equipped themselves with voice recorders there because they constantly ran into trouble with the police. [...] the girls said that it's just that the police chief was totally against them, and he had it in for them, and the police officers had orders to keep watch and to fine them. It simply depends on the police precinct.

While relying on the current law, officers interpret its provisions at their discretion, which can lead to excessive fines and drive women into financial problems.

This situation was particularly challenging during the COVID-19 pandemic when (high) fines were also issued based on regulations related to sanitary safety (e.g., mandatory facemasks, ban on meetings with unrelated people, ban on the operation of entertainment venues) (Dziuban and Dziuban, 2020; Dziuban, Moźdrzeń and Ratecka, 2021).

It merits mentioning that the workers referred to by Iga took some defensive measures – they recorded interactions with the police on a voice recorder. Zofia, an employee at an organisation supporting sex workers in another part of the country, recalled another way of handling the situation when local police made it difficult for sex workers to provide sex services along the roads.

It all boils down to what the police chief is like. There was a time when our local police chief declared war on prostitutes. This was a new kid on the block who had the brilliant idea to eradicate prostitution across the entire voivodeship. And it was awful, more comical than awful, because most of the police units were sent out on the roads, and these policemen just stood by the side of the road. As prostitution is not banned in Poland, the girls kept on standing, but there were no clients. Thus, he fought with these girls for three months, until the girls made a happening, and then finally these policemen stopped coming. The girls put up a giant bed sheet and wrote: ‘We would like to thank the chief for his round-the-clock care’, and they hoisted scores of vibrators. The incident had first-page coverage in the press, and it became all the rage. The chief lost it and threatened to finish them off. Of course, he never did.

In this case, the involvement of the media and publicity helped end the police chief’s ‘war’, but this is a telling illustration of the fact that there might be radical differences in the police’s understanding of their tasks in connection with sex work at the local level. It is also worth noting that the actions described (recording police officers, a happening) were undertaken by sex workers working in a group and being supportive of each other. I have not encountered an instance of such efforts made by a woman working solo during my research.

‘Raids’ and Interrogations

Apart from routine inspections, police officers also conduct ‘raids’ on the premises for which operational activities are being pursued. The interviewees who witnessed such events said that such ‘raids’ tend to be more violent if carried out not by the local police, but by a particular CBS unit (Central Investigation Bureau of Police) specialised in combatting organised crime. Drawing on personal experiences, accounts of such occurrences shared by sex worker acquaintances as well as footage of police actions available on the internet, the interviewees reported ‘raids’ on escort agencies during which armed officers broke down doors to the premises, used

bang grenades, knocked sex workers to the floor, handcuffed them, and confiscated their phones or computers. Although the provision of sex services is not criminalised in Poland, sex workers feel they are treated like criminals. Dorota, a dancer in a striptease club, also supports this thesis:

One particular night, the cops raided the club, and the girls were ushered out in handcuffs. The whole club was searched, and there was a camera recording of the whole thing. It was an awfully shitty situation. The girls spent close to 48 hours at the precinct.

Although the operation of striptease clubs is legal in Poland, the police acted on suspicion of crimes committed against clients (beatings, thefts) in the events she recalled. During the 'raid', the strippers were treated as suspects.

'Raids' result in sex workers being interrogated by police officers. Also, in this regard, the research participants' experiences were diverse. As Dorota remarks, some police officers treated interrogations as a necessary ritual without much confidence in the possibility of gathering valuable information:

You never know with interrogations. It depends on who you end up with. The usual course of action was such that they were well aware that they just had to go through the motions of interrogating, but to no avail. The bottom line is to produce a record, and that's it, and let's call it a day. Well, they actually never caused me any nuisance. But the reason is my looks. I don't really look like I work in a striptease club. I've got the appearance of an innocent child: 'Mr. Officer, after all, I don't know anything. I'm new here. I don't know anything.' Well, I am a little better off thanks to my looks.

Helena also corroborates the ritualised course of interrogations:

Once [...] they came in, it was Friday evening, first two gentlemen came in, they were asked what they would drink, and you know, there was no liquor license. They responded: 'No, thanks.' Then the doorbell rings, and an entire team barges in, including one woman. ID card presentation, check-ups, etc. And so, they packed us up in the vehicles and took all the girls to the police precinct. They took all the girls' ID cards and passports. I told them: 'Cut it out, will you, don't waste the time, it's Friday, the best time in the entire week.' But we were being interrogated anyway. One of them said: 'How much do you charge?' And I go: 'But for what?' And then he goes: 'Don't give me that crap; tell me how much you charge?' Then I go: 'But I don't get it, what should I charge for?' He goes: 'Well when a man locks eyes with ya, how much do you charge?' And I say: 'If he locks eyes with me, I don't charge anything.' 'Hey, you, don't give me baloney. Just tell me how much you charge!' I say: 'A hundred.' 'And what's the amount you share [with the pimp]?' And I go: 'Am I supposed to share a hundred with someone?'

And he goes: ‘Alright, what about your friends here?’ And I say: ‘Well, ask my friends.’ And then he made me stand against these white doors to take my mugshot, and I said: ‘But what pose should I take?’ And he goes: ‘Release that nutcrack.’ [laughs]

According to Helena, the police and the sex workers engage in a kind of interaction game – the police officers inspect the venues, record, and interrogate the workers, but are usually unable to get real answers from them. Sex workers mete out the information during interrogation carefully so as not to harm the venue’s head. Although both parties are familiar with the business profile of the venue, neither party is willing (sex workers) or able (police officers) to prove it. So, they carry on playing their roles with the knowledge that not much will come out of the encounter. Helena recalled (as do other interviewees) that many police officers accepted this game and behaved neutrally and even indulged in humour during interrogations.

However, interviewees who were interrogated in connection with pimping charges brought against the owners of the venues where they worked have a completely different recollection of their contact with the police. In this case, the policemen enacted the roles of the ‘bad cop’ before the interrogation, informing them that other workers had already testified against the manager. If they didn’t follow through as well, they would get in trouble, be taken into custody, not see their children and could even lose them. Of particular interest are the words of Beata, who contrasted her experience of the police ‘raid’ on the venue with the course of her previous interactions with police officers:

The police burst into the agency and behaved rudely, very unpleasantly, shouting at us and searching things and the premises with the assistance of drug-tracking dogs. At the police precinct, I was interrogated by a policewoman. However, every now and then, a policeman also came in to threaten me with the treasury authority, labour exchange, and taking away my child. I told them whatever they wanted me to say to get released. This was the first time I witnessed such police behaviour. At the agency I used to work at previously, police officers would come to the manager and have coffee and take advantage of the services, and now police officers from the same police precinct were so aggressive.

It is worth noting that none of the interviewees who encountered abuse on the part of the police officers during interrogation complained about the actions of the police, explaining that they wanted to be cut off from the case as soon as possible. One of the participants, Ewa, was also quick to add: ‘And who was I supposed to tell?’ expressing the conviction shared by almost all the interviewees that in such a situation, they are on the losing end.

These entirely different sex workers' experiences of police interrogations reveal that their course depends on how a particular officer (and his or her superiors) wishes to handle a given interaction. From the perspective of the sex workers, such interactions involve a great deal of uncertainty, and until they commence, it is difficult to predict what course they will take (mild or aggressive).

Police Officer as a Potential Interaction Partner

Not all of the study participants had the experience of interacting with police officers in any of the aforementioned roles. Some of them constructed their ideas about such interactions based on information sources available to them. Some interviewees learned about what interactions with the police might look like from other sex workers. If other sex workers consistently and repeatedly reported negative experiences, the person became convinced that the police were not a supportive institution and that she had better be wary of them. Other sex workers also shared advice regarding, for example, the behaviour of police officers at particular police precincts or strategies for conducting a conversation with a police officer. As a result, by the time the first interaction with the police officer took place, the sex worker may have already had a host of convictions about how the encounter would proceed.

It should be borne in mind that the members of sex worker support organisations may also have (even unconsciously) influenced the perceptions of the police held by the people they helped. For example, the fact that the organisation worked with a particular police officer to whom they turned for help if needed (this theme surfaced in the interviews with the members of three organisations) may have upheld sex workers' perceptions that police officers are generally somewhat reluctant towards sex workers and interacting with a random officer without the assistance of the organisation is risky. According to Zofia, who belongs to a harm reduction organisation:

Zofia: Every so often, people try to collect money from girls who work solo in apartments. Whenever they do, the girls call us and ask us to obtain help from the police. Because they know we collaborate with this department.

Researcher: Does that mean they are reluctant to report to the police themselves?

Zofia: They know that if we take care of this, then the case will be followed up on and resolved to a point. Then again, it's rather challenging to show up at a precinct and say: 'I'm a prostitute. I've just had someone fresh out of jail visit me and try to coerce me to pay money.'

Organisation members were also likely to believe that reporting a crime and involving sex workers in interrogations and later in a court case was, at the very least, an unpleasant and often traumatic experience for them. It can also jeopardise their

safety. Weighing the costs and benefits, some interviewees explicitly said that they would advise sex workers against reporting a crime and testifying. In the words of a nun, Sister Elżbieta, who belongs to a Catholic organisation:

Elżbieta: Sometimes, we would help women who were dragged off the street by the police. And they were supposed to testify against these pimps, but, unfortunately, there is no protective law in our country. The moment they testify or say something to the police, even if it leads to a court hearing, they are no longer protected. And they know this much; the women also knew it was dangerous for them, so we sometimes ensured they were protected; we made sure they wouldn't testify. We were more concerned about protecting them than denouncing the perpetrator because we knew that even if he went to prison, he would track her down through proxies.

Researcher: So, they refused to testify?

Elżbieta: At the outset, they did say something, but later they would not.

Sister Elżbieta commented on the lack of system-wide measures for the protection of and support for female sex workers who testify. Currently, no such solutions are in place. The police treat the women as a mere means of convicting the pimp. Therefore, members of this Catholic organisation were convinced that protecting sex workers was equivalent to minimising their contact with the police. This attitude of distrust may have been passed on to the women who contacted the organisation.

Interestingly, many interviewees knew no one who had confronted the police. In such a situation, they gained knowledge of the procedures used by officers from the media, e.g., news stories in news or intervention programmes, movies, and TV series (often crime dramas or pseudo-documentaries) and materials available on websites and social media platforms, which usually resulted in a pessimistic outlook on interactions with the police. As Dominika notes:

In principle, I don't trust the police. [...] Anyway, I'm reminded of such images as when the police just raid the agencies and shut them down. It's all supposed to prevent human trafficking, but in the end, people who work there end up in handcuffs themselves, in massively humiliating circumstances. Does that really do any good to anyone? I saw some footage of precisely these raids, and I don't know how I would go through something like this; it looks terrible, just terrible.

The lack of legal awareness of many sex workers further aggravates the envisioned course of interaction with a police officer. Marta observes:

Well, unfortunately, the state does a poor job of ensuring safety. A girl cannot feel safe and may even think that she will face some charges when, for example, she calls the police because she has an aggressive client.

It is not solely the police who are perceived as a source of danger. The entire legal system is seen as hostile to sex workers. In Iga's view:

Well, it comes as no surprise that it is an abstraction for a sex worker to really be able to report any violence in the current legal settings. A sex worker must be really determined to report violence, have the stamina and mental strength to do so, and brace herself for spades of secondary violence. Alas.

It is, therefore, worth noting that interviewees' beliefs about how police treat sex workers are not necessarily based on their own experiences. What matters substantially is how police officers are described by other people who are considered credible sources of information by the sex workers. Media coverage is equally important, whether it is fiction deploying the theme of police officers as tough guys or footage created by the police to demonstrate the effectiveness of their actions. These different sources of knowledge can foster the overarching negative attitude of sex workers towards the police. If these sentiments are further reinforced by fears stemming from incomplete or inaccurate knowledge of the legal measures in place, police officers can easily become eponymous with threats rather than support/help for sex workers.

Discussion

The experiences shared by workers show that interactions with police officers may vary depending on the role adopted by the police officer in a given scenario (client, person involved in facilitating sex work, or officer on duty) and, beyond the role itself, on the attitudes and intentions of police officers as well as the orders they receive from their superiors. The police role-playing in various situations is a source of insecurity for sex workers (Stardust *et al.*, 2021), as it blurs the identity of the police officer: whether the police officer is a protector (and, if so, of whom – the sex workers or, for example, the owners of the venue), or perhaps one of the parties exploiting his or her position against the sex workers.

Interviewees who worked as escorts indicated that police officers often sought their services. In many cases, they tended to be 'good customers', although they sometimes coerced the women to get free or extra services in return for 'protection' of the worker or her workplace.

It merits emphasising that police officers often act in the capacity of the customers of sex workers, as corroborated also by other studies. They either pay for sex or (especially if sex work is criminalised) extort it with the threat of levying a fine or arrest (Klambauer, 2018; Nestadt *et al.*, 2023; Stardust *et al.*, 2021; Williamson *et al.*, 2007) or solicit sexual services in exchange for protection (Stelko and Radačić, 2017). As my research shows, even when merely the third parties are criminalised,

while sex workers can only be penalised for offences linked to the provision of sexual services, there are sufficient grounds for some officers to abuse their power.

The interviewees also pointed out that some police officers join forces with sex work facilitators or that former police officers themselves become third parties. It is worth noting that while escort agencies' security guards openly admitted to having once been officers, the ties of venue owners to the police remained more in the realm of rumour and conjecture. Interestingly, the themes of a police officer acting as a pimp (taken up by Frelih [2017] with reference to Slovenia) and the collaboration between the police and pimps (mentioned by Stelko and Radačić [2017] with reference to Croatia), also evident in my research, tended to be absent in studies conducted in the Anglosphere. This may indicate a slightly different set of roles performed by police officers in former socialist countries.

With regard to the role of a police officer on duty, many researchers point out that it is virtually impossible for sex workers to anticipate at the outset of the interaction what will happen during a police intervention (Benoit *et al.*, 2016; Dewey and St. Germain, 2014; Williamson *et al.*, 2007). Klambauer (2018) described this uncertainty by means of the metaphor of playing roulette when it all depends on luck whether the sex worker meets the 'good', the 'bad', or the 'non-responsive' cop. The participants of my research were also unsure whether a police officer would behave neutrally or even friendly towards them during the check and interrogation or whether he would treat sex workers as dangerous criminals or abuse his position to take advantage of them. Some interviewees mentioned treatment representing opposite extremes of the spectrum from officers from the same city or police precinct. In effect, the interviewees saw all interactions with the police as fraught with an adverse risk.

Negative experiences with the police lead to handling the security issue in private. Under such a setup, sex workers do not perceive the police as helpful and avoid contact with them. In contrast, police tasks regarding indoor sex work are taken over by security guards employed at the venue (Ślęzak, 2016; 2017). Likewise, Frelih (2017) notes that sex workers take care of their own safety since they do not believe they can get help from the police. However, safety standards may differ between the types of sex work, their organisational mode, and the financial standing of a specific sex worker. Safety may be compromised especially for those who work independently and make less money.

It is worth noting that the negative experiences with the police in interaction with citizens have a more significant impact on police legitimacy than positive experiences (Skogan, 2006; Struyf, 2022). Hence, even though some of the interviewees had neutral experiences with the police (or none at all), they shared negative and distrustful beliefs about the police prevalent in the sex worker community. Such convic-

tions were also reinforced by media messages invoking the theme of the strict police officer, which may influence how both parties (sex workers and officers) define their roles and tasks. What is more, as noted by Stardust *et al.* (2021), the way the media portray how the criminal legal system has handled cases involving sex workers discourages them from reporting cases of violence because what is showcased is the inaction of the police and the impunity of the aggressor.

As pointed out by Klambauer (2018) and also evident in my analysis, the social stigma associated with sex work is a significant impediment to improving interactions between officers and sex workers across all regulatory systems. The criminalisation of sex work induces an exceptionally high power imbalance between the police and sex workers, thus exacerbating the vulnerability of sex workers (Nestadt *et al.*, 2023). Regardless of official legal measures in place, the 'whore stigma' is so entrenched in the criminal legal system that it can adversely affect the position of sex workers in interactions with the police even if sex work is decriminalised (Klambauer, 2018; Stardust *et al.*, 2021). This is also borne out against the backdrop of the abolitionist solutions operating in Poland. Even partial criminalisation of sex work (through the criminalisation of third parties) positions sex work as suspicious, potentially criminal activity. In effect, the asymmetry of power in police officer-sex worker relations is further aggravated. The participants of my study saw little opportunity to negotiate with or object to the police officer, regardless of the capacity in which he was acting. Under such circumstances, sex workers may avoid interacting with police officers (as a precautionary measure).

Finally, mention should be made of the limitations of my research. Due to its qualitative design, it is impossible to determine the scale of the profiled police behaviours towards sex workers. A report by the Police Internal Affairs Bureau (BSWP, 2023), which seeks to prosecute offenders in their professional environment, shows that in 2022, 251 police officers (out of approximately 100,000 employed) were charged with 1563 offences. Seventy-five per cent of these (1171 charges) related to offences against the activities of state and local government institutions, mainly corruption (demanding and accepting bribes, paid patronage, and abuse of power for gain). Thirty-five persons were charged with 1006 offences of disclosure by a police officer to an unauthorised person of information he/she had obtained in connection with the performance of professional activities (this includes deliberately warning criminal environment of scheduled police activities). In 2022, seventeen police officers were charged with 34 offences related to violent behaviours in the line of duty. Another fifteen police officers heard 25 allegations of drug crime offences. However, it is difficult to assess how effective the BSWP is in detecting crimes within the police ranks. It is also worth noting that there is no statistical data available to contrast these figures with sex work cases. In order to extend

the body of knowledge in this regard, it is worth conducting research with the police officers. This is also important as here I focus on the perspective of sex workers (to a lesser degree also security guards and sex worker organisation members). The unilaterality of the presented research is my analytical choice, but it is also a limitation. For completeness, the picture of relationships between sex workers and the police also requires interviews with the officers.

Female escorts working in an organised and individual manner prevailed among the participants of my research. Women from other branches of sex work were represented to a lesser extent, as were migrant sex workers. By design, I also narrowed my research to women only. It is, therefore, worth including broader categories of participants to obtain more nuanced results.

Conclusions

Based on the experiences of research participants, police officers may be said to interact with sex workers in diverse and unforeseeable roles. As a result, sex workers could not predict how the encounter would play out, whether the officer would turn out to be an amiable customer or a power abuser who extorts sexual favours. It may be anyone's guess whether he would treat sex workers neutrally or as dangerous criminals during inspections and interrogations. Lastly, it remained unknown if a police officer acting as a third party would warrant the safety of sex workers or abuse them out of his sense of impunity. Relying on their limited scope of experience (as any subjective experience is bound to be) as well as hearsay information or rumours about police officers, sex workers adopted the general view that the police is not a protective institution, with individual police officers involved in ambiguous relationships with people in charge of organising sex work, and following no particular behavioural pattern, depending on the circumstances. Paradoxically, many of the interviewees seemed to be more worried about encountering an officer than about facing violence from clients or a third party. As much as they believed that they were usually able to take action to prevent violence from clients or seek another workplace to get away from a violent boss (Ślęzak, 2016; 2017), they had no control throughout the interaction with a police officer. They felt the police officers had discretionary power to treat them in whichever way they pleased and decide on follow-up actions (e.g., whether they would be summoned for interrogation, be at an increased risk of denouncing them as sex workers to their relatives, get regular visits from a police officer demanding free services). Such interactions often left them feeling the weaker partner, which is perhaps why they most feared them and remained distrustful, even if they could also recount positive interactions with officers.

Given the study findings, it is worth considering what measures might best improve the scenarios of the interactions between officers and sex workers. Of crucial

importance is a revision of the role of an on-duty officer. Once sex workers feel more confident in this interaction, they will be more likely to approach the police to seek support regardless of the circumstances.

Undoubtedly, the police define themselves and their job within the institutional framework of police as a paramilitary force with an organisational hierarchy (Williamson *et al.*, 2007). The participants of my research believe that the actions of individual police officers (and their treatment of sex workers) are heavily determined by the orders they receive from their superiors. Hence, standards should be in place defining the admissible treatment of sex workers by police officers. Another corollary is ensuring higher efficiency in the supervision of officers on duty by a unit external to their own department. Last but not least, any trespass of authority should be promptly addressed.

Likewise, the police should discontinue the practices of recording and collecting sex workers' data (in violation of the abolitionist convention ratified by Poland in 1952). Sex workers who testify and participate in court proceedings should be accorded greater protection so that they feel safe (in every sense of the word).

Police officers should receive broader instruction to improve their preparedness and skills in interacting with sex workers. Such training can be readily facilitated by organisations advocating for sex workers (an issue also raised by Klambauer, 2018; Freluh, 2017; Stardust *et al.*, 2021; Struyf, 2022). A robust sex-worker-led organisation in Poland is an exceptionally valuable candidate for the role. To make change possible, the police as an institution could make the first step of showing up with readiness for learning about the sex workers' outlook and needs in mutual interactions. A closer system-wide (not just local) collaboration between the police and sex workers requires both parties to develop mutual trust and perceive the other as a reliable and worthy partner. To this end, a two-pronged approach must be taken. Readjustments (also in terms of mindset) are needed within the police. In contrast, systemic and financial support should be offered to sex workers' advocacy organisations in Poland in the face of numerous problems that afflict them (Dziuban and Dziuban, 2020; Dziuban, Moźdrzeń and Ratecka, 2021).

It would be advisable for the police to revise its public relations and redefine its image towards a force effective in the prosecution of criminals and respectful towards the victims and witnesses of crimes.

Low legal awareness of sex workers should also be addressed as a priority. The conclusion to be drawn both from my research and that of other researchers (e.g., Benoit *et al.*, 2016; Ellison, Dhónaill and Early, 2019; Klambauer, 2018; Struyf, 2022) is that some sex workers were ignorant of legal provisions governing sex work as well as the scope of the rights and responsibilities of police officers. It is,

therefore, crucial to develop services that inform women about their rights in the criminal justice system (Dewey and St. Germain, 2014).

One of the main recommendations from almost all the studies is to decriminalise sex work (Klambauer, 2018; McBride *et al.*, 2020; Nestadt *et al.*, 2023; Sanders *et al.*, 2022; Smith *et al.*, 2020; Struyf, 2022). Full decriminalisation (also relevant to third parties) in Poland, implemented by means of a change in the legal basis, may also affect how police officers and sex workers interact and what they expect from each other. However, decriminalisation can hardly be seen as a solution to the whole gamut of problems as sex workers may still be exposed to stigmatisation and discrimination based on their ethnicity, sexual orientation, drug abuse, and homelessness for example (Struyf, 2022). What is key is destigmatisation that could help to increase the accessibility of law for sex workers (Amnesty International, 2016).

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