Harmed and Made Vulnerable

Exploring the Experience of Sex Workers in the Netherlands during the COVID-19 Pandemic as a Case for Marginalized Groups in Society

1. GENERAL INFORMATION

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Abstract

This master thesis explores the experience of sex workers in the Netherlands during the pandemic as a case for marginalized groups' pandemic precarity. Hinging on the exacerbating effect of the pandemic on social injustices, the present study draws on the experience of marginalized workers during the pandemic to learn more about the emergence, perpetuation, and impact of social inequalities towards marginalized workers. By conducting semi-structured interviews with sex workers active in different sex work branches and municipalities of the Netherlands, the qualitative approach applied to the present research question seeks to oppose trends of victimization and incapacitation of sex workers in empirical literature and highlight sex workers' autonomy, agency, and resilience. Findings yielded four categories of experiences that were characterized by differential levels of options available to sex workers in the sample that determined if and under which conditions sex workers had to work illegally during the pandemic to be able to cover their cost of living. More accurately, the categories are located on a spectrum ranging from the experiences of sex workers without alternatives to illegal sex work ('harmed and made vulnerable'), passing through the experiences of sex workers with increasing levels of options ('depressed and indignant' and 'communal and self-efficacious'), to the experiences of sex workers with a lot of options ('in full agency and recognized'). By hinging on theories about precarious work, regulatory sex work regimes, governmental precarization, and commoning, I seek to highlight four implications of the present findings: First, the dimensions of precariousness found to characterize sex work in the present findings highlight the importance of considering sex work in the context of precarious work and extending current conceptualizations of precarious work to capture the multitude and severity of the sex work's precariousness dimensions. Second, exploring the role of the Dutch in shaping sex workers' pandemic experience through the lens of Isabel Lorey's (2015) theory of governmental precarization highlights the explanatory value of using governmental precarization as an analytical lens for understanding sex regimes. Third, I highlight the contribution of sexuality hierarchies to the exclusion of sex workers from protective measures by the Welfare State and explore how the portrayal of sex workers as sexually deviant based on heteronormative, traditionalist sexuality norms might cater to their construction as the precarious Other. Upon fulfilling that goal, I shift to propose commoning as an analytical framework to understand the resilience of the sex work community against its historical stigmatization.

Keywords

Sex Work – Sex Worker - Pandemic Precarity – Precarious Work - Precarious Worker - Precariousness - Governmental Precarization - Sexuality Hierarchies - The Commons – Commoning - Decriminalization - Sex Work Regimes

Chapter 1: Utilizing the Exacerbating Effect of the Pandemic to Explore Marginalized Workers' Experience

February 23, 2021. As the world finds itself amid a global pandemic, the Dutch prime minister, Mark Rutter, is asked to elaborate on the difference between a hairdresser and a sex worker during a press conference (De Telegraaf, 2021). The prompt for this question was the announcement that all contact professions, except for sex workers, were allowed to return to work. While Rutte struggled for words to describe - what he considered to be - the difference between sex work and hairdressing in terms of infection risk, one could not help but envisioning Kama Sutra's top ten and comparing them to scenarios at the hairdresser. In this paper, I will highlight that, however bizarre the comparison may seem with respect to the nature of the job, the differentiation between hairdressers and sex workers reflected by the pandemic measures of the Dutch government presents an illustrative case for mechanisms of governmental precarization.

The COVID-19 pandemic has functioned as a magnifying glass for social inequalities, worsening the living and working conditions of those that had already been precarious before the pandemic (Blundell et al., 2020). The term pandemic precarity refers to the "disparities in material deprivation and economic anxiety resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic" (Perry, Aronson & Pescosolido, 2021, p. 1) and is thought to be an exacerbated version of previous inequalities experienced by historically marginalized groups (Green et al., 2020; Wilson, Prakash Dwivedi & Gámez-Fernández, 2020; Parker & Leviten-Reis, 2021). For example, disparities in healthcare access between White people and People of Color have existed before the pandemic (Blendon et al., 1989; Rooks et al., 2008; Yearby et al., 2019; Mahajan et al., 2021), but have shown drastic increases during the pandemic, including heightened infection, recovery, and mortality rates amongst Non-White Americans (Lancet, 2020; Perry, Aronson & Pescosolido, 2021). Similarly, the pre-existing disadvantage of students with limited financial resources causing unequal access to study materials, calm study spaces at home, technology, and internet access has severely impaired their ability to follow online classes and study at home during the pandemic (Green et al., 2020). Women had already been disproportionately affected by domestic violence pre-pandemic, but lockdowns have further increased their vulnerability (Malik & Naeem, 2020; Kourti et al., 2021); this effect has been particularly strong for Indigenous women (Yakubovich & Maki, 2021). Indigenous peoples all over the world have additionally suffered not only from unequal access to healthcare facilities, social services, food, water supplies, and lack of infrastructure in the reservoirs (Power et al., 2020; Corpuz, 2021), resulting in higher infection and death rates (Power et al., 2020), but also from COVID-19-related federal border closures splitting their territories (Luna-Firebaugh, 2022). For example, the US-Canadian federal border crosses through the territory of the First Nations community on both sides of Niagara Falls in New York State. While border crossings have already been made difficult pre-pandemic with unequal access to travel documents, like passports, and racial profiling during border controls (McDougall & Valentine, 2004; Manuel & Derrickson, 2017; Philpott, 2019), the closure of the US-Canadian border in March 2020 has entirely separated their territory (Armenski et al., 2021; Luna-Firebaugh, 2002). In conclusion, the pandemic's

exacerbating effect has highlighted the severe real-life implications of social inequalities on marginalized groups' precarious living conditions.

Besides worsening the general living conditions of marginalized groups (i.e., Perry, Aronson & Pescosolido, 2021), the pandemic has also exacerbated the precariousness of the working conditions of marginalized workers, including low-wage workers, migrant workers, or contingent workers (Cubrich & Tengesdal, 2021). For example, workers in so-called essential jobs were exposed to a heightened risk of infection (Lancet, 2020) and frequently had to work over-hours without adequate benefits or protection from COVID-19 infection (Aloisi & De Stefano, 2021). Similarly, while most workers with a middle or upper salary were allowed – even commanded - to work from home, marginalized workers who already struggled with low wages and high job insecurity pre-pandemic were forced to continue working in unsafe circumstances to avoid salary cuts and dismissal. While the working conditions of marginalized workers had already been precarious before the pandemic, COVID-19 has further increased their vulnerability and dependency on governmental support (Cubrich & Tengesdal, 2021). Therefore, studying marginalized workers' pandemic precarity might further our understanding of the emergence and perpetuation of their precarious working and living conditions.

There are several reasons why sex workers might make an illustrative case for marginalized workers' pandemic precarity. Firstly, due to widespread sex work criminalization and stigmatization, sex workers' working and living conditions have likely already been precarious before the pandemic, with sex workers facing lack of governmental support, protection and even persecution (Vanwesenbeeck, 2017); this is reflected in a growing body of literature in the last decade that addresses sex work in the context of precarious work (Sanders & Hardy, 2013; Stewart, 2013; Cruz, 2013; Sanders & Hardy, 2014; Orchiston, 2016). During the pandemic, the impact of existing dimensions of precariousness involved in sex work, like the lack of governmental support, have likely been exacerbated (Blundell et al., 2020), therefore, rendering sex workers' living and working conditions even more precarious. Secondly, depending on the type of sex work and similar to other contact professions, sex workers' proximity to their customers may expose them to increased health and infection risks. Particularly before the COVID-19 vaccines became available, this may have resulted in an increased chance of contracting COVID-19 and suffering severe or even fatal courses of illness in sex workers (Burdorf et al., 2020). Therefore, the dimensions of precariousness involved in sex work might even exceed existing conceptualizations of precarious work that are commonly based on instability, low wages, and precarious working conditions (e.g., Vosko, 2010; Standing, 2011; Sanders & Hardy, 2013; Lorey, 2015; Campbell & Price, 2016), making it a suitable case for marginalized workers' pandemic precarity.

A considerable body of scientific literature published since the beginning of the pandemic highlights sex workers' precarious working conditions during the pandemic: Recurring themes include lack of governmental support for sex workers (Abji et al. 2020; Migrant Rights Network 2020), inability to access existing support funds due to legal status issues (Lam, 2020a; Gercama & Derks, 2020; Abji et al. 2020; Langille 2020), concerns about privacy violations, persecution and administrative issues when

attempting to register for governmental support (Gercama & Derks, 2020; Scott, 2020; Rocca, 2020; Lam & Fudge, 2020), lack of healthcare access and vaccines to protect sex workers from COVID-19 infection (Abji et al. 2020; Gercama & Derks, 2020), shift to alternative forms of sex work, like camming (Drolet, 2020; Campamour, 2020; Moran & Farley, 2018; Farley, 2016), loss of housing due to brothel closures (Farley, 2020) and increased exploitation by sex buyers and pimps (Farley, 2020; Lam, 2020a; Lam, 2020b). Additionally, lack of financial support and social distancing measures forced sex workers to see clients clandestinely (Gercama & Derks, 2020; Lam, 2020a; Naftulin, 2020), therefore, rendering sex work illegal (Lam, 2020a; Lam 2020b; Farley, 2020); the resulting lack of legal protection and vulnerability was taken advantage of by sex buyers and pimps pushing for lower prices and unsafe sex practices (Farley, 2020). In conclusion, there is reason to believe that the precariousness of sex workers' working conditions has been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, therefore, rendering them an illustrative case of marginalized workers' pandemic precarity.

Aforementioned research findings show that the scope of marginalized workers' precarity depends, amongst other, on governmental support like financial benefits and healthcare access. In countries where sex work is legalized, like the Netherlands, one would expect sex work to be recognized and treated like any other profession. However, based on articles addressing the pandemic's impact on sex workers in the Netherlands, this doesn't seem to be the case: Farley (2020) addresses Amsterdam sex workers' a case for sex workers' pandemic precarity; Gercama and Derks (2020) point out that Dutch governmental social distancing measures made a distinction between sex work and other contact professions like hairdressers, prohibiting sex workers from exercising their profession much longer than other contact professions. Azam et al. (2021) detected a shift towards riskier and less visible forms of commercial sex in the Netherlands and Belgium. In conclusion, despite the legality of sex work in the Netherlands, Amsterdam sex workers seem to receive less governmental support during the pandemic than workers in other professions (Gercama & Derks, 2020).

Prior literature about the pandemic's impact on sex workers in the Netherlands is mainly based on publicly available information, like policy documents and eligibility criteria for governmental emergency support during the pandemic. Though this is a relevant source of information, it may not adequately represent sex workers' experiences (Gercama & Derks, 2020). For example, emergency funds reserved for sex workers might well underestimate the number of sex workers relying on financial support. Additionally, governmental support rates might not suffice to fully cover the living costs of sex workers, forcing them to continue seeing customers clandestinely (Lam, 2020). Furthermore, many sex workers are registered at the Chambre of Commerce (CofC) with another profession to avoid stigma and discrimination, making them unable to access governmental support during the pandemic, the same accounts for illegal sex workers. Additionally, even sex workers eligible for financial aid frequently don't register out of fear of privacy violations and abuse of their information by police and law-enforcement post-pandemic (Gercama & Derks, 2020). Finally, trying to infer sex workers' experience during the pandemic based on policy documents and their eligibility for governmental support alone doesn't do justice to the situatedness of their knowledge and experiences and once more undermines their autonomy and agency in speaking for themselves (Lam,

2020). Building on prior research regarding marginalized workers' pandemic precarity and sex work during the pandemic, the present research applies a qualitative approach to attend to the research questions how sex workers in the Netherlands experienced the pandemic, and which inferences about the emergence, perpetuation, and impact of social inequalities towards marginalized workers can be drawn from their experience.

By analysing the implications of the research findings about sex workers' experiences in the light of empirical literature on precarious work, regulatory sex work regimes, governmental precarization, and commoning, my goals are threefold: First, I aim to review precariousness-dimensions of sex work that are highlighted by the present findings in the context of conceptualizations on precarious work. Second, I strive to explore the usefulness of Isabel Lorey's (2015) theory of governmental precarization in understanding the role of the Dutch government in shaping sex workers' pandemic experience. Third, I seek to shed light on the contribution of sexuality hierarchies to the exclusion of sex workers from protective measures by the Welfare State and show how the portrayal of sex workers as sexually deviant based on heteronormative, traditionalist sexuality norms might cater to their construction as the precarious Other. Upon fulfilling that goal, I shift to propose commoning as an analytical framework to understand the resilience of the sex work community against its historical stigmatization.

Chapter 2 introduces the theoretical framework of the present research: First, I review existing efforts to theorize precarious work and the impact of precarious work on precarious workers. Second, I argue that, in order to understand the experience of sex workers in the Netherlands during the pandemic, engaging with Lorey's (2015) theory on governmental precarization is vital. Third, I review dominant value systems regarding sexuality that might play into the historical stigmatization of sex workers and their implications for being granted protection by the welfare state. Fourth, I introduce the concept of 'commoning' as a theoretical framework to understand the initiatives and self-efficacy of sex workers and the sex work community. *Chapter 3* motivates important methodological choices and ethical considerations regarding the present research. *Chapter 4* provides background for the case of sex work in the Netherlands. Laying out the legal and professional framework in the Netherlands, as well as relevant terminological distinctions and sex work typologies, sets the scene for the present case study by sketching the space in which the participants move daily. *Chapter 5* presents the results of the qualitative interviews and investigates their implications in the context of the theoretical framework. *Chapter 6* presents the conclusions that can be drawn from the present research and their implications for precarious work and precarious workers in general.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

To attend to the research question regarding the experience of sex workers in the Netherlands during the pandemic, this research hinges simultaneously on several theories.

2.1. Sex Work – A Case for Precarious Work?

Firstly, if pandemic precarity is an exacerbated version of previous precarious living and working conditions, then studying sex workers' experience during the pandemic as a case of pandemic precarity cannot bypass the existing body of empirical literature on precariousness. In the last decade, precariousness and precarious work – characterized by high levels of labor insecurity resulting from "processes of casualization, outsourcing, subcontracting and flexploitation" (Sanders & Hardy, 2013, p. 16) - have increasingly been the subject of empirical research (Campbell & Price, 2016). While intended to increase competitiveness and promised to benefit workers due to increased freedom, in practice, flexibilization has rendered an increasing number of jobs precarious due to low salaries, poor working conditions, temporary contracts, and lack of labor security and employment benefits (Sanders & Hardy, 2013). As Lorey (2015) emphasizes, the precarization of living and working conditions is not only bound to less developed countries and goes beyond issues of employment insecurity and low salaries. "Precarization is not an exception; it is rather the rule. […] [It] means living with the unforeseeable, with contingency" (Lorey, 2015, p. 1).

Based on Campbell and Price (2016), the present research makes a conceptual distinction between precariousness, precarious work, and precarious worker. *Precariousness* in employment is a multidimensional construct that refers to the objective job characteristics that entail contingency and insecurity. *Precarious work* refers to any type of paid work that is characterized by multiple dimensions of precariousness. A *precarious worker* engages in precarious work and suffers the multiple dimensions of precariousness involved in it. Here, the conceptual distinction between precarious work and precarious worker is crucial since the experiences of workers in precarious jobs are diverse and dependent, amongst others, on their positionality and the presence of mediating factors that may emphasize or soften certain dimensions of precariousness exhibited by precarious work. For example, workers' experience of low income and high employment insecurity may differ, depending on the availability of a partner's income. Similarly, sex workers' experience during the pandemic might have differed, for example, depending on the type of sex work they engaged in, their dependency on their income from sex work, and their employment form (self-employed, opting-in, or illegal). Therefore, the sex workers interviewed for the present study might have experienced similar working conditions during the pandemic in very different ways; in particular, attention will be paid to factors that might have mediated their experience. Interestingly, while sex work appears to be archetypal to precarious work, it has only recently been addressed in this context (Sanders & Hardy, 2013; Stewart, 2013; Cruz, 2013; Sanders & Hardy, 2014; Orchiston, 2016).

Though specific conceptualizations of precarious work may differ between publications and authors (Vosko, 2010; Standing, 2011; Sanders & Hardy, 2013; Lorey, 2015; Campbell & Price, 2016), frequently named characteristics of precarious work and employment are summarized in Vosko's (2010) four-dimensional model of precarious work: (1) a lack of regulatory protection, (2) low wages, (3) high employment insecurity and (4) low levels of employee control over wages, hours and working conditions. Notably, these dimensions are primarily concerned with employment characteristics and the degree to which workers can execute control over them. As I will argue, however, current conceptualizations might not suffice to adequately capture all dimensions of precariousness involved in sex work, a topic that has – though seemingly archetypal for it – just recently been addressed in the context of precariousness and precarious work (Sanders & Hardy, 2013; Stewart, 2013; Cruz, 2013; Sanders & Hardy, 2014; Orchiston, 2016). Even before the pandemic, brothel sex work across different regulatory settings was characterized by poor working conditions and a distinct lack of employment rights (Bruckert et al., 2003; Wagenaar et al., 2013). Moreover, particularly in criminalizing or regulatory settings where sex workers do not enjoy the same rights as workers in other professions, sex workers' safety, health, and rights are on the line (Crofts et al., 2012). Should it turn out that the pandemic has indeed further exacerbated this situation (Gercama & Derks, 2020; Lam, 2020a; Lam, 2020b; Farley, 2020; Naftulin, 2020), then the experience of sex workers in the Netherlands during the pandemic might present an interesting case based on which current conceptualizations of precarious work can be revisited and - if necessary - extended.

2.2. Sex Work Regimes and Their Consequences on Sex Workers

To this day, sex work is criminalized in most countries worldwide, and the regulation of the sex work industry remains a heated topic of debate (Vanwesenbeeck, 2011; Orchiston, 2016). Generally, three different regulatory approaches can be differentiated: (1) *Criminalizing or proabolitionist systems* that aim to abolish sex work by penalizing sex workers and third parties facilitating sex work, like taxi drivers, brothel owners, and in some cases, pimps (McCarthy et al., 2012; Bleeker et al., 2022); (2) *Regulationist systems* that seek to regulate the sex work industry, protect public health, and limit potential damages inflicted by the industry, such as human trafficking (Scoular, 2010; Vanwesenbeeck, 2011, 2017; Bleeker et al., 2022) even though the protection and safety of sex workers are not a primary concern (Kloek & Dijkstra, 2018); and (3) *Decriminalizing or antiabolitionist systems* that strive to safeguard sex workers' human rights, health, and safety by officially recognizing sex work as a legal profession, regulating the sex work industry as much as possible under the same laws as other professions, and treating sex work like any other profession (McCarthy et al., 2012; Bleeker et al., 2022). So far, sex work has only been fully decriminalized in New Zealand (Abel, Fitzgerald, Healy & Taylor, 2010; Bleeker et al., 2022) and Belgium (Chini, 2022). Though scientific literature has repeatedly highlighted the benefits of sex work decriminalization (Wagenaar, Amesberger & Altink, 2017; Wijers, 2018; Bleeker et al., 2022), sex work continues to be criminalized in most countries around the world:

> "*Sex work is an extremely controversial area of human conduct that is burdened like no other with an interplay of moral judgementalism, political incompetence, criminal opportunism, and subsequent human suffering*" (Vanwesenbeeck, 2011, p. 1).

2.3. Governmental Precarization

Given this growing body of literature concerned with the impact of different regulatory approaches to sex work on the working conditions in the sex work industry (e.g., Sullivan, 2010; Sanders & Campbell, 2007; Crowhurst, 2012; Levy and Jakobsson, 2014; Krusi et al., 2014), studying sex workers' experience as a case for pandemic precarity is a pointless undertaking if the political context and role of the government are not taken into consideration. While the Hobbesian security state and the 20th-century welfare states were legitimized by the promise of offering security and protection in exchange for obedience, Isabel Lorey (2015) suggests that the normalization and democratization of precarization in neoliberalist states have turned precarization into an instrument of governing: By constructing a precarious Other as a supposed threat to the security and stability of the neoliberalist state, such governing through insecurity and destabilization which she terms *governmental precarization*, derives its legitimation by offering protection against the very threat it has no interest in resolving: Precarity. In other words, rather than resolving the instability and insecurity caused by precarization, states governed through governmental precarization instrumentalize the high prevalence of precarity in society to construct a threat, the precarious Other, that they can offer protection against. Accordingly, sustained legitimation through governmental precarization relies on the persistence of the precarious Other, for states would lose their purpose if precarity was to be fully resolved: "Legitimizing the protection of some, generally requires striating the precarity of those marked as 'other'" (Lorey, 2015, p. 14). This raises the question of how certain groups are constructed and maintained as the precarious Other. Given their long-standing stigmatization and exclusion even in countries where sex work is legalized, sex workers might lend themselves to the role of the precarious Other. Hence, exploring sex workers' experiences during the pandemic through the lens of governmental precarization might yield valuable insights into the workings of governmental precarization and the construction of the precarious Other.

2.4. The Impact of Sexuality Hierarchies on the Protection by the Welfare

In view of sex workers' historic stigmatization (Vanwesenbeeck, 2017), this research also brings dominant value systems regarding sexuality to the table and their implication for those granted protection by the welfare state. The moral concerns regarding commercial sex are grounded in heteronormative, traditionalist sexuality norms that render certain forms of sexuality normal and good, while rejecting all other forms of sexuality as being inherently deviant and bad (Ho, 2006; Vanwesenbeeck, 2017). The Charmed Circle by Gayle Rubin (1984) is a model that visualizes existing sexuality hierarchies by displaying 'charmed' forms of sexuality in line with heteronormative,

traditionalist sexuality norms on the inner ring of a circle, while sexualities labelled as deviant frame the outer ring (Rubin, 1984). 'Charmed' forms of sexuality concern, amongst other, sex between heterosexual couples in monogamous relationships, 'vanilla' without toys, and non-commercial sex out of (heterosexual and monogamous) love. Deviant sexualities, in contrast, represent the opposites of their charmed counterparts; promiscuity, polygamy and polyamory, and sex with toys or pornography to name a few. In addition to having these deviant sexualities featured in sex work, what deems sex work deviant is its monetary transactional aspect (Ho, 2006). Additionally, commercial sex also contests other heteronormative norms like the 'reproductive imperative', which defines the function of sex in terms of its reproductive outcomes and renders all no-procreative forms of sexuality and female pleasure redundant since they fulfil no reproductive function (Mills, 2013). These disparities regarding norms for male and female sexuality highlight the intersectionality of gender and sexuality resulting in gendered norms of sexuality, also denoted by the feminist concept of the 'sexual double standard' (Eichler, 1980). For example, while men are considered sexually active and driven by an evolutionary urge to find potential partners to reproduce their species, women are chiefly meant to be sexually attractive. This results in the differential appraisal of sexual acts depending on one's gender: While casual sex is frequently considered acceptable and even praiseworthy for men, sexually active women are readily denoted as 'sluts' (Endendijk et al., 2020).

According to Rubin (1984), the presence and combination of charmed and deviant sexualities in persons determine their place in dominant sexuality hierarchies. While these value systems regarding sexualities and the resulting hierarchies are socially constructed, their consequences are nevertheless real (Rubin, 1984):

> *"Individuals whose behaviour stands high on this hierarchy [of accepted sexual practices] are rewarded with certified mental health, respectability, legality, social and physical mobility, institutional support, and material benefits"* (Rubin, 1984, p. 279).

In line with this argument, Judith Butler (2011) contends that one's positioning in gender and sexuality hierarchies determines, amongst others, one's worthiness of protection by the welfare state. To relate this to my research, I will argue that sex workers' experiences during the pandemic might reflect their sexual deviance according to heteronormative traditionalist sex and gender norms.

2.5. Organizing the Struggles of Marginalized Groups by Commoning

Finally, the principles of 'the commons' and 'commoning' as defined by Silvia Frederica (Caffentzis & Federici, 2014; Monteagudo, 2019) will serve as a theoretical framework for the resilience and self-efficacy of the sex work community in resisting their historic marginalization and stigmatization. In capitalist societies, communal resources and social spaces are increasingly privatized and turned into scarce commodities. This benefits the individuals and groups that control certain resources and make a profit from their scarcity. However, it also results in unequal access to formerly communal commodities like education, nature, and social spaces (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2011). The commons,

a principle of social organization based on self-government and equal access to social wealth, reject these notions of exclusion and hierarchization in capitalist societies. According to the politics of the commons, the possibility of satisfying one's basic needs should not be jeopardized by profit-making and exploitation, and everyone should be able to partake in decisions that concern one's life (Monteagudo, 2019). The commons, forms of imagined or existing wealth, are communally shared and managed in a way that benefits all community members: "Commons are not only the means by which we share in an egalitarian manner of the resources we produce but a commitment to the creation of collective subjects, a commitment to fostering common interests in every aspect of our life" (Caffentzis & Federici, 2014, p. 103). The social relations and processes that arise between community members through collaboration and exchange while managing their commons are referred to as commoning (Caffentzis & Frederici, 2014). According to Silvia Frederici, the commons and commoning can serve as a tool to fight exploitation and re-organize society. In her construction, anti-capitalist commons should serve as autonomous spaces that allow people to organize their struggles at a local and national level and reclaim control over the (re)production of resources, distribution of wealth, and services. The resulting forms of self-governance, communitarian structures, and institutions will gradually disentangle the state and market, reducing the capitalist state's monopoly and power (Caffentzis & Frederici, 2014; Monteagudo, 2019). According to Frederici, there is no difference between sex workers' struggle against exploitation and the struggle of other (un)employed workers under capitalist regimes (Monteagudo, 2019). Hence, if sex workers face the same struggles are other workers, exploring the struggles that shaped sex workers' pandemic experience might not only showcase the influence of capitalist regimes on marginalized workers but also offer perspectives for the organization of their struggle.

Chapter 3: Methodology and the Ethics of Care

3.1. Epistemological Framework

In view of sex workers' historical marginalization, criminalization, and victimization (Farley, 2020), I adopted a qualitative feminist epistemological approach for the present research. Feminist epistemologies reject notions of objectivity, neutrality, and truth (Harding, 1992) and instead suggest the situatedness of knowledge (Haraway, 1991) and the ethics of care (Narayan, 2004). They are grounded in the idea that people are knowledgeable experts on their lived realities and hold a deep understanding and knowledge of their experiences. Accordingly, they should be the ones guiding the interpretations of these experiences. I follow this approach by taking sex workers' experiences before and during the pandemic as a primary source of knowledge. My goal is to highlight sex workers' autonomy, agency, and resilience (Lam, 2020).

> *"To position sex workers (or any marginalized group) as the experts of their own lives and experiences, and to make possible the spaces for them to speak about themselves, is not only an ethical and epistemological issue but also an ontological and political act"* (Code 2015, Harding 1992).

3.2. Positionality Statement

This section lays out my positioning in relation to my research. I am about to obtain two psychological degrees in Clinical Forensic Psychology and Psychological Research. My research master's was very much grounded in positivist epistemology and objectivist traditions. Accordingly, I was trained to overcome characteristics of my positionality to avoid bias and achieve objectivity and neutrality. During my minors in Gender Studies and Indigenous Studies at the University of Amsterdam and McGill University, as well as my Gender Studies Master at the University of Amsterdam, I got acquainted with qualitative research methodologies and feminist epistemologies that made me aware of the role that my positionality plays in selecting and going about my research question. Moreover, I learned to value my positionality and regard it as an essential tool since it shapes my empathy, relatedness, and responsiveness concerning my subjects and their environments and the way I navigate empirical research fields. By describing the impact of central characteristics of my positionality on my research process and interpretation of the findings, I seek to encourage the critical reflexivity of the reader.

First and foremost, being a straight cis-gendered woman, I find myself at the heart of the same intersectionality of these gender and sexuality hierarchies as most of my researched subjects. Therefore, I can better engage with discussing and understanding their experiences, despite us differing on other factors like social upbringing, family background, educational accreditation, and sexual explorations.

Furthermore, though my research approach opposes positivist claims to neutrality and objectivity, positivist epistemologies have undeniably shaped most of my academic studies and empirical work and are ingrained in my thinking, working, and writing. For example, the use of first-person pronouns continues to feel quite unfamiliar to me and I occasionally find myself tempted to return to a quantitative way of structuring this paper, which is why, in my methodological considerations, I must continuously be alert against my traditional quantitative patterns of thinking and reasoning.

That being said, my background also bears advantages, since it has taught me a self-reflective, critical, and meticulous approach to life and science. For example, all my empirical work is grounded in research, and I refrain from making generalizing claims unless they are evidence-based. During my Research Masters, I was taught to write compactly, say more with fewer words, and avoid using jargon to make my empirical work accessible to people from other academic and non-academic backgrounds. Additionally, my work experience as a teaching assistant and later as a junior lecturer has taught me to make connections between different theories and findings, compare authors and academic sources, and recognize and explain the core arguments and ideas of various scholars in simple words. Therefore, this research project seeks to combine 'the best of both worlds' from my quantitative and qualitative education.

Furthermore, my background in Forensic Psychology, Gender, and Indigenous Studies has influenced the topic of the present research and my approach to the sex work community since a lot of my studies have been concerned with marginalized individuals and groups: While in Forensic Psychology, my work is focused on the level of the individual and seeks solutions to problems on a micro level, my work in Gender and Indigenous Studies is characterized by finding structural solutions at a macro level. Being able to combine both approaches – the curiosity and empathy of the forensic psychologist in understanding the world of thought and experiences of the individual on one hand, and the ability of the researcher and sociologist to abstract, see the bigger picture and understand my relation to that picture on the other – is a unique feature of my positionality, and an asset I am keen on deploying in the service of this research.

Finally, since I work with sex offenders as a forensic psychologist, talking about sexuality comes to me naturally. I am aware of the great diversity of sexual preferences, the impact of culture and upbringing on people's sexuality and sexual preferences, and the constructedness of the shame and restrictedness we are taught to feel about sexual topics and needs in Western societies. My interview techniques, observations, and work experience as a clinical-forensic psychologist have taught me that being direct, curious, and naming things by their name is paramount to an open conversation – insights and skills I tried to apply to the interviews conducted for the present research.

3.3. Qualitative Approach

The present research utilizes the exacerbating effect of the COVID-19 pandemic to gain insights into the emergence, perpetuation, and impact of social inequalities toward marginalized workers. More

precisely, I explore the experience of sex workers in the Netherlands during the pandemic as a case for marginalized workers' pandemic precarity. Therefore, the pandemic is not only the subject but also the tool of the present research (Wacquant, 2011).

Gaining Trust and Access

Due to the privacy concerns and overstudiedness of the sex work community, as well as the struggles, I was prepared and required to invest a substantial amount of time in gaining the trust of and access to the community before conducting the in-depth interviews that present the core data of the present research. My quest for participants began at the end of March 2022, one month after most COVID-19 measures in the Netherlands had been lifted (Rijksoverheid, 2022a). Based on prior research and newspaper articles about sex work during the pandemic (e.g., Abji et al., 2020; Lam, 2020a; Gercama & Derks, 2020) and the extensive body of scientific literature on the historic stigmatization and exclusion of sex workers (e.g., Vanwesenbeeck, 2017; Minichiello et al., 2018; Toubiana & Ruebottom, 2022), I had good reasons to assume that sex workers' pandemic experience might have been – and continues to be – characterized by struggles and hardship. Therefore, it did not seem appropriate to ask them for time-consuming interview participation without offering appropriate compensation for their time, openness, and effort. In the end, interviewees could choose between a monetary reward of 50 euros per hour or a contribution to one of their projects. As efforts to get (partial) funding for my project were not crowned by success, I drew on my private funds for monetary rewards.

Participants Compensation

In the end, most sex workers in the sample (6) chose compensation through compensation. While I already realized several contributions, others are still ongoing (e.g., the workshops at the police) or have yet to start (e.g., correcting a business plan proposal for the municipality of Vlissingen, editing the content and language of the English website of stichtingsexpower.nl, and making a flyer for an escorting fair). Of the remaining participants (3), one received the monetary reward of 50 euros as a tax-free bank transfer via a payment request. The other sent an invoice for 50 euros, excluding taxes through his business, since this yielded administrative benefits for his administration. The last participant was an employee of the PIC and only charged me the regular interview fee of 25 euros handled by the PIC. Due to my frequent visits to the PIC, I also donated 75 euros to the organization and bought two books (ca. 25 euros). Additionally, I regularly prepared meals to bring along for interviews at the PIC.

Recruitment and Sampling Strategies

In the early recruitment phases, I used purposive sampling strategies (Bryman, 2021) by contacting sex work organizations in Amsterdam for potential interviewees. If organizations mentioned a telephone number on their website, I called them to introduce myself and my project before sending them more information about my research via email, since I deemed this approach more personal than sending an email in the first place. Unfortunately, some organizations did not mention a telephone number or were not reachable on several subsequent days. In these cases, I resorted to just sending an email. Depending on the language of an organization's website, I used an email template

in Dutch or English to introduce myself, explain the purpose, background, and qualitative approach of my research, and lay out the compensatory options for potential participants. During a phone call, an employee of the organization Sekswerkexpertise warned me that student projects do not tend to be well received in the community, since many students perpetuate sex work stigma, use disrespectful language, and ask questions that confirm their existing stereotypes during interviews. Therefore, I decided to mention my role as a junior lecturer at the University of Amsterdam and my intention to publish my thesis to highlight my request's empirical motivation and sincerity. Additionally, I personalized the template by referring to any prior phone calls (if applicable) and tailoring it to the organizations' names and missions.

Regardless of these efforts, most organizations (e.g., PROUD, SAVE) did either not respond to my email or turned down my request and referred me to the Prostitution Information Centre (PIC) in Amsterdam, which I had already contacted myself via phone and email. At this moment of the research process, after lots of rejection, back-and-forth exchanges, and referrals, I realized that moving forward with my research project would require substantial perseverance, patience, and investment in the sex work community. This challenge only sparked my interest even more. Based on the advice of researchers at the University of Amsterdam working on sex work or related topics (e.g., Dr. Marie-Louise Janssen: sex work; Prof. Dr. Olav Velthuis: webcam sex; Prof. Dr. Jochen Peter: pornography), I decided to broaden my focus to include all types of sex work from all over the Netherlands. The first interviewees I managed to recruit were members of the sex worker-led organization Seksworks in Brabant. Later, three participants were recruited via snowball sampling (Bryman, 2021) through referrals of members of sex work organizations I had already interviewed.

Forming Bonds with the Community

Such recruitment of referrals only occurred later during the recruitment and data collection process, when I had gotten to know multiple participants from the sex work organizations I collaborated with and created some deeper bonds with participants during in-depth interviews and meetings to work on contributions. For example, (1) volunteering at the Open Day of Amsterdam's Red-Light district (NL: Open Wallen Dagen) allowed me to get to know not only several employees and board members of the PIC, but also the neighbours and members of PIC's the neighbourhood, (2) writing business plans for prospective sex businesses and applying for licences at different municipalities, allowed me to get to know my participants better, deepened my understanding of sex work regulations and policies, and gave me the chance to witness which problems arise from the current sex work regime, (3) the submission of several grant applications for project funding (Red Umbrella Fund, Spark Fund, Building Narrative Power) yielded insights into the organization of the struggles of the sex work community, introduced me to many initiatives and organizations, and put me in touch with further community members, and finally, (4) my contribution to the professionalization and restructuring of the content, slide show and didactic of a workshop about sex stigma held at different police stations allowed me to further bond with interviewees and introduced me to the topic of police violence and abuse towards sex workers, which is also highlighted by the present findings. Though splitting my attention and time between those contributions and my research project was challenging, I will always

cherish the bonds I have created with the sex work community members. To this day, I continue to be humbled by the openness, acceptance, and compassion I was welcomed with. What started as a master thesis project has become an allyship that allowed for almost ethnographic insights into the sex work community. In writing this report, I feel deeply committed to the community I represent through this research project's findings.

Sample Characteristics of the Present Sample

The final sample comprises nine (former) sex workers that were directly or indirectly recruited via two organizations: First, the Prostitution Information Centre (PIC) in Amsterdam is an organization that is founded and run by sex workers and allies to provide tourists with information about sex work through lectures, events, and, until recently, also guided tours through the Red-Light district that were now replaced by talks and subsequent self-guided walking tours (PIC Amsterdam, 2022). Second, the lobby group Seksworks is founded by sex workers in collaboration with the municipality of Tilburg and advocates the rights of sex workers in Zeeland, Brabant, and Limburg (Seksworks, 2022). Participants were employees of the PIC, active members of Seksworks, or referrals by members of either organization.

The sample comprises eight active sex workers and one former sex worker from different sex work branches (more information: Table 1 and 4.2. Sex Work Typologies) and locations across the Netherlands. On the one hand, these diverse sample characteristics reflect the challenges associated with recruiting sex workers for in-depth interviews in general and recruiting sex workers based on a set of inclusion requirements in specific. On the other hand, such diverse sample characteristics can also be desirable since they reflect the heterogeneity and diversity of the sex work community. The final sample comprised eleven sex workers representing eight types of sex work. The sample characteristics are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample characteristics of the sex workers who participated in the qualitative in-depth interviews conducted for the present research project.

Pseudonym	Age	Nationality	Place of Residence	Type of Work	Time as Sex Worker	Experience in other cities or countries	Type of work in other places	Languages	Gender identity
Inanna	46	Dutch	Leiden	Sex coaching and sex care	17	Belgium		German, English, Dutch	Woman
Romana	54	Dutch	Groningen	Former sexworker (chem sex,	27	Spain	Tried to take over couples' club/amateur prostitution, but quit because of corruption	English, Dutch, a little German and Spanish	Woman
Bear	52	American	Amsterdam	Porn actor/ producer	Declined	Declined	Declined	Dutch, English	Trans masc

Tom	46	Dutch	Den Bosch	Escort ("Gezelschapsheer")	8	Belgium, Germany, America	Escort ("Gezelschapsheer")	Dutch, English	Man
Emma	58	Dutch	Amsterdam	Sex care/window	21	-	-		Woman
Kate	37	Dutch		Private house	7	-	-	Dutch, English	Woman
Esther	43	Dutch	Ossendrecht	Dominatrix (Before: escort, private home, sex club, peep show)	24	Belgium, Germany	Strip, lap dance, peep show	Dutch, English, German	Woman, sexual
Godness Red	51	Dutch	Tilburg	Dominatrix, striptease, hostess, escort, sextherapist, paydates with swinging	12	-	-	Dutch, English	Woman
Anna	35	Dutch	Amsterdam	Escort, porn performer	5	Belgium, US	Tripsitting	Dutch, English	Woman

Semi-Structured Qualitative Interviews

According to Mahat-Shamir et al. (2021), open-ended semi-structured interviews are well-suited for the investigation of empirically relevant topics and phenomena that touch upon sensitive, personal experiences and significant life events. They offer interviewees a space in which they can share their experiences with a non-acquainted, genuinely curious and empathetic listener, without having to worry about acquaintances' judgment and emotions. In that sense, semi-structured interviews are an exchange where interviewees receive the researcher's undivided attention and presence in their story in return for sharing their experience, which is often perceived as a rewarding experience. Therefore, I applied this interview format to the present research question.

Depending on interviewees' location and preference, interviews took place at either the PIC or via Zoom. The duration of the interviews ranged, on average, from 60 to 90 minutes, but was in some instances shorter or longer to accommodate participants' schedules and preferences. This flexibility of the timeframe and location aimed to put interviewees in control of the course, content, and circumstances of their interview, therefore highlighting sex workers' agency, autonomy, and self-efficacy rather than undermining it (Lam, 2020).

Given the semi-structured interview format, a potential structure and set of questions was established in preparation for the interviews. However, rather than a static framework, the semi-structured interview guide was used as a red thread that I could use for orientation and as a checklist of topics that could be covered during the interview (Bryman, 2021). The following steps are a rough first draft of a potential interview guide for the proposed research: First, participants were open-endedly asked to narrate their experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, participants were asked if that experience differed from their experience as a sex worker in Amsterdam before the pandemic. Third,

if not covered by their answer to the opening question, sex workers were then asked about struggles they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Fourth, they were asked about potential factors that might influence sex workers' precarity during the pandemic were specifically asked about if not previously mentioned. Fifth, participants were asked to describe the implications of those struggles on their living and working conditions. Sixth, participants were asked how they overcame these struggles, where they found sources of support, and how they resisted discrimination and social inequalities. Seventh, sex workers were asked what is needed to improve their current situation. Finally, participants were asked to imagine a sex work utopia and describe the status of their profession in an ideal world.

To maintain good contact with the interviewee and make the conversation as natural as possible, the interviews were recorded with participants' consent; not only do recordings serve as a memory aid and allow for a detailed, accurate account of the interview content, but they also relieve the interviewer from notetaking, therefore improving the interviewer's listening capacities and effectiveness (Bryman, 2021). Additionally, I carried out all interviews but two in Dutch. Though my native language is German, I speak Dutch fluently. Therefore, it made sense to offer participants the opportunity to conduct the interviews in Dutch, which meant that language was less of a barrier for them (as Dutch natives) and put them more at ease. After obtaining permission, I transcribed the interviews by summarizing them in English. This decision was based on the fact that the reach of an article published in English is greater (Mol, 2002), and most of the academic writing I did during my research masters and sociology masters was in English, making my English writing skills more nuanced and advanced than my Dutch writing skills.

Data analysis

I used ATLAS.ti, Version 22, to code and organize the data. First, I identified (recurring) themes in the data during an open coding phase. Next, I compared them across participants during the axial coding phase. Finally, I analyzed connections between themes in relation to the theoretical framework of this piece during the selective coding phase (Laureau, 2021). Following an abductive approach, I went back and forth between theory and data in an iterative process. Hereby, phenomena were related to other observations and existing theoretical concepts but could also lead to the proposition of new hypotheses and theory (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). In other words, while the coding process was generally open to discovering previously unanticipated themes following an inductive approach, identifying different themes was led by or made sense of in light of existing theories and empirical findings. Illustrative quotes were translated from Dutch to English to support the present findings and arguments (Beuving & de Vries, 2015; Bryman, 2021). The results of this process will finally be interpreted in light of existing theories and new theoretical insights resulting from the data, relevancy, and implications of the findings will be discussed, and future directions for research building on the present study will be formulated.

3.4. Research Ethics

According to Kawulich (2005), data storage and anonymization measures belong to researchers' crucial ethical responsibilities. Particularly in light of sex workers' stigmatization (Vanwesenbeeck, 2017) and associated privacy concerns, ensuring participants' anonymity and privacy was paramount in all my research-related documentation, including notes and observations, interview recordings, write-ups, and publications. To ensure that the names of my participants were not connected to the interview-recordings or other privacy-sensitive information. For those sex workers that wanted to be called their real name, I handled a coding sheet to connect a pseudonym that I used on all documentation to their name. For other participants that introduced themselves with their work name or used their work name during the interviews, participants indicated that the use of yet another pseudonym instead of their work name was not required.

Furthermore, I was transparent about the purpose and focus of the present research. Some participants had negative experiences with interviews with students, researchers, or journalists seemed to only seek confirmation of their existing beliefs, used politically incorrect language, and reproduced misconceptions like the conflation of sex work with human trafficking or necessary involuntariness of sex workers. Therefore, I decided to tell participants a bit more about my positionality and relation to the research topic, my political/activist perspective on sex work, perspective on certain trends in existing research on sex work and the resulting motives for certain methodological choices in my research project. I got the impression that this approach created trust between me and the participants, and put them at ease.; maybe, because it gave them a rough idea what I was looking for, and from which angle I would reflect on my findings.

In view of my tremendous excitement about this research project, and all the encounters and experiences that came with it, I made sure to always strike a balance between empirical and theoretical fascination for the topic at hand, and the consideration that the topic is the interviewees' lived reality. And finally, as an act of gratitude to their kind responsiveness and cooperation and as an act of transparency and honoring to their trust in me to have shared their stories, experiences and muffled struggles, a soft copy of my thesis will be sent to all my participants upon completion.

Additionally, I plan on turning this thesis into a scientific publication, since this will increase the reach of my findings. As my interviewees took the time for extensive interview, really opened up, and shared extremely vulnerable information about the structural harm that was done to their community during the pandemic, I consider it my responsibility to represent my participants well and look for a way in which this research project can be beneficial to their community. For this, I have laid the cornerstone with the time and effort I invested in this master thesis. As my first qualitative research project, working out this thesis has confronted me with unprecedented struggles, while simultaneously being the most motivating and energizing research project I ever worked on.

Chapter 4: Duties, but no Rights: Sex Work in the Netherlands

4.1. Terminology

In the present research, the term *sex work* is used to refer to all commercial forms of sexual and/or erotic services. It can, but does not always (e.g., pornography, webcam sex) involve variations of sexual intercourse with paying customers (Majoor, 2021; Proud, 2022). The person providing these services is referred to as *a sex worker*. While often used synonymously, the terminology sex work and sex worker are broader and more inclusive than prostitution and prostitute, since the latter is limited to forms of sex work that involve physical contact between sex worker and client. Additionally, the term prostitution stems from the French word '*prostituée*', which translates to 'someone that's made available for sex' and, therefore, implies involuntariness (Proud, 2022). Importantly, interviewees may choose to refer to themselves as sex workers, prostitutes, or even whores as an act of empowerment (Nyangairi & Palmary, 2015).

4.2. Typologies

As mentioned in the previous section, sex work is an umbrella term that encompasses different forms of sexual and/or erotic services (Proud, 2022). Subsequently, I will define the types of sex work represented by the participants in the present sample. These definitions are supposed to allow the reader to effortlessly follow the presentation of the present research findings in Chapter 5 while allowing the reader to consider sex workers' experiences in light of the type of sex work they are engaged in.

<u>Window Sex Work</u>
Window sex workers rent working spaces - often but not exclusively located in tipple zones - from window frame plus operators. The windows and enclosed working spaces are maintained and equipped by the operator, can be reserved upfront, and are usually rented out per shift (daytime or nighttime) or day. In the tipple zone of Amsterdam, renting a room for a day shift costs 100 euros, while renting a room for a night shift costs 200 euros. In the Netherlands, window sex workers are usually independent entrepreneurs. If approached by customers, they negotiate the prices and services before letting them enter the room behind their windows to provide the agreed upon service (Majoor, 2021).

<u>Private House</u>
Some sex workers rent a private house as their working space, often shared by several sex workers to warrant security. Compared to brothels and sex clubs, private homes have the advantage that sex workers do not need to 'lure' potential clients into their rooms and can focus 100% of their time on client contact and service provision (Majoor, 2021).

Sex Care

Sex care is a sexual service for people with severe physical and mental disabilities that is often executed by sex workers with a background in health care (Nwanazia, 2018). The goal of sex care is to allow for intimacy and sexual satisfaction amongst people who would otherwise struggle to engage in sexual relations and fulfil their sexual needs, heightening their quality of life by meeting and catering to their basic needs. Several sex care organizations in the Netherlands, like Flekszorg, Snoezelzorg, or Tender Care, serve as mediating platforms between the self-employed sex care professionals working for them and their customers. As such, they find prospective customers, conduct intakes, preparatory and healthcare measures, match them with sex care professionals in their region, and standardize the prices of sexual and erotic services. They also take over legal procedures regarding complaints from either sex workers or clients. In return, they keep a percentage of the profit.

Erotic Massages

Erotic or tantric massages involve massage techniques like strokes, caresses, pressures, mindfulness, and breathing techniques to all body parts, including genitalia. Tantric massages are aimed to awaken one's sexual energy and loosen tensions, but don't involve sexual intercourse (BoAnn Coaching, 2022).

Escort Service

Sex workers providing escort services meet their clients in hotels or homes, depending on their request. They are either self-employed or work for an agency that mediates between sex workers and clients for a share of their profit. Since escorts meet clients alone and at varying locations without specialized alarm systems and prior inspection, this form of sex work generally bares more risks but is also paid at higher rates ranging between 150 and 500 euros per hour (Majoor, 2021).

BDSM

BDSM stands for Bondage, Discipline/Domination, Submission/Sadism, and Masochism. It involves a wide range of erotic practices that involve receiving and inflicting pain, dominance and submission, and role play (Carlström, 2019). Dominatrices are female sex workers that take on the dominant role in said role plays and exert sexual control over paying customers, also referred to as 'slaves' or 'courtship'. Their services commonly do not involve sexual intercourse. Instead, clients receive and follow orders; they may also be physically beaten or humiliated (…). The rules and boundaries of sex workers and slaves are discussed and contractually agreed upon before service provision (Carlström, 2019).

Queer Pornography.

Pornography refers to representations of sexual activity in photography, film, or writing (King, 2016). While mainstream porn is frequently focused on male pleasure and features relatively homogenous bodies, queer porn "depict[s] a wide variety of sexual orientations, identities, and body norms" (Porn film festival Vienna, 2022) and showcases the complexity and diversity of erotic expression. It engages erotica as a cultural artefact and tool for social change in its attempt to reclaim queer bodies and erased

sexualities. In that, it is linked with the queer and feminist social movements, and it is a political form of art. Unlike mainstream porn actors, queer porn actors choose their roles and determine the specific sexual acts that they want to perform in tandem, rather than just execute the scenes imposed on them by directors (Gutek, Szreder & Żwirek, 2022).

Chem Sex Work

Chem sex workers provide erotic and sexual services while being under the influence of stimulating drugs or alcohol, like methamphetamine, cocaine, or gamma-hydroxybutyric acid (GHB). While chem sex is a voluntary form of sex work in the first place, the disinhibiting effect of the stimulants consumed can result in risk-taking behaviour and the crossing of sexual boundaries of sex workers and customers (Aldridge, 2020).

4.3. Sex Work in the Netherlands

With the lifting of the brothel ban in 2000, sex work is officially legal in the Netherlands (Outshoorn, 2012; Wijers, 2018). This means that sex workers possessing a work permit can legally provide sexual and erotic services to paying customers above the age of 18 (Daalder, 2007; Wijers, 2018). Additionally, the operation of sex businesses is legal if the operator lives up to the requirements formulated in the municipal licensing systems (Vanwesenbeeck, 2011). To prevent the exploitation of sex workers by pimps, clubs, and brothel owners, sex workers can no longer be employed by others and, instead, must be independent (Ketelaars, 2015).

While one of three official objectives of the Law Reform in 2000 was the improvement of sex workers' societal position and working conditions (Daalder, 2002; Vanwesenbeeck, 2011), to this date, only the two other objectives – regulating the sex work industry and combatting criminality like human trafficking, involuntary prostitution, and illegal migration – have been enforced (Bleeker, Mulder & Korf, 2022). As a result, the number of (legally registered) sex workers in the Netherlands has decreased since 2000 (Vanwezenbeeck, 2017), and sex workers continue to lack professional rights, benefits, and infrastructure other legal, tax-paying professions are entitled to by labour law (Wijers, 2018; Majoor, 2021).

The Sex Work Regulation Bill (WRS) in 2008 has worsened the situation by requiring sex workers to register and show their licences to their clients as a proof of their legal and voluntary engagement in sex work. Since many sex workers register under other professions at the Chamber of Commerce and use different names at work to ensure their privacy, this registration requirement further complicates legal engagement in sex work. A second strongly contested version of the WRS has not gone through yet, but it intends to go even further by criminalizing sex buyers and third partners that facilitate the services of unregistered sex workers (Sekswerkexpertise, 2022).

Even though sex work is legal according to Dutch federal legislation, the translation of national law to regional sex work policies, like the number of available sex work licences and the requirements to

obtain them, are delegated to local authorities (Vanwesenbeeck, 2011; Verhoeven, 2016; Majoor, 2021). This results in vastly different regulations, working conditions, and support systems in different municipalities of the Netherlands (Vanwesenbeeck, 2011; Kovacsics, 2019). While in some municipalities, authorities are open to cooperating with sex workers and creating safe working conditions, other municipalities choose to issue few or no licences (Majoor, 2021).

Sex workers legally engaging in sex work are either registered as independent entrepreneurs at the Chamber of Commerce (CofC; Vanwezenbeeck, 2011) or employed via the opting-in regulation (Ketelaars, 2015). Both groups of sex workers are officially independent in the sense that they work for themselves and are not employed by a pimp or sex business owner. CofC-registered sex workers are fully self-employed in that they rent their own workspaces, determine their working hours, working conditions, and prices, and do their own income taxes. Since CofC-registrations can be looked up and reviewed by other members of the public, many sex workers are hesitant to register at all or choose to register for professions other than sex work to protect their privacy and avoid stigmatization (Bleeker, Mulder & Korf, 2022). This means that, despite being legally registered and paying income taxes, these sex workers do not appear on the governmental radar, resulting in dark data regarding the actual size of the legal sex work industry in the Netherlands (Vanwesenbeeck, 2011). Therefore, the adequacy of governmental support for sex workers, like the size of available funds, cannot be judged based on official data, and require close collaboration with members of the sex work community to be successful.

On the other hand, most sex workers working in indoor establishments in the Netherlands are not CofC-registered entrepreneurs but work via the opting-in regulation. Opting-in refers to a regulatory construct already used for professions other than sex work. It enables working relationships between commissioners and contractors based on a settlement contract without requiring them to be in a real or fictitious employment relationship. As a result, commissioners do not have employer duties, and contractors are supposed to remain largely independent. In 2009, concerns that sex workers' independence as required by the Law Reform in 2000 might be violated when working in sex clubs and private houses resulted in the extension of the opting-in regulation to sex work (Ketelaars, 2015). This has the advantage that sex workers do not have to CofC-register, and the business owners of the establishments they work in are responsible for their financial administration and tax payments. Additionally, twenty percent of their income is tax-free. At the same time, opting-in sex workers have neither the advantages of independent entrepreneurs nor employee rights like sick leave, holiday pay, or other social benefits. Additionally, sex workers' independence in determining their rates, working hours, and services are frequently limited by the rules of the establishment that sex workers must adhere to if they want to be able to work there (Ketelaars, 2015; Vanwezenbeeck, 2017; Majoor, 2021).

Since the Law Reform in 2000, legal sex work licences in the Netherlands are only granted to EU citizens (Outshoorn, 2012; Verhoeven, 2016). This resulted in a shift of migrant sex workers from Russia and Latin America to Central and Eastern Europe. According to estimations, about 60% of all sex workers in the Netherlands have a migrant status, two-thirds of which are EU citizens. This means

that the remaining third - which amounts to 20% of all sex workers in the Netherlands- are likely unable to obtain a work permit. Consequently, this group of sex workers is rendered vulnerable and find themselves forced to either work in other countries with similar or worse working conditions, resort to other professions, or carry out their work illegally (Vanwesenbeeck, 2011). This renders them a particularly vulnerable group of sex workers.

4.4. Timeline COVID-19 and Sex Work in the Netherlands

During the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, sex work was prohibited in the Netherlands from 23 March 2020 to 1 July 2020 and from 15 December 2020 to 19 May 2021 to control the spread of COVID-19 (de Wildt, 2021; SekswerkExpertise, 2022). While treated the same as other contact professions - e.g., hairdressers or massage therapists - during the first lockdown, sex workers were banned from work for more than 2.5 months longer than all other contact professions during the second lockdown: Instead of being able to return to work on 3 March 2021, sex workers were prohibited from working until 19 May 2021. In reaction to this unequal treatment, sex workers and allies organized several protests in major Dutch cities, like The Hague. Even outside hard lockdowns, sex workers' working times and protocols were impaired by curfews, and testing- and registration requirements for clients (SekswerkExpertise, 2022). Figure 1 provides a timeline of important events and decisions regarding sex work in the Netherlands during the pandemic.

Already in the early stages of the pandemic, members of the sex work community raised concerns about sex workers' difficulties in accessing governmental support funds and the resulting vulnerability imposed on them (de Wildt, 2021). While self-employed entrepreneurs were eligible for the 'Temporary Bridging Measure for Self-employed Professionals' (Dutch: Tijdelijke Overbruggingsregeling Zelfstandige Ondernemers; TOZO) payments, a governmental emergency fund created for all independent entrepreneurs registered at the Chamber of Commerce, unregistered migrant sex workers and opting-in sex workers did not receive any financial compensation for their loss of income (SekswerkExpertise, 2022), rendering them vulnerable and frequently unable to cover basic costs for food and shelter (de Wildt, 2021). As a result, some sex workers continued to work illegally against social distancing measures, despite putting themselves at risk of COVID-19 infection, client abuse, and legal penalties (de Wildt, 2021; SekswerkExpertise, 2022).

To offer at least some financial support to the most vulnerable sex workers, members of the sex work community founded several initiatives, like the Dutch Emergency Fund (DEF), created by sex worker Hella Dee as early as 15 March 2020, to pay sex workers in need 50 euro a week for groceries. Additionally, sex work organizations like PROUD and VER advocated for more support for sex workers on a political level (SekswerkExpertise, 2022).

Chapter 5: Classification and Interpretation of Sex Workers' Experiences during the Pandemic

Goddess Red, a 51-year-old dominatrix, is a walking eye-catcher: Her long, voluminous hair is coloured in a red so bright that Ariel, the little mermaid, would turn green with envy. Her skin is covered in freckles, her nail polish matches her hair, and her arms feature words tattooed in big, curved letters. One of them says 'Ohana', which is Hawaiian for 'family'. If I had to choose three words to describe her, they would be sweet, loving, and compassionate: Due to a dentist appointment, I was late for our zoom appointment. As I called her to announce the delay and offer my apologies, she assured me that there was nothing to worry about and asked me not to rush and to drive home safely. At work, sweet Goddess Red, a loving mother to a daughter, stepmother to her husband's children, and 'bonus oma' to his grandchildren, has her moment of power and control as she slips into her role as a dominatrix and governs the slaves of her courtship. Whoever does not abide by her orders risks feeling her whip. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, she currently has to rebuild her established courtship after months of being banned from work. Since her husband's income sufficed to cover their costs of living, Goddess Red could adhere to social distancing measures and did not work during the pandemic, though she lost all her income and did not receive governmental benefits. Being able to make that choice is a luxury, she says:

> *"You have to keep in mind: I'm married, my husband has a job, so that makes a difference [...]. I was in a lucky position. Let me put it this way: Of course, we also took a step back in terms of finances without my [BDSM] sessions, but I didn't suffer that much."* (Goddess Red, 51)

This excerpt from my interview with Goddess Red highlights that even for sex workers in the Netherlands that faced similar circumstances during the pandemic, experiences of these circumstances were shaped by many individual and structural factors. Since Goddess Red could fall back on her partner's income, she survived the pandemic without having to work illegally, despite being denied governmental benefits. Therefore, the presentation of the research findings in this chapter follows the conceptual distinction between precarious work and precarious worker by Campbell and Price (2016) and provides a categorization of sex workers' experiences of their working and living conditions during the pandemic, while taking the factors that shaped them into consideration. This approach differs substantially from much prior literature, where sex workers' working and living conditions are frequently equated to their experiences.

Importantly, though I identified four distinct categories to guide the structure and interpretation of my findings, such categorization is a simplified version of reality and represents merely four out of many possible experiences on a continuum. At the outer ends of the spectrum are sex workers whose experiences are categorized by either no alternatives to choose from or many options. Sex workers without alternatives ('harmed and made vulnerable') are in survival mode; since they depend on sex work to earn a living, they cannot be picky regarding customers and working conditions and frequently have to take risks. Their capacities are consumed by the need to function, and they cannot allow

themselves to feel depressed or indignant. Experiences further up the continuum are characterized by increasingly more alternatives, which allow sex workers to reflect on their unequal treatment compared to other professions ('depressed and indignant') and organize their struggle ('communal and self-efficacious). Sex workers' experience at the upper end of the spectrum ('recognized and empowered') is characterized by many alternatives, giving them the freedom to make their own decisions and protect their boundaries. Unfortunately, this position was not represented by any sex workers in the present sample and only came up when participants imagined a sex work utopia.

As much as I would like to pride myself on it, the idea of locating sex workers' experiences on a spectrum depending on sex workers' available options was suggested by the interviewee Anna in reaction to the categories of experiences I had identified in the data. Anna (35) started to work as an escort to be able to finance the final phase of writing her doctoral thesis. Escorting allowed her to cover her cost of living with relatively few work hours, so she had time and energy left to work on her thesis. Ultimately, she enjoyed her profession so much that she decided to switch careers. By now, she has several years of work experience in different types of sex work and has worked for many different agencies. Besides being a sex worker, she is trained and practices as a psychological body worker. The following excerpt of our conversation marks the birth of the continuum idea:

Anna: *"I think the two tracks ['harmed and vulnerable' and 'depressed and indignant'] are not that different. I think there's something about being made more vulnerable that makes you feel less empowered, and, therefore, doesn't really give you the energy and wherewithal to look for other options. So, you're being forced into some sort of learned helplessness role."*

Julie: *"So then there are two ways of being made vulnerable? One is being put out of options, and the other is being treated unfairly? The former being a subgroup of the latter, I suppose [...]."*

Anna: "[It] is [...] a continuum. There is an unjust system where some minority groups are being given less options. [The available options are] on a continuum. So, some people have more privilege than others. So, their options are being limited, but they still have some. Others are limited even further until you're at the end of the continuum, and they have none. But it's not like there's group A or group B, it's a sort of sliding scale. I think that the same processes affect everyone [...] on all levels of the continuum, like the feelings of depression and learned helplessness, not believing in a just world any more, despair, feeling like you can't have boundaries any more or like you have to take more risks, feeling unsafe, and being threatened. All those feelings increase the more you go down the scale. And the more feelings of having options and empowerment increase, the more you go up the scale." (Anna, 35)

5.1. Harmed and Made Vulnerable

When asked open-endedly about their experience during the pandemic, most interviewees primarily addressed the struggles they faced. Emma (58) is one of the sex workers active for the Prostitution Information Centre (PIC) in Amsterdam. She showed me a poster that, to her, summed up the pandemic experience of many sex workers. The poster, as visible in Figure 2, states: "Work ban, but no support - act normal!"

Figure 1. Poster issued by the PROUD: "Work ban but no support - be reasonable! Sex workers have the right to equal treatment and support during times of crisis! Stop the stigma."

To control the spread of COVID-19 in the Netherlands, the Dutch government required residents to stay at home for several months. Where possible, workers continued to work remotely in their home office. For those that could not execute their profession from home, governmental support measures were put in place to compensate for their loss of income, either via employment benefits or through the entrepreneurial emergency fund TOZO. Though most forms of sex work were prohibited during the lockdowns, with no or limited possibilities to resort to online sex work, many sex workers could not access governmental support to compensate for their loss of income during the pandemic. The reason for this was twofold: On the one hand, opting-in sex workers' in-between status made them neither eligible for employee benefits nor entrepreneurial TOZO payments. Emma (58) is a former nurse that is now splitting her time between sex care for a mediating agency, a day of window sex work in the tipple zone of Amsterdam per week, and her work at the PIC. Though she is registered at the CofC as a caretaker and dog walker, she recalls the problems her opting-in colleagues found themselves in during the pandemic:

> *"What also played a role was a group of sex workers, the opting-in workers, that worked in private houses. [...] If you work through the opting-in, you are not an employee, but also a not freelancer. You do pay taxes. Normally there is nothing to worry about, but when suddenly there is a pandemic, and you cannot work for several months… I mean, who could have possibly foreseen such a thing? So, this group of women had no support at all. Because they were not self-employed, but they were not employees either. […] [They fell] between the cracks."* (Emma, 58)

One of the sex workers that fell between the cracks during the pandemic was Anna (35). Before the pandemic, she worked for several escort agencies via the opting-in system. When agencies had to close during lockdowns, she lost all her income sources and was not eligible for governmental benefits.

> *"[During the pandemic], I have just been living on my savings and the odd client here and there, through referrals, through friends. Pretty funny: One night, I was at a small-scale party where I was like: 'Well, my work sucks right now. I do not have any income. So, if you know of anyone wanting a sex worker or, you know, ring me up!' I meant it as a joke, but two people from that party ended up booking me. […] So, I worked a bit during the pandemic, [but the work I did] was only 5 or 10 percent of what I would normally do. […] I couldn't [work more] since the agencies got closed. [...] I wish I had started to work independently before the pandemic, when everything was still good. Suddenly, sex work was illegal, [which] makes it more dangerous. And [since I had always worked for agencies and not independently], I did not have much experience with putting up ads, and I was petrified that I would get fined or that there would be police checks. So, I felt really uncomfortable with that. […] Anyone who would post [an ad] would get these really threatening messages by the police saying you are not allowed to work."* (Anna, 35)

These interview excerpts highlight the exacerbating effect of the pandemic on dimensions of precariousness involved in sex work even before the pandemic: For example, it was openly known that opting-in sex workers counted neither as employees nor as entrepreneurs and were, therefore, not entitled to any benefits like sick leave or holiday money. The pandemic, however, depicted how severe the consequences of these dimensions can be, as sex workers were banned from work for several months and could not access governmental benefits to compensate for their income loss. In other words, the crack has always been there, but the pandemic has highlighted how deep opting-in sex workers could potentially fall.

Even if sex workers were registered at the CofC, many did not apply for or were not granted entrepreneurial benefit payments to compensate for their loss of income because they were registered for nursing- or care-related professions that continued to work during the pandemic. Since CofC-registrations are open to the public, especially sex workers that have not informed their social environment about their profession, they fear stigmatization and exclusion if family members or friends come across their registration. According to Emma (58), her work environment in the Right Light District and her private life at home are two different worlds that encompass distinct spaces and inhabit distinct people. At work, people know her as Emma, 45, a relatively small, slim woman of working-class background whose quick-witted responses to comments from tourists and sex buyers have become her signature style and serve as a regular source of entertainment at the PIC. At home, Emma is 58, listens to her official name, and pretends she is a nurse. In a way, not even an actual lie. More a truth that has not been updated in a while: After all, Emma has been trained and worked as a nurse in the past. The only person that knows and moves in both worlds is Emma's sister, Liz. To keep it that way, Emma is registered at the CofC as a nurse and dog walker, not as a sex worker. Therefore, she could not apply for governmental TOZO payments during the pandemic, despite being banned from her jobs in the windows and sex care for several months in a row:

> *"[...] [B]ecause I'm self-employed, I could also apply for the TOZO, but I didn't do it. I didn't think I needed it. Besides, I'm registered at the Chamber of Commerce as a nurse, so it would be rather strange if I told them that I had no work during the pandemic, you know?" (Emma, 58)*

Regardless of why sex workers received no governmental funding, the consequence was the same: Sex workers had to draw on private funds like savings and incomes from other professions or their partners to cover their cost of living while they were banned from work. Sex workers with none of these options struggled to cover their cost of living. Some became homeless because they could not pay rent. Others could not heat their flats during winter because of unpaid electricity bills, and even struggled to find the money for groceries. As a result, many sex workers were forced to return to work illegally and against social distancing measures. Kate, 37, runs a funeral business besides working as a sex worker and told me that this gives her much freedom only to see the clients she wants to see and turn other offers down. During the pandemic, she continued to work and see people in private spaces, which was an additional risk but turned out to be such a success in her case that she continued to work in that way (instead of in clubs) after the pandemic. She remembers, however, that some of her clients, too, tried to abuse the situation during the pandemic:

> *"Well, some tried, but that were mostly new people that I turned down anyway during the pandemic. […] But of course, I am also in a very luxury position because I have another job besides sex work… so if someone tries to negotiate or asks for a service, I am not willing to offer, I am not going to see that person. But I can imagine that other people do that sometimes, anyway, because they are like: 'I have to do my groceries, all I have in my fridge right now are two eggs'."* (Kate, 37)

Due to the high fines imposed for social distancing violations and the risk of being arrested and receiving a criminal record, many sex workers that worked illegally during the pandemic were hesitant to call the police in case of incidents. Some sex buyers took advantage of that and tried to, for example, negotiate lower prices, push for unsafe sex practices, disregard agreements, and even refuse to pay. Romana (54), a former sex worker and sex workers' rights activist, is very involved in the sex work community and familiar with the working and living conditions of many sex workers:

> *"I noticed that a lot of sex workers went to work illegally. Think, for example, of hotel dates with the associated risks, seeing people at home. Luckily, there is 'UGLY mugs', a website where you can report undesirable behavior [of sex buyers]. That helps at least a little bit. But in the meantime, I have heard from women that were extorted because customers came and refused to pay and said: 'You're not even allowed to work, so I won't pay you'."*(Romana, 54)

Romana's words highlight the immense risks sex workers had to take and the unsafe circumstances they found themselves in because of the lack of governmental support during the lockdowns. Especially sex workers that are dependent on their sex work income to cover their cost of living and have few alternative options, like savings, income from other jobs, or the financial support of a partner, were put in a bind by the measures of the Dutch government, with no legal options to save themselves and improve their situation. The following quote from dominatrices Esther (43) and Goddess Red (51) highlight that, for some sex workers, the consequences of being cornered in such a vulnerable position went well beyond payment refusals and price negotiations:

> *"I personally did not work during the pandemic, because I am not financially dependent on [sex work], because I have my work on the chat site, so the perfect corona-proof job, actually. […] But [in case of abuse by clients] I just go to the police. I have a foundation that aims to destigmatize sex work, so I know all the law and regulations. The moment someone is violent towards me, I will instantly go to the police, no matter what. […] I have not personally experienced [abuse during the pandemic], but it's a small world and […] I have heard the most terrible things. One girl made an appointment [with a sex buyer] at her house. Because she had cameras on her walls, she eventually went to the police, but only after a lot of convincing from other sex workers. […] So, she was supposed to meet up with one man, but three men in police uniforms stood in front of her door, and she let them in because she thought they were policemen. They did the most terrible things to her, raped and robbed her."* (Esther, 43)

> *"Four sex workers in the Netherlands have committed suicide during the pandemic. One man and three women. One was a dominatrix like me, and another was a migrant sex worker. A lot of the abuse is directed against foreigners, you know. Last weekend – or the weekend before? – a twenty-year-old Columbian woman was drugged and raped from the front and the back, down to the blood. And when the police show up, all they say is: 'Yeah, she shouldn't have worked here'."* (Goddess Red, 51)

Unfortunately, such hostile interactions with the police are not an exception. Several interviewees in the sample addressed the misconception amongst police officers that the heightened risk of sexual violence inherent to their services was their professional risk and was not subject to criminal persecution. Already before the pandemic, such interactions with police frequently withheld sex workers from reporting transgressive client behaviour and (sexual) violence to the police. The pandemic has further exacerbated this precariousness-dimension of sex work by forcing sex workers into illegality and rendering them even more vulnerable to abuse and violence from sex buyers and police officers. As highlighted by the following quote, the dimensions of precariousness involved in sex work can entail severe consequences for sex workers' human rights, mental health, and physical well-being. These consequences exceed the impact and severity of the precariousness dimension considered in current conceptualizations of precarious work, like low wages, unstable contracts, and precarious working conditions. In fact, as the following excerpt highlights, they can even end fatally:

> *"There was a migrant sex worker that got into a conflict with a client, and he pushed her off the balcony, and she died. And then they [the police/authorities] only said: 'Well, she shouldn't have worked here. That's really not okay. Especially, migrant sex workers are so, so vulnerable. And because the police say these kinds of things, they don't dare to ask the police for help."* (Goddess Red, 51)

These findings highlight that by simultaneously prohibiting sex workers from working legally and denying them governmental funding to compensate for their income loss, governmental pandemic measures rendered sex workers vulnerable and enabled further precarization of their working conditions. On the one hand, the pandemic exacerbated existing precariousness-dimensions of sex work and showcased the severity of their consequences. For example, the lack of benefits associated with the opting-in system was a reality before the COVID-19 pandemic, but month-long lockdowns and curfews at sex workers' prime work hours exposed the existential consequences of this dimension of precariousness. Similarly, the public accessibility of the CofC-register had presented a privacy

concern and hindrance from (correct) registration to sex workers before the pandemic, but only entailed severe consequences when sex workers registered for other professions, like care jobs and nursing, could not access TOZO payments during the pandemic because their income loss was not deemed plausible based on their registered profession. Also, policemen's misconceptions regarding (sexual) violence against sex workers as being their professional risk or resulting from their (il)legal work status already led to mishandling and insufficient persecution of criminal offences against sex workers before the pandemic. When social distancing measures deemed sex work illegal, however, negative prior experiences and mistrust towards members of the police force stopped sex workers from seeking police protection and rendered them vulnerable to abuse from sex buyers. On the other hand, the pandemic caused the emergence of new precariousness-dimensions of sex work, like the risk of being infected with COVID-19, the lack of priority access to COVID-19 vaccinations, and the shift to illegality due to social distancing measures.

Sex Work - A Case for Current Conceptualizations of Precarious Work?

Compared to the conceptualizations of precarious work discussed in Chapter 2 (e.g., Vosko, 2010; Sanders & Hardy, 2013; Lorey, 2015; Campbell & Price, 2016), the existing and pandemic-induced precariousness dimensions of sex work identified by the present findings do not only render sex work an illustrative case for precarious work but also call for an extension of existing conceptualizations. In fact, following Vosko's (2010) model of precarious work, sex work meets all dimensions of precariousness associated with current conceptualizations of precarious work: (1) First, already before the pandemic, sex work was characterized by a *lack of regulatory protection*. To begin with, the primary goal of the regulationist sex work regime in the Netherlands is not the protection of sex workers' human and labour rights but the regulation of the sex work industry and the prevention of human trafficking (Bleeker, Mulder & Korf, 2022). Therefore, sex workers are not protected by the same labour laws as workers of other professions, which can be seen, amongst others, in the lack of rights and benefits of sex workers working via the opting-in model whose collaboration agreements with business owners do not protect them from dismissal or provide contractual security. Additionally, the lack of regulatory protection in sex work is also reflected in the lack of governmental control and standardization of the rules sex business owners impose on sex workers in their establishments. Since the brothel ban in 2000, sex workers working in sex businesses, like sex clubs, private houses, and escort agencies, can no longer be employed. Instead, the opting-in model was extended to the sex work industry to enable sex workers to work in indoor establishments while remaining independent of the establishments' owners and determining their work conditions, prices, and hours. In reality, however, sex workers frequently have to adhere to business owners' rules to work in their establishments. Due to the illusion that opting-in sex workers are independent and in charge of their working conditions, however, sex business owners can freely determine the rules and conditions of their establishments without governmental supervision and control. As a result, working conditions in different establishments can vastly differ, and sex workers' protection depends on the benevolence of individual business owners. (2) Second, sex work is frequently characterized by *low and irregular income*. Since many sex workers rely on agencies and club owners for new clients and are not allowed to circumvent agencies' mediating services, it often takes them a long time to build a customer base

that allows for a decent income. With agency fees of up to 40 percent of their income, sex work is frequently characterized by low and irregular income, especially in the first years of working for an agency. During the pandemic, this dimension of precariousness was further exacerbated by the loss of income resulting from work bans and the lack of financial support by the Dutch government to compensate for the lost income. (3) Third, based on the present findings, sex work is also characterized by *high employment insecurity*. For example, since opting-in workers are not entitled to employment benefits, they lose their income and potentially their job when they are sick. Additionally, sex business owners can end the collaboration by opting-in sex workers in their establishments at any time, which subjects sex workers to the arbitrariness of their terms and conditions and puts them at constant risk of losing their job. During the pandemic, the sudden closure of sex clubs, private houses, and agencies meant that sex workers lost their job, income, and the customer base they had built up. (4) Finally, sex work was also found to be characterized by *low levels of employee control over wages, hours, and working conditions*; while self-employed sex workers can usually determine their rates, work hours, number and type of clients, and work setting, opting-in sex workers have to adhere to the terms and conditions of the establishments they are working for. Their dependency on agencies and indoor establishments for new clients means they have little control over their number of work hours, income, customers assigned to them, and working conditions. The pandemic's financial constraints further exacerbated this dimension of precariousness by forcing sex workers with little or no alternatives to work illegally and take more risks regarding their customers and working conditions.

Extending Current Conceptualizations of Precarious Work

In sum, the dimensions of precariousness found to characterize sex work in the present findings render sex work an illustrative case for current conceptualizations of precariousness. At the same time, such conceptualizations defining precarious work in terms of job characteristics like the height of income, job security, and regulatory protection (Vosko, 2010) fail to fully capture the multiplicity and severity of the precariousness dimensions that contribute to the precarity of sex work. On the one hand, current conceptualizations of precarious work neglect essential attributes of precariousness in sex work, like the heightened risk of abuse and maltreatment by members of the police force, the lack of prosecution of criminal offences committed against sex workers, the conflation of sex work with human trafficking, and the regulation of sex work by different laws than all other professions.

On the other hand, current conceptualizations only consider the presence but not the severity of the precariousness dimensions that characterize a profession. Notably, the kind and severity of the consequences of specific precariousness dimensions of sex work on sex workers are fundamentally different than for workers in other occupations. For example, a frequently discussed case in the literature on precarious labor, amazon workers that have to wear diapers because they are not allowed to take toilet breaks (Zanoni & Miszczynski, 2022) is certainly outrageous, but the consequences of diaper-wearing and lack of breaks on the health of the workers does not compare to the detrimental physical and psychological harm that can result from precariousness attributes of sex work, like the lack of police protection.

Therefore, I suggest an extension of existing conceptualizations of precarious work in two directions: First, by horizontally complementing existing dimensions regarding job characteristics and workers' control over them with dimensions regarding professions' legality based on (labor) laws, protection by criminal law, and respectability based on dominant value systems in society. Second, by vertically nuancing existing and new dimensions with a severity rating, which allows basing the precariousness of professions not only on the presence but also the severity of their precariousness dimensions.

5.2. Depressed and Indignant

Notably, financial needs were not the only reason that drove sex workers' decision to work illegally during the pandemic. Even if sex workers were eligible for TOZO payments or could draw on private funds to cover their cost of living, many sex workers chose to return to work. The present findings yielded four factors that played a role in this decision:

First, the availability of options gave sex workers the capacity to address the emotions of depression and indignant resulting from the feeling of being let down and discriminated against by the Dutch government. Several interviewees addressed the toll that existential fears, lack of governmental support, and concerns about clients' well-being have taken on their mental health and the mental health of sex workers in their network. Inanna (46), a mother of two, has studied to become a teacher before changing careers and starting to work in sex care. As my first interviewee, she managed to break with all of my expectations before I was even aware of them. Everything about her elegant appearance and eloquent presentation seemed to radiate strength and empowerment. Sex work has allowed her to earn a living with relatively few flexible work hours, so she could put her teaching skills into practice by homeschooling her children. Besides giving the occasional tantric massage, she works as a sex coach and provides sex care. During the pandemic, Inanna received entrepreneurial TOZO payments for a few months. Unfortunately, the TOZO was a fixed rate rather than proportional to her regular income. Therefore, the loan did not suffice to cover her cost of living, and when the administrative hassle of applying for the TOZO became too big, she decided to go back to work instead. Regardless, her decision was not primarily driven by financial considerations, but Inanna's concerns about the lockdown's impact on her own mental health and the mental health of her clients:

> *"I believe that if a government says 'You're not allowed to work and earn money, but you are also not allowed to support yourself in other ways, and we'll put you on starvation mode, on an absolute minimum, which you're basically just withdrawing from.' [...] [T]hen I think you're just marginalizing and [...] omitting people. I think that's absolutely antisocial."* (Inanna, 46)

Second, another factor that seemed to contribute substantially to sex workers' feelings of depression and indignation was the unequal treatment and discrimination of sex work compared to other professions. While sex workers were initially treated like other contact professions, they were later

banned from working much longer than other contact professions. This resulted in tremendous frustration among sex workers that disagreed that sex workers are exposed to higher infection risks than hairdressers. Among others, several interviewees highlighted the strict intake and screening procedures, hygiene protocols, and COVID-19 test agreements that ensure the safety of sex workers and clients. Since Inanna (46) requires prospective clients to undergo extensive screening and provide her with ST-test results before starting their trajectory, she disagrees with the claims of the Dutch government regarding sex workers' heightened risk of COVID-19 infection and customer abuse.

> *"[Someone crossing my boundaries] would not happen, because I screen clients at the beginning of trajectories. They also have to provide a STI declaration and are required to get tested once per year. I am very strict with this: No insight, no service – bye! I am very careful with my clients, but also with my own health."* (Inanna, 46)

Also, Romana (54) reflects on the unequal measures in regard to sex workers and other contact professions and activities with similar infection risk:

> *"A sex worker with a face mask is unfortunately no option… no matter how long we talk about it. […] But we can sit in the sauna again [without a face mask]… because they [saunas] were allowed to reopen relatively soon. So, that was really twisted."* (Romana, 54)

Figure 2. Poster issued by the PROUD: "My protocol is safer than your social life. Sex workers have the right to equal treatment and support during times of crisis! Stop the stigma."

Third, besides their own mental health issues, several interviewees also addressed their concerns about their clients' physical and psychological well-being. Especially, sex workers active in sex care felt a

great responsibility for their clients, whom they knew many of them did not have any other options to receive physical warmth and affection. For example, many clients of Inanna's (46) suffer from disabilities and psychiatric disorders. The goal of their sex care trajectories is to teach them about sexuality and help them to explore their own sexuality. Therefore, only about twenty percent of Inanna's client contacts involve sexual intercourse. In other trajectories, her role is more didactic. For example, she provides masturbation training for clients with mental disabilities to prevent them from hurting themselves through excessive masturbation. All her sex care trajectories are personalized to fit the needs and goals of her clients, and often involve close collaboration with clients' caretakers. During the pandemic, Inanna received entrepreneurial TOZO payments for two months. Since the loan did not suffice to cover her cost of living and the administrative hassle of applying for the TOZO got bigger and bigger, she decided to return to work. Regardless, her decision was not primarily driven by financial considerations, but Inanna's concerns about the lockdown's impact on her own mental health and the mental health of her clients:

> "*During the pandemic, I saw that my clients started to suffer more and more, especially the elderly, because they were very much in need of intimacy*." (Inanna, 46)

Finally, since the monthly TOZO payments for entrepreneurs that had (partially) lost their income during the pandemic concerned a maximum amount of 1052 euros for singles and 1503 euros for married entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs in registered partnerships, the loan was not proportional to sex workers' income and cost of living. In fact, while some workers could only compensate a small proportion of their lost income with the TOZO, other entrepreneurs earned more than before the pandemic. Additionally, entrepreneurs could only apply for loans up to three times. As a result, some sex workers that were not able or willing to draw on their private funds to cover their remaining costs had to continue to see at least some clients against social distancing measures. Because of her registration as a nurse and dog walker, Emma (58) could not apply for TOZO payments. Due to money that Emma (58) had inherited from her parents, she did not have to continue to work illegally anyway:

> *"During the pandemic, sex work was not allowed at all. For me, that wasn't such a problem, because my parents died [before the pandemic]… that's why I had money. [...] So, many self-employed people could apply for the TOZO, but that wasn't much. It was something like 1,000 euros a month. And if you live here, that's just your rent and sometimes not even your rent. The girls from abroad are forced to rent in the free sector, of course, because with social rent, you have a waiting list of 15 years in Amsterdam or so, so that's not possible. And then you're also quickly at 1200 euros for rent per month."* (Emma, 58)

In sum, sex workers' motives for disobeying social distancing orders and working illegally cannot be reduced to financial needs and the absence of other options. Instead, the precarization of sex workers' working and living conditions during the pandemic was influenced by a variety of factors, like sex workers' mental health issues caused by the lack of support, unequal treatment, and existential needs that shaped their pandemic experience. As should be mentioned, most participants in the present

sample had at least enough options to decrease the urgency of making every client contact possible, regardless of the associated risks one's for safety and protection. Importantly, this unequal representation of experiences in the present sample must do considered in the need for recovery and healing during the aftermath of the pandemic, especially for members of marginalized groups in society, like opting-in workers, that were harmed and rendered vulnerable the most. As a consequence, my unsuccessful attempts to recruit members of the most vulnerable groups of sex workers, migrant sex workers, for research participation and the resulting unequal representation of experiences by sex workers in the sample, should not be seen as indicative of prevalence of different experiences among sex workers in the Netherlands, but as reflective of the levels of trauma and harm inflicted on this group. Additionally, just because the availability of options created a bit more leeway for sex workers to determine their course of action regarding the work ban, does not mean that they were not harmed and made vulnerable by the circumstances during the pandemic.

> *"Of course, I could have [found another job], but I resisted it. I had friends who just went: 'Okay, I cannot do my job anymore, so I'm just going to start testing people at the GGD or work at the grocery store. But I felt so… almost annoyed, yeah. Like, oh my god, all because of these stupid government regulations. I just did not want to do anything else [than sex work]. I started working in sex work to be able to finance my dissertation, but then I noticed that it was a cool turn of events to make it my career. Three years later, I suddenly could not do my job anymore. It just felt so shitty. But I noticed that every time we had to close when also hairdressers and massage therapists had to close, I shrugged my shoulders and thought: I mean, I get it. People are dying; it is dangerous."(*Anna, 35)

This excerpt from my conversation with Anna highlights the harm inflicted by the lack of governmental support during the pandemic is not merely financial. Therefore, the availability of options might mitigate the existential threat emanated by financial hardship but does not entirely prevent sex workers from being harmed. Moreover, the lack of governmental pandemic support for sex workers cannot be reduced to notions of falling between the cracks and being treated unfairly. Instead, the lack of support and discrimination of sex workers compared to other professions are part of the intentional exploitation of sex workers' vulnerability for the benefit of the Dutch government.

> *"If a government is so oblivious to the group I belong to and ultimately so oblivious to my rights... I mean, I have duties too: I also pay taxes, and I'm very responsible in the way I conduct my business. There are limits to what is realistic."* (Inanna, 46)

Based on the present findings, the role of the Dutch government in shaping sex workers' experience during the pandemic is undeniable. More specifically, the exploration of sex workers' experiences yielded several ways in which the government impacted sex workers' pandemic experience. The lack of governmental support for opting-in sex workers and sex workers registered for other professions to protect their privacy, the unequal treatment of sex workers compared to other contact professions, and the risks for sex workers' safety and health resulting from making sex work illegal. In light of prior research depicting regulationist sex work regimes' primary purpose to be the regulation of the sex

work industry (Scoular, 2010; Vanwesenbeeck, 2011, 2017; Bleeker et al., 2022) rather than the protection of sex workers' rights there is reason to believe that the unequal treatment of sex workers by the Dutch government is intentional and serves a purpose for the Dutch government. Here, Isabel Lorey's (2015) theory of governmental precarization provides an interesting analytical lens to shed light on the potential interests of the Dutch government in sex workers' unequal treatment and lack of support: By simultaneously prohibiting sex workers from executing their profession and earning money and denying them financial support to compensate for their loss of income, the government might purposefully render sex workers precarious. As a result, particularly sex workers that highly depend on their sex work income - or governmental benefits, for that matter - found themselves cornered and deprived of their opportunities to take matters into their own hands. While the illegality of sex work during the pandemic alone rendered sex work more dangerous, high dependency on (sufficient) booking left even less room for negotiation and further exacerbated the precariousness of sex work. This intentional precarization of sex workers living and working conditions through exclusion from the Welfare State staged by the Dutch government gives way to the construction of sex workers as the precarious Other that is a threat to the rest of society. By offering protection against the supposed threat presented by sex workers (and other marginalized groups in society), the Dutch government gains its legitimacy. In other words: following the logic of governmental precarization, the Dutch government is legitimized by offering protection from the very 'threat' it creates.

Importantly, this construction of sex workers as the precarious Other is also driven by dimensions of precariousness that were already involved in sex work before the pandemic; for example, the (political) conflation of sex work with trafficking, which results in the victimization and incapacitation of sex workers in the eyes of the public, supports conservative Christian notions that engagement sex work is necessarily involuntary, and, therefore, renders sex workers even more precarious. On top of that, also the differential treatment of sex workers compared to other professions plays an essential role in sex workers' construction as the precarious Other. This differential treatment is reflected in various official and unofficial differences between sex workers and other professions: a) the differential pandemic measures and longer work bans for sex workers, b) the prohibition of sex workers from working in employment relations with the Law Reform in 2000 that gave rise to an extension of the opting-in system to sex work, effectively, stripping sex workers of all employee rights, benefits and protection, and c) the regulation of sex work under different laws than all other professions in the Netherlands. Notably, the latter must also be considered in light of empirical research on different sex work regimes that highlight that the legalization of sex work, like in the Netherlands, neither seeks nor achieves an improvement of sex workers' societal position and labour rights. Instead, it was found to keep societal stigmatization and exclusion of sex workers intact by reinforcing their differential professional status. In light of governmental precarization, a legalizing sex work regime is a logical choice since it allows the government to keep sex workers in their precarious position through regulation, which also allows for keeping a suitable precariousness threshold. It is essential to realize that in light of governmental precarization, the Dutch government has no interest in ever improving the position of sex workers in society, as it relies on their precariousness for its legitimization.

The constructedness of the precarious Other by the government based on one or several social groups that Isabel Lorey's (2015) theory postulates raise the question of who gets to be 'the lucky one'. In other words, who qualifies as a candidate for the job of precious Other in the eyes of the Dutch government? Following the reasoning in previous paragraphs and assuming that sex workers in the Netherlands are indeed (one of the societal groups serving as) the precarious Other by which the Dutch government derives and maintains its legitimacy narrows the consideration as mentioned above to the case-specific question of why sex workers might lend themselves as precarious Other. Here, sex workers' positioning on dominant sexuality hierarchies might yield profound exploratory value: As highlighted in Section 2.4., many sexualities represented in sex work, like BDSM, polygamy, commercial sex, and pornography, are deemed deviant by heteronormative, traditionalist value systems for sexuality norms (Rubin, 1984). As a result, their constructed positioning on dominant sexuality hierarchies based on these value systems is low; despite the constructedness of these hierarchies, sex workers' overall low positioning on them have severe and wide-ranging real-life implications for e.g., the respectability, mental well-being, legality and access to government support and benefits (Rubin, 1984) of members of the sex work community. Similarly, Judith Butler's (2011) book *Bodies that Matter* argues that the interplay of one's positioning on different dominant value systems also determines which bodies 'matter' and are worthy of protection by the Welfare State. Applied to the present research, given the transactional monetary nature, changing partners and sex practices associated with sex work (Rubin, 1984), as well as the historical stigmatization of sex workers (Vanwesenbeeck, 2017), and the moralist character of ongoing debates regarding sex work regulatory regimes (Scoular, 2010; Vanwesenbeeck, 2011, 2017; Bleeker et al., 2022), there is a reason to believe that sex workers' sexuality - judged by heteronormative, traditionalist sexuality value systems (Rubin, 1984) - is about as deviant as it gets and their positionality in dominant sexuality hierarchies as low as it gets (Butler, 2011). Notably, most of the severe consequences of sexual deviance postulated by Rubin (1984) and Butler (2011) align with factors shaping sex workers' pandemic experiences in the present research. Think, for example, of the lack of governmental support and material benefits described by Rubin (1984) and the lack of protection from the Welfare State mentioned by Butler (2011). Notably, many of the proposed consequences, like the negative implications for a person's legality and respectability, are reflected in the differential treatment of sex workers compared to other professions under the current sex work regime and the societal stigmatization and exclusion of sex workers in the Netherlands. Therefore, value systems and sexuality hierarchies seem to offer meaningful explanatory frameworks to understand sex workers' experiences and the precariousness of their living and working conditions. On top of that, the stigmatization and exclusion of sex workers from the protection of the Dutch Welfare State, larger society, and governmental support measures seem to - at least partly - result from their sexual deviance, and low positioning in dominant sexuality hierarchies render sex workers almost archetypal of the precarious. As they will not need much additional precarization or construction as a threat for the Dutch population to buy the role of the precarious Other from them, they are a convenient choice for the precarious Other for the Dutch government.

In conclusion, in an attempt to determine how certain social groups end up in the role of the precarious Other in governmental precarization, I investigated the role of sexuality hierarchies in rendering sex workers a suitable 'candidate' for the precarious Other. To my knowledge, the role of sexual norms and hierarchies in the construction of certain social groups as the precarious Other has not previously been addressed in research. The explanatory symbiosis of the link between sexual hierarchies and governmental precarization for the experiences of sex workers in the Netherlands during the pandemic and beyond calls for linking governmental precarization with value systems that are meaningful for the marginalization - and, potentially, governmental precarization - of other social groups.

5.3. Communal and Self-efficacious

Several interviewees reflected on the importance of the resilience and self-efficacy of the sex work community in shaping their pandemic experience and organizing their resistance against the lack of support by the Dutch governmental, the differential treatment of sex workers compared to other professions, and the heightened risk associated with the illegality of sex work resulting from social distancing measures. Therefore, especially, experiences of sex workers with relatively many options and low dependence on their income foregrounded the benefits resulting from the sense of community and self-efficacy amongst members of the sex work community.

The findings yielded several themes that were frequently mentioned regarding the self-efficacy and resourcefulness of the sex work community. To begin with, many sex workers recounted the support they found in the sex work community and their social networks. Organizations founded by and for sex workers, like Save, PROUD, or Sekswerkexpertise, created emergency funds for sex workers that could not access any government funding. For example, they started fundraising activities like online bingo nights to raise money to support sex workers. Additionally, sex work organizations started campaigning for equal rights for sex workers compared to other professions. Goddess Red (51), a dominatrix that did not give any live sessions throughout the pandemic, addresses community initiatives that were created in no time to support sex workers during the pandemic:

> *"We had a go-fund-me page from sex works, and we definitely got quite a sum of money there. And we organized bingo's, online bingos. And they could buy tickets and the earnings went to, together with our go funds incomes, to those sex workers that had the most difficult time. The prices available [in the bingos] came from organizations we approached, like, for example, sex shops […] But the community did this almost all alone, so it came from us sex workers, we set it up."* (Goddess Red, 51)

Additionally, when physical meetings with sex buyers were prohibited during the lockdowns, several sex workers resorted to new and creative forms of sex work:

> *"Some have started to work online, cam sex, phone calls, text… some have even sold used underwear! [giggles]"* (Emma, 58)

Indeed, branches of sex work that did not involve physical contact or local proximity to customers and, therefore, were not at risk of COVID-19 infection, like cam sex or pornography, were not or hardly impacted by the pandemic. In fact, the prohibition of most types of sex work, entailed an increase in demand for remote forms of sex work and the growth of certain sex work branches during the pandemic. Importantly, this increase of certain sex work branches did not necessarily entail more job opportunities and higher income for sex workers engaging in them. In the one hand, the increased demand for online forms of sex work, was paired to the online shift of sex workers banned from working in other types of sex work. On the other hand, the popularity of free pornography sites and public access to formerly paid pornography sites made it hard for professional porn actors to get paid for their services. Bear is a transman sex worker that works in the queer porn industry and produces and enacts queer porn movies. Queer pornography aims to reclaim the bodies and identities that are not represented in so-called 'cheesy mainstream porn'. Even before the pandemic, Bear's work in queer porn did not suffice to cover their cost of living. Therefore, Bear was used to have other sources of income, like their income from working at the PIC; during the pandemic, Bear found a 'pandemic-proof' job as a mail man:

> "[…] *I might not really be who you are looking for, because I wasn't really impacted by the pandemic. On the one hand, I have a second job as a mail man that pays my bills, and on the other hand, the porn industry was not really impacted by the pandemic. […] Also, there was no money in queer porn before, so nothing much changed. [...] So, I think some of my colleagues can speak to the trouble more than I can.*" (Bear, 52)

Once more, this excerpt highlights that sex workers' dependency on their income from sex work was a crucial factor in determining their pandemic experience. Interestingly, Bear also remarked that pornography is frequently not perceived as a form of sex work, which explains not only why the pornography industry boomed during the pandemic, but also why people are generally more open about the fact they consume porn, even if they otherwise reject sex work:

> *"A lot of people just don't connect sex work and porn. If we recognise that porn is sex work, and we consume porn, then that makes us clients of sex workers, and we don't want to be that."* (Bear, 52)

Moreover, if sex workers chose to return to work illegally, they often self-efficacously took measures to ensure the safety of sex workers and clients. For example, a lot of sex workers developed sophisticated hygiene protocols and put intake and screening procedures in place to ensure their health and physical safety.

> *"With one client who wasn't disabled but due to his age at a heightened risk of infection, I just agreed with him and his caretakers that we would both do a test before meeting up."* (Inanna, 46)

Finally, many interviewees mentioned the importance of being confirmed and supported their decision to resume their work illegally for their ability to deal with periods of anxiety and to handle challenging

situations. For Inanna (46), the support of her partner was not only decisive for her return to work, but also equipped her with the confidence needed to safeguard her boundaries and decrease the susceptibility to client abuse resulting from being rendered vulnerable, optionless, and illegal.

> *"[…] [T]his [abuse by sex buyers] didn't happen to me because I had psychologically determined my own boundaries by deciding 'I'm just going to do this'. Therefore, my boundaries remained the same [as before the pandemic]'. But also because [...] one of my partners just said: 'If you get a fine, I'll just pay it. This is not going to end well otherwise [if she went on like this and didn't go back to work], so this is just what we'll do.' So, he really had my back."* (Inanna, 46)

To this day, genuine openness, tolerance to difference, curiosity to experience, and positive attitude towards each other that I witnessed and experienced during countless encounters, continues to amaze me. As a Junior Lecturer, and during past volunteering projects, I have seen members of other marginalized groups dealing with experiences of discrimination and exclusion in very different ways. Some became sour, turned inwards, and internalized their depression. Others decided to change the world and turned every encounter - even with the mail man - into a political debate. Still others decided to turn the tables, at least in their little microcosms, and let others experience first-hand what they had to endure; they became harsh, cranky, and, frankly, a bit intolerant. Oh, what a world of difference in the sex work community!

When I started to spend more and more time in the sex work community, for data collection, contributions, or just as a friend, I did not yet understand the full scope of structural discrimination, disregard, and exclusion that sex workers in the Netherlands have to face every day, as it is ingrained in the system. Yet, I got the impression that members of the community - as diverse as it gets - were mostly in good spirit, strong-willed, self-directed, very hands-on, supportive, and clearly committed to finding a common ground that includes everyone, regardless of differences. The governing strategy of the common ground? Dark sense of humor! The darker, the better. Sexual jokes and obscene language were explicitly allowed.

This raises the question of how a relatively small community of heterogeneous individuals with little financial means or institutionalized support structures has shown such remarkable resistance in the face of persistent stigmatization, marginalization, and exclusion. I will argue that it is, in fact, this common ground and the shared interest and commitment of the community members in keeping it like that, that constitutes the essence of the sex work community. The principle of the commons by Silvia Frederica (Caffentzis & Federici, 2014) refers to a principle of social organization that contests the privatization of resources in capitalist societies that makes it possible for individuals to make money of the artificial scarcity of resources that could be there for everyone. Instead, the commons are forms of real or imagined wealth that is shared and managed communally in an away that benefits everyone. Notably, the commons go beyond just a shared space alone, and also refers to the shared interest and commitment of community members. This is in line with my observation that keeping the common ground open for everyone, seems to be an unspoken agreement and interest of all

community members. Additionally, also the organization of sex work organizations is very communal and rejects hierarchies: While all members of Seksworks are also Board Members, the PIC has a board but always meets up with the entire team. Similarly, Bear reflected on the communal decision-making in queer porn: While the producer comes up with a general theme and hires a number of actors, the specific story line, role division amongst the actor, and sexual acts are determined by the team, and require everyone to feel comfortable to be accepted and realized.

> "*Working in mainstream porn, we don't really talk about consent. We talk about what kinds of scenes the director wants to shoot, how they want to shoot them, and usually who he wants to shoot them with. And then that's what we do. Whereas in a queer set the director has an idea, let's say, I want to make a road movie where we're driving around picking up hitchhikers, and the movie shows different scenes of that road trip. But then what exactly happens within those scenes is worked out between the actors before any camera is set. So, instead of being directed around and an idea being imposed onto us, we play an active role in the creative process."* (Bear, 52)

This excerpt highlights how members of different branches of the sex work industry apply the principle of the common to their way of collaborating and fostering shared interests in various projects and initiatives. As a result, social relations and bonds between community members arise, referred to as commoning, reflected in the respectful, open-minded, and communal interactions between community members. By applying these principles of the commons and commoning to all organizations and initiatives, the sex work community sets up all processes and actions of members of the sex work industry that are carried by the rest of the community, avoiding fragmentation, and maximizing the community's potential to effect change. This explains why the sex work community has shown to be so effective in organizing its resistance on a local and national level by setting up initiatives and creating an infrastructure for its members, despite its small size and limited financial means. In line with Monteagudo (2019), their fight against the exploitation by the Dutch government and Welfare State does not go entirely without governmental funding, which is reflected in the collaboration of organizations like Seksworks and Proud with their municipalities for shared policymaking and funding. Gradually, this will create structures within the sex work industry that allow sex workers to reclaim the resources currently denied, like governmental benefits, protection by the welfare state, and labor rights. With the growth of its structures, the sex work community will gradually be able to take control over essential resources in its own hands, which decreases its dependence on institutions of the Dutch state and makes them less vulnerable to exploitation and governmental precarization. In conclusion, the principles of the commons and commoning offer an insightful theoretical framework for the resistance and resilience of the sex work community, while also giving perspective for a potential independence of the sex work community from the Dutch government despite governmental precarization (Caffentzis & Federici, 2014).

5.4. In Full Agency and Recognized

This final section of my thesis concerns the experience of sex workers at the other end of the continuum, which is characterized by full recognition of sex workers as professionals and humans, which puts them in full agency. Unfortunately, none of the participants in the sample represented this experience. Instead, this section refers to the answers of the participants when imagining an ideal future scenario for sex work in the Netherlands: A sex work utopia. The findings yielded four requirements to achieve such a future scenario: (1) full decriminalization of sex work, (2) recognition as legal profession (3) collaborative and evidence-based sex work policies, (4) and provision of the same infrastructure, including professional training for sex workers, as other professions.

Full Decriminalization

Worldwide, only two countries have fully decriminalized sex work: New Zealand (Abel, Fitzgerald, Healy & Taylor, 2010; Bleeker et al., 2022) and, very recently, Belgium (Chini, 2022). In decriminalizing sex work regimes, sex work is regulated as much as possible by existing legislation within labor, tax, and administrative law. This also means, that sex workers are mostly subjected and protected by the same labor law as other professions (McCarthy et al., 2012; Bleeker et al., 2022).

> *"In New Zealand, where sex work is decriminalized, sex workers have a union and are allowed to work together. There, sex work is simply a profession just like any other."* (Kate, 37)

As discussed in Section 2.2., the goal of decriminalization is to ensure sex workers' human and labor rights, and safeguard their right to self-determination, equality, and inclusion. While critics worried that the full decriminalization of sex work in New Zealand with the Prostitution Reform Act in 2003 might entail the rapid growth of the sex work industry and the associated sex tourism, these concerns were not confirmed ever since (Bleeker et al., 2022). Decriminalization has additionally been found to be paramount to the destigmatization of sex work and the creation of safe work environments for sex workers (Wagenaar, Amesberger & Altink, 2017; Wijers, 2018; Bleeker et al., 2022). As has been discussed in one of the previous sections, sex workers' precarity is reflective of the sexuality norms and values held in wider society.

> *"If there was no stigma, there would be no problem. If people thought of a sex worker is also going to report to the police, there wouldn't be this. So, the stigma imposed by society here creates the problem. A bank won't give you an account, won't give you a mortgage because you're a sex worker, even though it's a legal profession. So then I think: we create the problem. It is, it doesn't have to be a problem, precisely because of the further along it was allowed to go. That makes it a dangerous industry. That's just a shame, because it's also a very beautiful profession, you know."* (Esther, 43)

To reduce sex workers' precarity and improve their position in the Netherlands, full decriminalization is a crucial step in reducing the sex work stigma held in Dutch society.

> *"The law needs to change. Sex work is work, so if the law reflects that, you ensure that people are in full agency and […] that people can secure their rights well. […] And there should be no stigmatization, the media should*

> *promote a healthy image [of sex work/ers], and [sex workers] should be able to prosecute. If we tackle a couple of other institutions like the church, the banking system, and so on, the government will also tag along and change the law. […] And there should be no zero-option any more. I mean, if you say: Sex work is work, then it is a legal profession, and [sex workers] should be able to work everywhere. With the [introduction of the] APV, municipalities have gotten too much power, which is insane."* (Innane, 46)

No Status Differences to Other Professions

Throughout the interviews, participants repeatedly mentioned the injustice of having to pay taxes and, therefore, fulfil their duties as a legal profession in the Netherlands, while not being granted any of the labour rights and governmental support associated with other legal professions:

> *"Sex work is legal, but that's about it. Every municipality can make their own rules. So, for example, in Amsterdam, sex workers are the only profession that cannot work from home. We are also the only profession that always needs their CofC-registration on them, so we can show them when police approach us in the window. If you don't have it with you, sex businesses you work for can lose their licence."* (Emma, 58)

For sex workers that do not want to risk their privacy by officially registering as sex worker at the CofC, registering under a different profession or working via the opting-in model are currently the only two alternatives, none of which is truly attractive. In the prolonging of full decriminalization is the regulation of the sex work industry by the same laws and policies applicable for other (contact-) professions in the Netherlands. For many sex workers, the erasure of the status difference and differential treatment of sex work compared to other professions is an important characteristic of a brighter (sex work) future in the Netherlands. Tom (46) highlights that treating sex work like any other profession would make the sex work industry a lot safer:

> *"If sex workers could just register for their profession, without being labelled and without all the hassle, and if they were able to open a professional bank account, everything would become a lot safer. At the moment, there is still a lot of cash payment, so sex workers risk being robbed because people know they have a lot of cash at home. And I don't get it. For some reason, we continue to be so short-sighted, even though [sex work] is one of the oldest professions in the world and very much needed!"* (Tom, 46)

Collaborative and Evidence-based Sex Work Policies

Currently, the degree to which municipalities and local policymakers engage sex workers in their decision-making processes highly varies in different regions of the Netherlands (Vanwesenbeeck, 2011). Sex workers are often talked about instead of being talked to. Therefore, many interviewees consider collaboration with municipality officials and policymakers a critical prerequisite for the improvement of sex workers' position in the Netherlands. For example, sex workers' voices have repeatedly been disregarded in the debates about the erotic centre that the municipality of Amsterdam wants to build at the outskirts of the city. The goal of the erotic centre is to remove sex work from the heart of Amsterdam, therefore, making it less visible and integral to society. Sex workers are

concerned that the planned ban of the industry to a remote industrial area at the outskirts of Amsterdam would bear significant risks for their safety and reduce the size of the industry due to customers' long journey getting there and missing anonymity of the red-light district.

Professional Infrastructure

Several interviewees have voiced the wish for a professional infrastructure similar to the one available for other professions. In particular, they repeatedly voiced the wish for formal education and training opportunities that allow sex workers to be better prepared for the job and profit from each other's expertise without having to find out everything by themselves. Furthermore, they have also voiced the necessity for sex work to be embedded in a professional support network, including confidential persons, health care providers and mental health professionals where they can seek professional support if needed.

> *"I think there needs to be an organ that is controlled by an external party and allows sex workers to, for example, get an insurance for a normal rate, open a professional bank account, or get a mortgage to buy a house."* (Romana, 54)

Finally, while a lot of these infrastructures already exist in the form of community initiatives founded by sex workers and allies, several interviewees were critical of their reliance on their private social networks and the sex work community for support that should usually be put in place by the government and local municipalities. Instead of asking sex workers repeatedly to invest their time and energy in self-founded initiatives, and share their expertise for free, interviewees highlighted either wanting to get paid for sharing their expertise or wanting to be granted an infrastructure by the Dutch government like other legal professions. Inanna (46) elaborates on the requirements for a brighter sex work future in the Netherlands:

> *"The government should give a million a year in subsidies to organizations like PROUD, run by and for sex workers, and only specific expertise like ICT or an accountant should be outsourced to third parties outside the sex work community. Additionally, the sex work industry should be organized like in New-Zeeland. There, sex workers also have a union and advocacy organization, but they are put in place by the Dutch government. [...] If we receive more funding and support from the government for organizations run by sex workers, they can keep doing what they do, but are finally compensated for it."* (Inanna, 46)

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The present research explored the experience of sex workers in the Netherlands during the pandemic as a case for marginalized groups' pandemic precarity. Utilizing the pandemic's exacerbating effect on social injustices, as well as exploring marginalized workers' experience of their living and working conditions during the pandemic, can yield important insights into the emergence, perpetuation, and implications of these social inequalities. In view of opposing trends of victimization and incapacitation of sex workers in prior literature, the qualitative approach of the present study aims to highlight sex workers' autonomy, agency, and resilience by giving them the space to speak for themselves during semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Following the conceptual distinction between precarious work and precarious worker by Campbell and Price (2016), the findings provide a categorization of sex workers' pandemic experiences and reflect on the factors that contributed to shaping them. While the resulting categories of experiences would be more accurately described as different positions on a spectrum ranging from the experiences of sex workers without any options to the experiences of sex workers with many options, the somewhat simplified presentation of the findings as distinct categories of experience allowed for a clearer structure of the results and their interpretation. My analysis of the implications of the research findings about sex workers' experiences in the light of empirical literature on precarious work, regulatory sex work regimes, governmental precarization, and commoning yielded four conceptual contributions. The following paragraphs summarize these contributions and explore their implications for the perpetuation of inequalities towards marginalized groups in general.

First, by comparing the precariousness-dimensions found to have characterized sex work and shaped sex workers' experience during the pandemic to current conceptualizations of precarious work in the empirical body of literature, and though sex work has only recently started to be discussed in the context of empirical literature on precarious work (Sanders & Hardy, 2013; Stewart, 2013; Cruz, 2013; Sanders & Hardy, 2014; Orchiston, 2016), I showed that sex work meets all criteria commonly included in current conceptualizations of precarious work (Vosko, 2010), therefore rendering it a relevant case for precarious work. At the same time, existing conceptualizations fail to adequately capture the multiplicity of the precariousness dimensions in sex work and consider only the presence of certain precariousness-dimensions, but not the severity of their impact. Given the likely unsurpassed severity of the implications of certain precariousness dimensions in sex work for sex workers' safety and health, I, therefore, suggested an extension of existing conceptualizations of precarious work based on three additional dimensions of precariousness, and a severity rating for the implications of all dimensions.

Second, the theory of governmental precarization from Isabel Lorey (2015) offers an interesting analytical lens to explore the role of the Dutch government in shaping sex workers' pandemic experience. By denying sex workers governmental benefits to compensate for their income loss during work bans and treating them differently than other professions, the government is in fact precarizing sex workers' living and working conditions. This serves the construction of the precarious Other in opposition to stability and order in society. The government derives it legitimation by offering

protection from the very threat it created: sex workers, the precarious Other. In this context, sexuality hierarchies can provide a useful theoretical framework for understanding why sex workers lend themselves as the precarious Other. A lot of sexualities associated with sex work, like BDSM, pornography or commercial sex, are deemed deviant by traditional, heteronormative sexuality norms and values (Rubin, 1984). The resulting low positioning on sexuality hierarchies has severe real-life implications for sex workers, including their exclusion from institutional support, material benefits and the Welfare State (Rubin, 1984; Butler, 2011). This does not only explain a lot of factors that shaped sex workers' pandemic experience, nor does it only contribute to their general precarious living and working conditions in the Netherlands, but it also explains why sex workers might have been a perfect candidate for the precarious Other. Importantly, it also highlights that the Dutch government might not be interested in improving the situation of sex workers in Dutch society, which is in line with the regulationist sex work regime in the Netherlands (Bleeker et al., 2022) and the new draft for the Sex Work Regulation Bill (Sekswerkexpertise, 2022).

The implications of this contribution for the emergence, perpetuation, and implications of social inequalities towards marginalized groups is three-fold: First, it highlights the usefulness of using governmental precarization as an analytical tool to explore which factors contribute to the emergence and perpetuation of social inequalities, and the purpose they might serve for the government. Second, it points out that social inequalities might very well be intended to keep marginalized groups in their precarious position with no intention to improve their position in society. Third, it depicts the explanatory value of dominant value systems in society for understanding why certain marginalized groups offer themselves for the construction of the precarious Other. While the conceptual link between sexuality hierarchies and governmental precarization has not previously been made, its usefulness for the analysis of the present findings suggests that the consideration of other value systems in the context of governmental precarization might yield new insights in the emergence, perpetuation, and implications of social inequalities towards marginalized groups.

Finally, the third contribution of this research commissions the principles of the commons and commoning to serve as an insightful analytical framework for understanding the resilience and self-efficacy of the sex work community in the face of persistent stigmatization and exclusion from society. By challenging the hierarchization and exclusion in capitalist profit-oriented societies, the sex work community follows the politics of the commons in fostering a common ground that includes all members of the sex work community that is communally shared and managed and benefits all members of the sex work community. Preserving this common ground is a shared interest and a commitment of all community members. By offering sex workers an autonomous space to organize their resistance to capitalist exploitation and reclaiming their rights to the resources that are currently denied to them, like governmental benefits, protection by the welfare state, and labor rights, sex workers organize their struggles on communal and national level, wherein the common ground fostered amongst members of the sex work community is the essence of their resilience and has the potential to give way for their increasing independence from the monopoly of the Dutch state over resources and power that currently causes their precarious position in Dutch society.

The present research project highlights the relevance of offering members of marginalized groups the space to speak for themselves and about their experience to understand the emergence, perpetuation, and implications of the social inequalities that shape their experience and contribute to their marginalization, hereby differentiating between the condition that marginalized group members face and their experience of that condition.

As it was previously mentioned in section 5.2, the role of sexual norms and hierarchies in the construction of certain social groups as the precarious Other has not been yet explicitly addressed in current literature. Hence, the novelty of this research lies in its versatility and potentiality to be applied and extended onto various marginalized and minoritized groups such as LGBTQI refugees- possibly Arabs and Muslims- in order to unpack the relationship between one's positioning on the sexual hierarchies and its collateral governmental precariousness, when Othering factors such as religion, nationality, and sexual orientation come into play. That being said, I would like to end by emphasizing that, contrary to common belief, the creation of the Other, rather than it seeming solely a societal issue and the by-product of a bottom-up process stemming from the governed against the Other and landing in the lap of decision and policymakers- is as much a carefully crafted top-down governmental construction, taking exactly the opposite path.

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