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## Sex Workers' Professional Experiences in the Interplay of Structure and Agency in Croatia

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IVANA RADAČIĆ, MARIJA ANTIĆ

Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar

MIRJANA ADAMOVIĆ

Institute for Social Research in Zagreb

### *Summary*

There are still relatively few studies on job satisfaction and the quality of work among sex workers, partly due to the ideologies surrounding sex work. In this paper we move away from dichotomous thinking and investigate the professional experiences of indoor independent sex workers in Croatia against the background of criminalised context and gendered socio-economic realities. We look into sex workers' motivations, perceptions and experiences, their control and safety strategies.

The study shows that despite many structural constraints on the sex workers' agency, all participants exercise some degree of autonomy and control over their working lives. The factors that seem to be the most relevant in terms of their ability to set up their own conditions, which in turn influences their experiences, are their economic situation, motivation and self-perception. Negative experiences mostly stem from criminalisation and stigmatisation of sex work, which affects women primarily, and creates more risks to their health and safety. The results of the study call for integrative policy approaches, which presuppose full decriminalisation of adult voluntary sex work.

*Keywords:* Sex Work, Motivations, Experiences, Control and Safety Strategies, Autonomy

### **1. Introduction**

While sex work is a multidimensional phenomenon, in feminist theory it has largely been discussed within dichotomous categories of work vs. violence (Kesler, 2002; Outshoorn, 2005; Scoular, 2015). Previously, the literature which associated prostitution with violence prevailed, and focus was mostly on gendered intimacy and he-

terosexuality. Recent research has focused more on its work dimension and the gendered labour conditions (Benoit *et al.*, 2018; Maher, Pickering and Gerard, 2012; Lewis *et al.*, 2005; Agustín, 2005; Brewis and Linstead, 2002; West and Austrin, 2002).

However, there are still relatively few studies on occupational choice, quality of work and job satisfaction among sex workers, in part arguably due to the ideologies surrounding sex work debates, translated into dichotomous thinking in terms of 'exploitation' and 'choice' that obscures work dimension from 'sex work' research (Sanders, Conelly and King, 2016; Weitzer, 2012; Lewis *et al.*, 2005). Moving away from dichotomous thinking and investigating the professional experiences of sex workers might hence bring new insights and open new policy options.

With this in mind and drawing on the recent feminist literature on professional aspects of sex work, in this paper we provide an analysis of professional experiences of indoor, independent sex workers in Croatia against the background of the criminalised context and gendered socio-economic realities. We look in particular into the issues of occupational choice, (self)perception, positive and negative experiences and control and safety strategies, exploring the links between these different categories.

## 2. Sex Work as Work

The wealth of research on sex work shows that sex industry is polymorphous (Weitzer, 2012) and class stratified (Bernstein, 2007; Bruckert, 2002; Kay Hoang, 2011). Weitzer shows how the pathways into street-based survival sex and indoor sex work differ significantly. In the case of indoor sex work, economic motives predominate, and sex work is 'less about survival than a desire for financial independence or upward mobility' (2007, p. 144). Benoit *et al.* (2017) similarly show that for many, sex work is a career choice, rather than meeting basic needs.

Research with female sex workers in the brothels in Nevada (USA) shows that flexibility and higher hourly earnings compared to other accessible service work were the key motives to enter sex work (Brents and Sanders, 2010). Other studies show the role of excitement and desire for social mobility as relevant factors in entering sex work (Oselin, 2014). Hence, as with other jobs, both structural and personal factors are relevant in decision-making. As Rosen and Venkatesh argue, sex work 'offers just enough money and flexibility to make the job worthwhile, and just enough autonomy and professional satisfaction to make it more attractive than other options' (2008, p. 417-418).

Experiences in sex work are also diverse and are influenced not only by the setting (street-based vs. indoor internet based) and the type of work (independent vs. organised), but also by the legal framework (Benoit *et al.*, 2018; Connelly and San-

ders, 2020; Pinto *et al.*, 2015). Koken (2010) explains how women who advertise for their services, screen their own clients, set their own fees and retain the profits may exert a much higher degree of control over their working circumstances than women who work through a third party. Moreover, street-based sex workers, who are generally more targeted by law and society, are more at risk of violence than indoor workers (Koken, 2010). However, some negative experiences are common for all sex workers, such as non-payment and theft by clients, and stigmatisation (Sanders and Campbell, 2007).

Many harms of prostitution are not inherent to it, but are the result of criminalisation and stigmatisation. Sullivan (2008, p. 74) argues that 'law and policy addressed to the sex industry has a significant impact on the making of safe (or not) working environments for sex workers on their civil and labour market rights, and capacities as both human beings and workers'. Sex work stigma also has significant influence on sex workers' professional and private lives, while their self-perception in the context of stigma is a relevant factor in assessing job satisfaction.

Legal and social settings, including policing practices, hence, provide a specific local context for the organisation of sex work (Brewis and Linstead, 2002). Sex workers' organisational and professional strategies are highly dependent on the context (Pajnik and Radačić, 2021). We hence start by introducing the Croatian context.

### 3. Croatian Context

Croatia is a small post-socialist European country, which gained independence in 1991. A dominant outlook on gender issues in this predominantly Catholic country<sup>1</sup> is traditional (Tomić-Koludrović, 2015). Women are generally disadvantaged, indicated by the unfavourable position in the labour market (Fritsch and Liedl, 2023; Matković, 2008; Kerovec, 2003) and in the family, due to the gendered division of the household chores and domestic violence, *inter alia* (Klasnić, 2011). Women have a higher rate of unemployment, and less educated women are more often unemployed, especially if they have more children (Gelo, Smolić and Strmota, 2011), while married women often leave the labour market early, due not only to gendered expectations but also to the lack of effective measures to balance family and work life (Galić, 2011). The poverty risk rate in Croatia is higher for women (21.1%) than for men (17.2%) and is particularly high for elderly women, women with lower level of education, women with disabilities and single mothers. In comparison to other EU countries, not only is overall income at the lower end, women in Croatia also earn significantly less than men, while working in traditionally female occupa-

<sup>1</sup> According to the 2021 Census, 78.97% of the population declared as Catholics (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, *Population by religion, 2001-2021 censuses*).

tions means they are more likely to belong to the lower income class (Fritsch and Liedl, 2023). Croatian labour market is also quite conservative in terms of offering flexible forms of employment (Grgurev and Vukorepa, 2018), i.e. part-time work or remote work. Earning a livelihood in such a context is extremely hard for under-educated women, especially if they are single mothers with no support system. Many women hence end up in informal economy, and some in sex work. However, there is no hard data on sex work markets in Croatia, making it impossible to estimate the number of women engaging in sex work.<sup>2</sup>

Sex work is still a taboo topic in Croatia; prostitution<sup>3</sup> is discussed primarily as a ‘social evil’ in legal and policy documents, the discourse dominant during the time of the adoption of the main law regulating prostitution – the Act on Misdemeanours against Public Order and Peace (AMPOP) in 1977, when Croatia was a part of the Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia (Radulović, 1987). This Act criminalises ‘falling into prostitution’ and facilitating prostitution,<sup>4</sup> placing Croatia in a minority position in the European Union with respect to regulation of prostitution.<sup>5</sup> Organising is proscribed in the Criminal Code.<sup>6</sup> The case-law analysis shows that the primary target of the laws are (female) sex workers, working in the street or independently in apartments, the majority of whom are in a difficult socio-economic situation (Radačić and Antić, 2022).<sup>7</sup> It also shows discrepancies with the human rights standards.

<sup>2</sup> Insights from research studies as well as from official police and judicial data indicate that prostitution is not widespread in Croatia and that mostly Croatian citizens engage in it.

<sup>3</sup> Here we use the term to refer to a specific form of sex work and a specific legal category. Other forms of sex work are not prohibited in Croatia.

<sup>4</sup> The penalties for either offence are fine (20-170 euros for Article 7 offence and of 20-100 euros for Article 12 offence) or imprisonment (maximum 30 days for both offences). In relation to the Article 12 offence, two security measures can be ordered: obligatory treatment of STDs or AIDS, and expulsion from the municipality in which the offence was committed for a period ranging from 30 days to 6 months. In practice, Article 7 offences are rarely prosecuted. *Official Gazette*, nos. 5/90, 30/90, 47/90, 29/94 and 114/22.

<sup>5</sup> Selling sex per se is not directly criminalised in any other European Union country. The main debate in Europe is between the models of legalisation and criminalisation of clients. Proscribing selling sex as a misdemeanour or administrative offence is typical of most of the former communist/socialist countries in Europe (SWAN, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Article 157, *Official Gazette* nos. 125/11, 144/12, 56/15, 61/15, 101/17, 118/18, 126/19, 84/21 and 114/22.

<sup>7</sup> There were 157 cases of falling into prostitution that finally ended in the period 2014-2019 at the municipal misdemeanour courts in Zagreb, Split and Rijeka, and nine criminal cases tried before the municipal criminal courts in the three cities, the majority of which related to basic form of offence where no compulsion was present (Radačić and Antić, 2022).

The analysis of relevant policy documents shows that sex work is a fringe topic, framed primarily as a public order, public security, and public health issue, while gender and human rights dimensions of regulation of prostitution are generally not acknowledged by the relevant governmental bodies (Šipić, Radačić and Baketa, 2022). Sex work is a topic of interest for a relatively small number of researchers, feminist and harm reduction NGOs and the Ombudsperson for Gender Equality. Sex workers' rights discourse is present only in the position of the harm reduction NGOs, while the Ombudsperson for Gender Equality and the umbrella association of women's rights NGOs frame prostitution as violence against women. There is no sex workers' organisation and only four organisations in the country which do harm reduction programmes have some contact with (mostly drug addicted and street-based) sex workers/persons engaged in survival sex. There is hence no sex workers' community in Croatia, which had an impact on the size of our sample as well as on our findings.

### *Methodology*

As a part of the research project *Regulation of Prostitution in Croatia*,<sup>8</sup> during 2022 and 2023 we carried out qualitative research to explore and understand experiences of sex workers in a specific criminalised context in Croatia, in particular how they exercise agency in the context of structural constraints related to the socio-economic realities and the legal framework. One-on-one, semi-structured and in-depth interviews were conducted with sex workers in three largest Croatian cities: Zagreb, Split and Rijeka (N=20). The interview protocol included questions related to the experiences in doing sex work, including the pathways of and reasons for entry, positive and negative sides, perception of sex work; Croatian legal framework and different models of regulation; experiences with the police and other state actors. For the purposes of this paper, we analyse motivations for entry, perception of sex work; organisational and professional strategies to enhance security and autonomy; strategies to cope with criminalisation and stigmatisation.

Since sex workers are a hidden and hard-to-reach population (Benoit *et al.*, 2005; Shaver, 2005), especially in a criminalised context, the recruitment process was long and diverse and was impacted by the fact that there is no sex workers' organisation in the country. It included recruitment by harm reduction NGOs who work mostly with drug users, as well as going through personal ads and specialised websites and contacting potential participants. A minority was recruited through informants and ear-

<sup>8</sup> The project *Regulation of Prostitution in Croatia* (principal investigator dr.sc. Ivana Radačić, implemented by Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar and financed by Croatian Science Foundation) included the analysis of laws, case-law, public policy documents, interviews with experts (policy-makers and policy-implementers) and sex workers, and workshops with experts.

lier participants. According to the different recruitment methods, the sample differed significantly, so much so that we divided it in two categories, taking into account that selling sex is not a homogenous phenomenon. One category (N=10) included those selling sexual services motivated by the needs related to drug use (survival sex; Antić, Krnić and Štojs Brajković, 2023) and the other those (N=10) selling sexual services as a way of earning money (doing sex work). While differences exist within each of our categories, contrasts in the exercise of personal agency and autonomy, self-perception and perception of selling sex were the main basis for splitting-up the sample. In this article we describe the experiences of those doing sex work. These participants were recruited through ads, other sex workers or informants.

Taking into account the importance of securing confidentiality and anonymity when working with a criminalised and stigmatised population (Sinha, 2017; Dewey and Zheng, 2013), we paid particular attention to these issues in the different phases of our research. All interviews were conducted by the researchers, with the participants deciding when and where to meet. All transcripts were anonymised and only the researchers had access to them. During the analysis, we omitted all identifying information, as well as any information that could lead to potential harms: for example, we did not report which websites are used for advertising or in what city each participant works. Respecting the principles of non-exploitation and reciprocity in the relationship with the sex workers (Wahab, 2003; Dewey and Zheng, 2013; Sinha, 2017), we managed to secure 30-euro vouchers in a store of their choosing for their time and help with the research, and offered assistance in connecting them with NGOs that provide legal, psychosocial or health-related services. The communication was open and transparent prior to and during the interviews. We constantly reflected on the power dynamics and were respectful of the boundaries of our participants, especially in relation to difficult topics such as trauma and violence.

Eight interviews were conducted in Zagreb and two in Split. Our sample included eight women and two men, aged from 24 to 61. Most of them have high school education, one university degree, one was studying at the time of the interview, one finished primary school, and one does not have any schooling. Most of them were divorced or single, and two were in a civil partnership at the time of the interview. All women in our sample have children, from one to four, while men in the sample have no children. All of them were working independently at the time of the interview. Most of them do out-calls, with two working in their apartments, and two renting an apartment for work. Entry into sex work was for six of them self-initiated and for others facilitated through a friend. Most of them entered in their twenties, a few entered in their forties, and one was a minor when she started. Their experience in sex work ranged from 11 months to 20 years. Those working longer usually had earlier experience of working in an organised setting. Four of

them were formally unemployed at the time of the interview, one had a full-time job, while five were engaged in part-time or freelance work.

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2019) was used to identify patterns and complexities in participants' accounts. Analysis followed the 6-steps approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) by recursively moving between reading the material, coding, re-coding, constructing themes and writing the report. Two main themes were constructed: *Motivations, Perceptions and Experiences*, and *Control at Work and the Protective Strategies*.

In the first phase, all authors read the material with a specific focus in mind: sex work as work, which was followed by a meeting where the different topics found in the material were discussed. Initial coding was conducted in NVivo software by one of the authors, in large part using the inductive approach to coding at this stage. Later on, codes were revised and re-coded by all authors, using both deductive and inductive approaches. Orientation to coding was mainly semantic, as we wanted the voices of the sex workers to be heard, especially in a context where such research is lacking. Hence, in an overall sense, the approach to this study was experiential, focused on the experiences of the sex workers we interviewed, and on how they make sense of their realities (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

### Socio-Demo Table

NAME	SEX	AGE	MARITAL STATUS	CHILDREN	EDUCATION	TYPE AND PLACE OF WORK, TYPE OF AD	ENTRY, YEARS OF EXPERIENCE, WORK SETTING (OTHER)	OTHER (CURRENT) JOBS
IVANA	F	61	Divorced	2	High school	Independent – her own place – personals	Through a friend; 20 years (on and off); organised	Occasionally care for elderly, medical massage
TESA	F	24	Divorced	1	High school	Independent – out-calls, specialised web portal	Through a friend; cca 2 years (on and off)	Full time job in sales
LIDIJA	F	25	Separated (civil partnership)	2	Primary school	Independent – out-calls, specialised web portal	Self-initiated; occasionally earlier, professionally for 2 years; organised	Formally unemployed

<b>VIKTORIJA</b>	F	33	Civil partnership	4	Unfinished primary school	Independent – rented apartment and out-calls	Through a friend; cca 15 years; organised	Formally unemployed
<b>SARA</b>	F	36	Single	1	University degree	Independent – out-calls	Self-initiated; cca 18 years; organised	Formally unemployed
<b>MARIJA MAGDALENA</b>	F	35	Divorced	2	High school	Independent – out-calls, specialised web portal	Self-initiated; 11 months	Part-time
<b>LUKA</b>	M	30	Single	0	High school	Independent, out-calls; specialised gay sex work web portals	Self-initiated; 2 years (on and off)	Other occasional jobs
<b>LEA</b>	F	37	Civil partnership	1	High school	Independent – rented apartment	Through a friend; 13 years; organised and organiser	11 years of work experience in different jobs, still has a side job
<b>KARLO</b>	M	31	Single	0	University student	Independent – out-calls, including outside the country; specialised sex work and gay portals	Self-initiated; occasionally earlier, 1 year professionally	A few other jobs
<b>ELA</b>	F	51	Divorced	2	High school	Independent – in-calls and occasional out-calls, including outside the country; specialised web portals	Self-initiated; 8 years	Part-time jobs earlier, currently (formally) unemployed



## 4. Results

### *Motivations, Perceptions and Experiences*

Economic motives are predominant in our sample, framed by the wider socio-economic conditions. For all of our participants **earning money** was the main motivation. Some women with children and lower levels of schooling perceive sex work as the only opportunity to earn money. Viktorija, who is in her mid-thirties, with kids in school and without opportunities for formal and gainful employment, as she didn't finish elementary school, commented:

What else am I going to do? Go stealing? What's in it for me again? I'm back in jail. So I think it's better to sell myself than to go stealing.

Similarly, Ivana – who entered sex work in her forties, after divorce – saw sex work as the only opportunity to pay back the debts she was left with, while providing for her children:

I just couldn't do it alone with 2 kids, it's simply impossible with one salary. It's just mission impossible... Those were [huge] debts...

However, for some participants sex work entry was not motivated by financial troubles or lack of opportunities. For Karlo and Tesa, who are both employed, sex work is an additional source of income. For Karlo, it is a 'side job' which allows him to invest his earnings, and for Tesa, it is a saving opportunity. Nevertheless, for most of our participants high earnings were one of the key factors in terms of the motivation for entry and also one of the main positive sides of sex work. As Lidija explained:

I'll be there for 3 hours; I'll make 800 euros. So, I'll literally take someone's entire salary. So, if I am working for money, then I'm going to maximise it to the full. (...) And here is simply a job where I can get the highest value in an hour.

Moreover, and particularly for women with small children, **flexible working hours and independence** were also highly relevant in terms of motivation, in the light of very limited opportunities for flexible well-paid jobs in Croatia. Not having a boss or a nine-to-five job is very important to Lidija, who explained that the biggest advantage of sex work was her freedom. Similarly, for Tesa, who is formally employed, doing sex work only when she wants is crucial in terms of her time management.

In addition to the market related factors, a few of our participants, both female and male, mentioned **pleasure, having fun and excitement** as the motivating factors. Marija Magdalena elaborated how for her sex work was a combination of fun and work, which brings excitement to her life because 'otherwise (it is) quite mo-

notonous', while Lidija noted how she was happy that she could get money by doing what she likes, as she enjoys sex.

### Perception of Sex Work

Regardless of the differences in motivations, our participants perceive sex work as work. For some of them it is a job as any other, others find it interesting, while yet others describe it as specifically strenuous and difficult. Regardless of what meaning they ascribe to what they do, all our participants think of sex work as work.

For Ela there are three important factors that make sex work just another type of work: investments, planning and the fact that sometimes she has to work even when she is not up to it:

Let's get to why I perceive it as a job. Because I invest in it. First the space... I invest in myself... I invest my time, invest in planning. (...) I need to plan how much I need to work and what I want to do. And it is a job because sometimes I have to work even though I don't feel like it. Generally, I try to work only when I feel like it because of physical contact, but sometimes I have to work even when I don't feel like it, and that is also why this is a job.

She also thinks it is an **interesting work** from 'a sociological, psychological and sexual point of view', and she perceives herself having an **educational and therapeutic role**.

On the other hand, Viktorija says it is a **difficult and painful work**, physically and otherwise. Luka also mentions harmful psychological consequences that he has experienced, as he believes that he should earn money in a different way.

Karlo defines what he does as a '**hobby**', elaborating that he has a regular job. However, he believes that sex work should be recognised as work. For him selling sexual services is a 'win-win situation' because he likes sex and is getting paid for it:

So, it's great, like a regular date. I just happen to get the money as well.

Regardless of how they see their own situation, all participants argue that people should be free to **choose** sex work and they don't see anything morally wrong with such a choice. While Luka thinks that sex work is not his best choice, he explains:

I've never viewed prostitution negatively as a concept. It's always been something to me that I think is a valid human choice. Your body, your choice in any context.

Similarly, Ela frames the choice to use your body as you please as a matter of human and women's rights:

I consider it human and women's rights that everyone has the right to use their body in the way they want and if no other form of work where we use our body is punishable, where there is demand and there are two consensual sides, then it should not be a problem.

### Work Experiences – Positive and Negative Sides

When asked about the positive sides of the job, our participants mentioned **high earnings, freedom, adventure and pleasure**. Hence, the factors that motivated their entry into sex work were also crucial for their continuation of work. Marija Magdalena, who has recently started sex work, talks about all these aspects:

It's really great, it's great earnings. I'm used to working for someone else and getting up at five, and I've been working for someone else my entire life; and this is completely unusual to me that you can somehow earn easily as much as you need, and that you decide for yourself whether you will work that day, or you won't, etc. So, I really like it. And it happens in my case that I love sex, so I don't do it just for the money.

**Freedom/independence** is one of the most mentioned positive aspects, in addition to high earnings. Ela explains how she can set up her own terms, and Lidija talks about the choice around 'when, what and with whom and how long'. Lea also explains how with this job she has time for herself and mentions how her previous job as a salesperson did not leave her any time for her boyfriend or family, how she 'was lost' and constantly running around. Luka compares this job with working as a salesperson:

I mean, it's certainly nicer when you get 500-600 euros after doing that kind of work for a couple of hours, than breaking your knees in some store, where some fool stands over your head, etc. – you're still your own boss here.

Many participants mention that the job is also **exciting, adventurous and provides the opportunities to learn and meet people**. Ela, Lidija and Tesa elaborate on these aspects:

But it can be exciting for me, I really like doing it because through this job I have met so many, I mean you really wouldn't believe it, so many great people. So intelligent, so successful, smart, funny, handsome, all kinds of people. (Ela)

But for me it's an adventure, I don't know, it's exciting for me when at the end – when I know that I'm so valuable to him and that the experience is so wow for him that he'll pay for it. (Lidija)

Well, it helps me for future relationships with people. That's a benefit to me. It helps me to discover my own sexuality because, I say, sexuality changes. (...) (Tesa)

When asked about the negative sides, the participants mentioned primarily financial, physical and legal insecurity, stress of managing difficult clients, negative impact on private romantic relationships, and health consequences.

Our participants described the **lack of financial security** primarily through unpredictability of demand. For Tesa, it is the only bad thing in relation to sex work:

The only bad thing, I would say, is that it cannot guarantee a constant source of income.

However, Viktorija – for whom sex work is the only source of income – discusses this unpredictability in more dire terms, seeing it as an existential threat:

(...) because it can happen that now there is work for a month and you don't know what to do with the money, and it can be two months that there is nothing. You can't even earn enough for a loaf of bread. It just stops.

A prominent topic in the interviews was **legal insecurity and lack of labour and social rights**, framed by criminalisation. Ela elaborated on the inability to register years of service, pay taxes, or legally be on the market as other persons. Lea, who has an experience of working in organised settings, stated that while most of the 'girls' work to sort out housing issues:

It's a shame that they can't register and get some kind of salary, so they can be eligible to take a loan and get themselves a flat.

**Safety concerns** are also present, primarily for women. Sara notes how you can 'literally be killed' doing the work. Most of the participants express strong dissatisfaction with **the lack of police protection**, framed by criminalisation. As Ivana explains, 'the biggest problem is that we, the girls, cannot call the police'. Ela also talks about fear of the police and the inability to report crimes. The same frustration is also expressed by Viktorija, who was raped by a client and was told by the police to drop the charges 'because it will go public and everybody will know'.

On the other hand, Karlo and Luka are less worried about their safety. Karlo believes that no one would even try to attack him as he is physically strong. In contrast to our female participants, they do not elaborate on the need for police protection or fear of the police.

Women also mention **problems with (some) clients**. While some women have experienced physical and sexual violence by the clients (Ela, Ivana, Viktorija), others are frustrated with clients who don't pay (Sara, Ela), cancel at the last moment (Sara), or are otherwise disrespectful. Sara explains how the disrespectful treatment by some clients is also a by-product of criminalisation and stigmatisation:

Because if the state did something, recognised us as human beings, I think people would change. Because this is how they take advantage of the fact that it is illegal and then they sometimes threaten us, like they will call the police on us.

Lidija also talks about disrespectful clients, who are more into chatting and picture-collecting than into meeting. She concludes that those who are only into chatting have no money to pay for her services (she charges 300 euros per hour) and that 'they are hicks, being disrespectful because they have no money'.

On the other hand, Luka stated that he never had any problems with the clients, while for Karlo, an example of a problematic client was the one who developed feelings for him.

Other negative sides mentioned by our participants are the **impact** sex work has on their **intimate relationships** and on their **health**. Tesa explains how it might be hard to get into a relationship while doing sex work, while Lidija says: 'Now that I know more about married men, what they do behind someone's back, I hate being with someone at all.' Viktorija often lacks sexual desire with her partner, because 'she is tired of it', but Lea on the other hand feels sexier since she started doing sex work. Viktorija talks about work-related injuries, Sara mentions STDs and Karlo the psychological pressure of the job. He hence occasionally uses GHB to help him feel more relaxed, which he also sometimes uses when having sex outside the work context.

Difficulties to cope with what they do, for some of them, are **related to the stigma attached to sex work**. While most of our participants have someone in their life who knows they are sex workers, the men in our sample speak about a wider circle of friends with whom they share what they do, which is possibly related to sex work being less stigmatised in the gay community. However, all but two participants (Ela and Viktorija) hide it from their immediate family, especially parents and children. Marija Magdalena describes her greatest fear related to sex work stigma:

What would be really bad is if someone would not allow their child to play with mine. That would really hurt me. I don't think I am doing anything bad, I am not stealing, I am not cheating.

For others, like Ivana and Luka, the stigma affects their sense of self-worth.

Do you understand? You feel like a lesser person. So, no matter how much I mentally want to change my mindset and accept it as something normal (...) (Ivana)

### *Control at Work and the Protective Strategies*

With our participants we also talked about autonomy, control and risk management as important professional strategies which enhance the quality of work and their security. These include the ability to choose clients and set up the conditions of work,

establish boundaries and ensure secure work environments. The strategies differ according to motivation for entering sex work and perception of work, work setting, including type of advertising and work experiences, how long they have been working and the experiences they have had.

### Selection of Clients and the Relationship with Clients

All the participants emphasise the importance of choosing clients. They, however, employ different strategies to ensure they avoid problematic clients. Lidija sets up really high prices to select 'better clients'. She also likes married clients for whom discretion is important, as they are generally more respectful:

I adore them because they are already in a relationship with a woman, they respect her as a person, they treat her gently... Also I don't have to fear that something will happen to me as they want discretion... Money as well, they are successful people.

Respect is important to all our participants when choosing clients. Ela, for example, explains how knowing what you want in clients, in the long-term, results in a quality relationship built on mutual respect:

My way of working is that I only work with the people I want, only what I want, and in that way a better, longer-lasting relationship is created – I have long-term clients, reliable clients, and we have respect for each other.

Both men in our sample associate desirable clients with a positive outlook on sex. For Luka it is important not to have clients who only want to vent 'sexual frustration', and for Karlo that he likes the client and that they both enjoy it:

I wanted certain criteria to be met, that they are not just some people who vent some, how would I say it, it's not even a sexual need, I'd say it's a sexual frustration. (Luka)

And for me, (...) I choose people who are good to me the way they are – I don't want to do someone just to do him – then they see that I enjoy it, then it's great for them too, then there's that moment (...) (Karlo)

### Location, Time, Price

For all our participants, it is important to control working conditions, including time, location and price, which enables them to exercise more autonomy, but also makes their work more secure. They, however, employ different strategies. Some, for example, only work from home as they think that this gives them more control and security (Ela), while some do not want to work from home (Lea, Viktorija), or can't work from home as they don't live alone (Marija Magdalena). Most of our participants do out-calls. Where exactly they are willing to go often depends on the

level of familiarity with the client. For example, Karlo is willing to go to another city if he first meets a person for a coffee or if a client is recommended by someone. Ivana avoids hotels due to previous negative experiences, and Ela is willing to compromise on the location if she knows the client.

Time schedules are also important. Ivana only works during the day so as not to disturb the neighbours. Tesa does not do late nights as she has a child. Lea only works in the morning as 'better people come in the morning: businesspeople'.

Setting prices is another strategy to secure control and safety. As mentioned above, Lidija puts high prices to select only good clients:

But if it's 300 euros, well, not everyone will be able to afford it, nor will everyone who can afford it give that money, but only those for whom it is not a problem. And usually, people who have a lot of money, for whom it is not a problem, they deal with this differently. I don't know, they are much more relaxed in their lives.

On the other hand, Lea sets up lower prices, so that clients would not have a sense of entitlement to do whatever they want.

Well, I don't like too high prices. My entire set is 400 kn. I don't like to take more because it results in them asking for more. And what I say is: 'Don't touch me; no touching, no spitting, no biting, no pinching!' You know what I mean. Well, that's why I don't like to put higher prices, because whoever pays you more, trust me, demands more.

In terms of pricing, Karlo talks how he set up a new 'business model', introducing a flat rate, after he realised 'that people don't like hourly prices'. He explains that his way of working, where nobody is watching the clock, makes both, him and his client, more relaxed.

The women in our sample use different strategies to secure payment and protect themselves against theft, the risks heightened in the criminalised context. Women who have been working for a long time, and have already had negative experiences with clients, have developed a number of such strategies, such as requesting payment in advance, hiding money or having enough change.

### Conditions of Work and Boundaries at Work

It is very important to our participants to be able to set up the conditions of work and establish boundaries with the clients. Many recognise the importance of **clear communication**. This is easier for those advertising through specialised websites as they can write clearly all the conditions. Tesa explains:

In fact... the conditions were agreed earlier, and I tell those people with whom I have an okay agreement, I will do that, but when I receive some requests that I am not okay with, I don't do that.

For those advertising in ‘personals’ it is much more complicated. They cannot write clearly what they do since they fear the police. For these participants (Ivana, Sara, Lea), phone communication is crucial for setting up the conditions and screening the clients.

Another important thing is not to have too many clients in a day, to **prevent exhaustion**. Lea and Sara both talk about this, elaborating how selling sexual services is mentally demanding and hence not sustainable if it is done too often:

I didn’t get rich, because I work only for myself. I mean, I won’t exhaust myself, I won’t... when it’s hard for me mentally, I’ll stay at home, I’ll hang out with my family. It is not a job that a person should be doing constantly, 24 hours a day. It’s simply not sustainable. You go crazy after a while. (Lea)

I avoid doing this every day. I avoid doing it too often as it leaves some consequences on the psyche. (Sara)

They all have **boundaries** with respect to what sexual acts they do. Off limits sexual acts are different for different people and include kissing (Tesa), anal sex (Ivana) or touching the vagina with the hands (Lea). Tesa explains how beneficial it is that you can put it in your profile what you (don’t) want:

So, this is perfect because it is all written there, what sex position I do, where on the body you can cum, where it’s not acceptable.

Women who worked in organised settings explain how it is much more difficult to set up your own conditions when working for someone. The most challenging were the number of clients they worked with in a day and, consequently, low health and hygienic standards. Viktorija and Lea both elaborate on that:

It was demanding to work for someone, and when you don’t work for someone, when you work only for yourself – then it’s easier, then you choose how much you will work. And that’s it. (Viktorija)

The turnover is high there. There are so many girls, so many customers. I’m leaving the room, I don’t have time to change the bed linen, sheets, to put on a new paper, and so many other things, and the other girl is already coming in, she’s already there. Conflicts happen; one left a used condom on the floor, one forgot to pick up the tissues. That’s really filthy. And these girls don’t even manage to take a shower. It’s just one after the other. I think it’s terrible. (Lea)

### Ensuring Physical Safety

As explained above, for most of our participants, primarily women, the lack of police protection represents a serious problem. In light of that, our female participants have developed specific protective strategies to ensure physical safety. Ivana, for



example, explains how she never locks the doors when doing in-calls, and how she also does not allow the client to lock the door on out-calls, as it is essential for her to be able to run quickly if needed. Elaborating further, she also explains that when doing out-calls, she always wears a dress in case she needs to dress quickly. Tesa, on the other hand, mentions having a few friends who can deal with an abusive client, if needed. Some of those who have experience of working in an organised setting mention protection as a positive side of the relationship with an organiser: they felt more secure knowing that the organiser would come or call the police in case they were not back in time or did not answer the phone at an agreed time. Ivana explained how that protection usually works:

So, I would contact him when entering the apartment (...) and say everything is ok, come and get me in half an hour. So, he knows that I am in for half an hour. So, it is 9 o'clock now, I must be outside by 9:30. If I am not out by that time, he calls me. If I am not answering, something is happening. Now he can call the police from a hidden number and say: 'There is a problem at that address, in that apartment.'

## 5. Discussion

Sex workers' experiences are shaped by the legal, social, economic and personal contexts in which they work. The motivating factors for entry usually involve an interplay of structural and personal factors (Benoit *et al.*, 2017). In our sample, these included: high earnings and time flexibility, in the context of diminished opportunities for gainful flexible employment for women, particularly for those with children and lower levels of education; as well as the opportunities to develop personally and professionally. Those whose reasons for entry were not purely economic have a positive perception of their work and themselves; for them sex work is an interesting job, described as a 'date plus', or therapeutic work. On the other hand, for those who entered sex work due to financial necessity, sex work is a more difficult, strenuous job, with negative consequences for their health and relationships.

Those who have a more positive perception of what they do generally have better experiences, which include the satisfaction of meeting new people and having fun. Certain negative experiences stem from the lack of legal and physical security in a criminalised context (Connelly and Sanders, 2020; Benoit *et al.*, 2018). These problems primarily affect women in our sample. Other negative sides include negative impact on health and well-being, which is mentioned by women who are pressured to earn money, who also generally exercise less autonomy. Sense of control over working conditions, especially with regards to health and safety, is hence essential for a feeling of job satisfaction, positive perception of work and self-perception.

Research has shown that working in a criminalised context has an adverse impact on health and safety of sex workers, including increased stigma, violence,

and reduced access to health services (Connely and Sanders, 2020). This has been confirmed in our study, particularly in relation to women. Studies have also shown that sex workers in decriminalised contexts have better access to health services and improved relationship with the police (Benoit *et al.*, 2018; Pinto *et al.*, 2015; Armstrong, 2019), which positively affects their sense of safety and overall control of working conditions.

Sex workers adopt different strategies to mitigate work-related risks and ensure their well-being. Studies from the different contexts identified similar protective strategies that sex workers usually adopt: screening clients, working in pairs, using technology to stay safe (Connely and Sanders, 2020; Pinto *et al.*, 2015; Bernier *et al.*, 2021). Our analysis showed similar results; screening clients and using technology (mobile phone and online communication to screen the clients, website profiles to set the conditions especially in terms of services provided and prices) were crucial for sex workers' sense of safety and control over their working conditions. However, in the criminalised context in Croatia, where sex workers working together can be criminally charged for organising, working in pairs usually is not an option. The isolated nature of doing sex work in Croatia also means that good practices are not shared – rather, each sex worker finds their own ways of mitigating safety and health risks and organising work.

Protective strategies are particularly important in a criminalised context as the inability to seek protection from the police increases the risk of violence and theft. These risks are particularly high for female sex workers, who were more concerned about their safety than men in our sample. Stigmatisation is also prevalent in the criminalised context of Croatia, impacting sex workers' well-being. While internal stigma affects both men and women in our sample, structural stigma seems to affect women more, as the assumptions inherent in the Croatian laws and institutions focus primarily on female sex workers (Bruckert, 2013). Finally, traditional gender roles which place women primarily in the realm of family life also heighten the stigma for female sex workers.

Despite challenges in relation to safety and control over working conditions caused by the different above-discussed factors, sex workers in our sample all exercise some level of autonomy and report positive sides of the job and some degree of job satisfaction. For some of them, the level of autonomy increased over time, with experience, and others entered with a sense of autonomy and more affirmative decision-making.

Participants from our sample who engaged in sex work out of necessity, difficult life circumstances and the position of extremely limited choice (all women) had a more negative perception of their work, less control over working conditions and their own safety at the beginning and hence more negative experiences, but

over time and with experience they developed different protective strategies and (re)gained control over their work conditions.

Part of them had a history of working in an organised setting which they all saw as primarily exploitative, in terms of working hours, number of clients, and division of earnings, but those experiences enabled them to establish boundaries and protective strategies, especially in relation to health concerns, when they started to work independently. However, in terms of their physical safety, some women felt more secure working in an organised setting, either because the organiser was a phone call away, or they worked in parlours where other sex workers were close by. Working independently, some women had multiple negative experiences with the clients, relating to violence, refusal to pay, robbery, and disrespectful behaviour. Men, on the other hand, had more positive experiences and were less worried about their safety.

Generally, those participants whose entry into sex work was motivated not only by (high) earnings but also by a desire for sexual exploration and sexual pleasure, had a more positive perception of sex work, felt that they were in control, had fewer negative experiences and have consequently developed fewer protection strategies. Strategies to secure control were to set up high prices to filter clients, to have detailed profiles with clear explanation of services offered, to set up boundaries, etc.

Our findings support similar studies conducted in other jurisdictions which show how sex workers exercise agency despite structural constraints, and undermine the arguments that sex workers are always victims. They are also in line with the research which shows that many indoor sex workers exercise a significant degree of autonomy and control in their everyday working lives (Sanders *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, the results emphasise the importance of the context, in particular the socio-legal setting, on the working conditions. As has been confirmed by other studies, law, policies and policing have significant influence on sex workers' health and safety (Benoit *et al.*, 2018; Connelly and Sanders, 2020; Pinto *et al.*, 2015). In Croatia, relevant contextual factors are lack of flexible high paying jobs (particularly for women and specifically those with low level of education and with children), criminalisation of selling sex, high stigmatisation (particularly for female sex workers) and the lack of sex workers community, due to which each independent indoor sex worker is navigating how to ensure control and protection on her/his own. These factors affect women and men differently: women have less opportunities in the labour market, and female sex workers are more targeted by the police, face higher stigmatisation and a higher risk of violence from clients and organisers.

In order to ensure better working conditions for sex workers, integrative policies, which involve multi-government protection through the engagement of labour, administrative and commercial laws, are called for (Östergren, 2017). In the Croa-

tian context this would firstly require removing provisions on sex work from the AMPOP and peace as well as removing the basic offence of organising prostitution (where no form of coercion or exploitation has been involved) from the Criminal Code. Sex workers' occupational health and safety, as well as labour and social rights, should be secured. Sex workers should be protected from exploitation and coercion and should have the right to refuse the service at any point. They should also be supported in their organising, as well as involved in the development, implementation and evaluation of public policy on sex work (United Nations Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls, 2023). Policing should move from a repressive to a protective role (Campbell, 2014).

As Benoit *et al.* (2018) explain, integrative policy strategies are grounded in an understanding of prostitution as an economic activity that involves a choice for many participants and vulnerability and exploitation for some. When sex work (as work) discourses are marginalised, issues of morality tend to dominate in policy-making. By looking at professional experiences of sex workers in Croatia, this research opens up the 'horizon of possible policy options' (Kantola and Squires, 2004, p. 93), outside of the dominant public order and security framework.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper we presented the results of our qualitative study with sex workers in Croatia, which examined their professional experiences in the interplay of structural constraints and personal agency. We discussed the main motivating factors, sex workers' self-perception, their protective and control strategies as well as positive and negative experiences of doing sex work in the criminalised and highly stigmatised context of Croatia. We noted certain gender differences, which findings are important and call for further exploration, though limited by our sample composition.

Our study showed that despite many structural constraints on the sex workers' agency, including criminalised legal framework and gendered socio-economic context, all our participants exercised some degree of autonomy and control over their working lives. In that sense, our results support the findings of other similar studies of the professional experiences of sex workers, identifying common themes as well pointing to the relevance of the context. The contextual factors found relevant in relation to exercising agency within the gendered structural constraints in Croatia are limited opportunities for gainful employment (especially for less educated women with children), lack of flexible (and high paying) jobs, direct criminalisation of sex work, lack of sex workers community and a highly stigmatised nature of sex work in a traditional Catholic country (particularly affecting women, who are targeted by social institutions).

All our participants were affected to a different degree by these factors, but gender difference was noted. The primary problem, particularly pertinent for women, was the lack of legal and physical security, which negatively impacted their well-being. Women mitigated these risks by developing different strategies of ensuring control and protection.

Two situational factors seem to have had the most importance in terms of our participants' ability to set up their own conditions: where financial constraints were less stringent and their job motivation was not purely economic, and where they had positive self-perception. In such cases, job satisfaction was high(er) and their experiences generally positive: these participants had no or little experience with the police and 'bad' clients, even though they were aware of the risks of criminalisation.

The results of our study call for integrative policies to enhance autonomy, and health and safety of sex workers. This would not only involve decriminalisation and ensuring labour and social rights of sex workers, but also addressing wider structural constraints that impact agency, including gender and socio-economic inequalities, as well as improving labour conditions generally. Sex workers should be included in policy-making, implementation and evaluation.

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**Ivana Radačić** is a scientific advisor at the Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar. *E-mail*: [ivana.radacic@pilar.hr](mailto:ivana.radacic@pilar.hr)

**Marija Antić** is a research assistant at the Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar and a PhD candidate at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb. *E-mail*: [marija.antic@pilar.hr](mailto:marija.antic@pilar.hr)

**Mirjana Adamović** is a senior research associate at the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb. *E-mail*: [mirjana@idi.hr](mailto:mirjana@idi.hr)