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# Still We Rise—The Contemporary Sex Worker Movement in Europe in the Context of Neo-Abolitionism and Repressive Policies<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

In 2015, sex worker activists across Europe celebrated the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their political mobilisations. Despite having sustained and further institutionalised their transnational movement, these activists are currently confronted with an increasingly adversarial context formed by neo-abolitionist prostitution opponents and repressive policies. In this paper, I explore how sex workers in Europe engage in activism in this adversarial context and investigate how the latter impacts on their contemporary mobilisations. My analysis of the movement's framing processes demonstrates that it is indeed strongly influenced by neo-abolitionism and repressive policies. Yet, activists continue to mobilise and adjust strategically in an attempt to reclaim self-representation, build coalitions, achieve legislative reform and ultimately, drive social change.

*Keywords: sex work; social movements; neo-abolitionism; Europe; framing; prostitution politics; protest strategies*

For the sex worker movement in Europe, 2015 was a special year. For one, it was celebrating four decades of activism and commemorating the first organised mobilisations of European sex workers, which took place in France in 1975.<sup>2</sup> For another, the internationally renowned human rights organisation *Amnesty International* (AI) officially adopted a policy on the decriminalisation of sex work after extensive lobbying by sex worker activists. Yet, the policy also generated outrage among other human rights groups,

1 I am especially grateful to all the activists who participated in my research and only made it possible by sharing valuable insights and personal perspectives with me. In addition, I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback, and in particular Mareen Heying, Alice Mattoni and Måns Lundstedt, who have been of great help in improving this paper.

2 Lilian Mathieu: Une mobilisation improbable: l'occupation de l'église Saint-Nizier par les prostituées lyonnaises. *Revue Française de Sociologie* 40:3 (1999), pp. 475.

feminist organisations and faith-based collectives.<sup>3</sup> This ‘neo-abolitionist’ coalition of prostitution opponents accuses proponents of decriminalisation of legitimising human trafficking, sexual abuse and large-scale exploitation of women. It advocates a complete elimination of prostitution through tightened anti-trafficking laws and the criminal prosecution of sex buyers and profiteers. Neo-abolitionist frameworks and repressive prostitution policies have in fact become increasingly popular and prevalent across Europe. Sex workers follow this development with concern, observing a deterioration of their living and working conditions under these regimes. The heated public debates following AI’s decision demonstrated that the issue of sex work remains highly polarising. Within these debates, sex worker activists and their opinions are still being ignored or denigrated. Given the general economic, social and political marginalisation of sex workers across Europe, it is remarkable that sex worker activists have sustained and further institutionalised their movement over the course of 40 years.

In this paper, I explore how sex workers in Europe engage in activism in the current context of neo-abolitionism and repressive policies, and I investigate how the latter impact on their contemporary mobilisations. My analysis of sex workers’ framing processes demonstrates that they are indeed strongly influenced by this adversarial context. In light of Ratna Kapur’s assertion that research undertaken outside the lens of victimisation reveals the “dynamic interplay between repression and resistance”<sup>4</sup>, I intend to show that sex workers in Europe are engaged activists who are severely challenged by neo-abolitionism and repressive policies, but continue to mobilise and adjust strategically in an attempt to reclaim self-representation, build alliances, achieve legislative reform and ultimately, drive social change. Whereas an abundance of contemporary research from the fields of law, health, feminist and labour studies scrutinises different ideological and legal frameworks on sex work and the position of sex workers in them, sex workers’ social movements are still an under-researched phenomenon. Some recent scholarship addresses sex workers’ collective organisation in trade unions<sup>5</sup>, but the field of social movement studies has so far produced little on these actors’ political mobilisations. This is especially true for the mobilisations that have been occurring across Europe since the

3 Coalition Against Trafficking in Women International: Open letter to Amnesty International, New York 2015, at: <http://catwinternational.org/Content/Images/Article/621/attachment.pdf> (accessed on 6 June 2017).

4 Ratna Kapur: Post-colonial Economies of Desire: Legal Representations of the Sexual Subaltern, in: *Denver University Law Review* 78:4 (2000), pp. 855–886, p. 857.

5 E.g. Gregor Gall: Sex Worker Collective Organization: Between Advocacy Group and Labour Union?, in: *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, 29:3 (2010), pp. 289–304; Kate Hardy: Incorporating Sex Workers into the Argentine Labor Movement, in: *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 77:1 (2010), pp. 89–108; Gowri Vijayakumar/Shubha Chacko/Subadra Panchanadeswaran: Sex Workers Join the Indian Labor Movement, in: *New Labor Forum*, 24:2 (2015), pp. 90–96.

early 2000s.<sup>6</sup> In comparison to this, sex worker movements in other regions have received some scholarly attention: Kamala Kempadoo and Jo Doezema<sup>7</sup> were among the first scholars to take stock of the global movement's activities, main issues and developments, while others have analysed how in North America sex worker activists successfully re-framed prostitution as a social problem<sup>8</sup>, introduced non-discriminatory health policies<sup>9</sup>, organised for labour rights<sup>10</sup>, or, as Sarah Beer shows in this issue, engaged in constitutional litigation. How sex workers mobilised to repeal criminalising legislation is also fairly well documented in the case of New Zealand.<sup>11</sup> Chi Adanna Mgbako<sup>12</sup> provides a recent overview of contemporary sex worker organising across Africa, while others examine how Indian sex workers “came to reinvent themselves as social actors”<sup>13</sup> through their activism. As Moshoula Capous Desyllas puts aptly, such “subjective experiences and voices of sex workers are seldom heard and their needs are consistently defined and represented by non-sex workers throughout history, in society and within academia”.<sup>14</sup> Yet, this gap is slowly being filled by works in which sex workers themselves define the parameters of the movement and theorise sex work in collaboration with scholars.<sup>15</sup>

With its analysis of the contemporary sex worker movement in Europe this paper contributes to social movement studies through a focus on sex worker activism in a under-researched socio-political context and adds to the field of sex work research by delineating sex work as a site of collective struggles in which sex workers themselves

- 6 For a recent example see the chapter on Spain in: *Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women: Sex Workers Organising for Change: Self-Representation, Community Mobilisation, and Working Conditions*, Bangkok 2018.
- 7 Kamala Kempadoo/Jo Doezema: *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance and Redefinition*, New York 1998.
- 8 Valerie Jenness: *From Sex as Sin to Sex as Work: COYOTE and the Reorganization of Prostitution as a Social Problem*, in: *Social Problems*, 37:3 (1990), pp. 403–420.
- 9 Melinda Chateauvert: *Sex Workers Unite: A History of the Movement from Stonewall to Slutwalk*, Boston 2015.
- 10 Emily van der Meulen: *When Sex is Work: Organizing for Labour Rights and Protections*, in: *Labour/Le Travail*, 69:1 (2012), pp. 147–167.
- 11 Gillian Abel et al. (eds.): *Taking the Crime out of Sex Work: New Zealand Sex Workers' Fight for Decriminalisation*, Bristol 2010.
- 12 Chi Adanna Mgbako: *To Live Freely in this world: Sex Worker Activism in Africa*. New York 2016.
- 13 Nandini Gooptu/Nandinee Bandyopadhyay: ‘Rights to Stop the Wrong’: Cultural Change and Collective Mobilization—The case of Kolkata Sex Workers, in: *Oxford Development Studies*, 35:3 (2007), pp. 251–272, p. 251.
- 14 Moshoula Capous Desyllas: *Representations of Sex Workers' Needs and Aspirations: A Case for Arts-based Research*, in: *Sexualities*, 16:7 (2013), pp. 772–787, p. 772.
- 15 P. G. Maciotti/Giulia Garofalo Geymonat (eds.): *Sex Workers Speak. Who listens? Open Democracy 2016*, at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B2lN4rGTopsaSldZNW4tUzVEUFk/view> (accessed on 12 June 2017).

have become crucial players. In the following, I will first briefly outline my analytical framework and research design, as well as give a short overview of the sex worker movement and the scope of neo-abolitionism and repressive policies in Europe. In the three chapters following this, I then lay out sex worker activists' framing processes and demonstrate that in their mobilisations for self-representation, coalition-building and legislative change they strongly relate to the current adversarial context. I conclude by saying that neo-abolitionism and repressive policies have both severely challenged as well as reinvigorated the sex worker movement in Europe, and point out the need for further research on their ongoing political mobilisations.

## Social Movements and Framing

I examine how the contemporary sex worker movement in Europe relates to the context of neo-abolitionism and repressive policies by conceptualising it as a counter-movement engaged in prostitution politics. As Mareen Heying substantiates in this issue with regards to the German Whores' Movement, sex workers' mobilisations involve diverse groups of actors who share a collective identity, form networks, and undertake protest action against opponents to achieve social change. Consequentially, they exhibit elements that scholars such as Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani have established as defining for social movements.<sup>16</sup> My analysis of framing processes is based on the idea that these are impacted by a movement's political opponent and structural context, and thus reveal how the former relates to the two latter. Social movements generally have an entire tactical 'repertoire of contention'<sup>17</sup> at their disposal which includes a wide range of protest strategies. Yet, activists only ever employ a few protest forms contained in these repertoires. Their strategic preferences are elaborated "in interaction with a field of actors both within a social movement community and within a broader political environment, and these changing relationships constrain and enlarge strategic options over time".<sup>18</sup> One of the strategies available to social movements is framing. Framing describes an interactive process in which actors give meaning to social reality and convey it to others. In this understanding, social movements are "signifying agents actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning"<sup>19</sup> who identify problems, suggest solutions or provide a logic for action and thus create 'interpretative packages' through which

16 Donatella della Porta/Mario Diani: *Social Movements: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Malden, MA 2006.

17 Charles Tilly: *Contentious Performances*, Cambridge 2008.

18 David S. Meyer/Suzanne Staggenborg: *Opposing Movement Strategies in US Abortion Politics*, in: *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change* 28 (2008), pp. 207–238.

19 Robert D. Benford/David A. Snow: *Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment*, in: *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000), pp. 611–639, p. 613.

they generate and guide protest while attempting to discourage adversaries.<sup>20</sup> These so-called ‘collective action frames’ are affected by changes in the political environment of a movement: in particular a successful adversary can alter the political opportunity structure by influencing public discourses and political agendas, which can then pose a threat as well as create an exploitable opportunity for a counter-movement.<sup>21</sup> To the contemporary sex worker movement in Europe, neo-abolitionism and repressive policies present a new structural context in the form of laws and policies, as well as an influential adversary in the form of prostitution opponents. These external conditions can therefore be expected to impact on sex worker activists’ framing processes, which I will examine to demonstrate how the movement currently operates and relates to this new adversarial context.

Analytically, I operationalised collective action frames by first categorising which individual frames are of diagnostic, prognostic or motivational nature, and examined how these individual frames are strategically aligned with one another through processes of bridging, amplification, extension or transformation to allude to potential movement supporters.<sup>22</sup> My analysis rests upon a 4-month research undertaken to acquire my masters’ degree. Between late October 2015 and early February 2016, I conducted five semi-structured interviews with sex worker activists representing the *French Union of Sex Workers* (STRASS), the *Association for Support of Marginalized Workers* (STAR) from Macedonia, *Sex Workers Alliance Ireland* (SWAI), *Sex Worker Open University* (SWOU)<sup>23</sup> from the UK, and regional network ICRSE (*International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe*). I collected additional qualitative data from participant observation at two public sex worker conferences and from 14 text documents distributed there (mainly programmes, brochures and zines), which comprised a total of about 104 text pages.<sup>24</sup> Where necessary, I verified information given by participants through organisations’ online resources. My results are grouped into the three major strategic aims of the movement’s framing processes, which to some extent necessarily overlap with each other.

20 David A. Snow et al.: Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization and Movement Participation, in: *American Sociological Review* 51:4 (1986), pp. 464–481.

21 David S. Meyer/Suzanne Staggenborg: Movements, Countermovements, and the Structure of Political Opportunity, in: *American Journal of Sociology* 101:6 (1996), pp. 1628–1660.

22 David A. Snow et al.: Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization and Movement Participation, pp. 467f.

23 Since then renamed to ‘SWARM’, see: <https://www.swarmcollective.org/> (accessed on 28 February 2018).

24 If not indicated otherwise, all quotes of activists as well as referenced political slogans are taken from interviews and field notes.

## The Sex Worker Movement

Sex workers resisting oppression is neither a historically new phenomenon, nor one constricted to the Global North. Recorded protest actions in India, Guatemala or Kenya date back to the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>25</sup> The first well-documented and sustained phase of sex worker activism emerged in the U.S. and Europe in the 1970s. Since then, the global sex worker movement has reached a considerable geographical scope and level of institutionalisation through self-organised collectives, annual action days and the establishment of the red umbrella as a powerful symbol of recognition. In Europe and Central Asia, ICRSE now conjoins 98 organisations from 31 countries into a regional network and provides a diverse range of support activities to its local community members.<sup>26</sup> ICRSE currently identifies two major, opposing trends in Europe: on the positive side, civil society is seen to be increasingly accepting of sex work. This is illustrated by numerous alliances with “organisations working in the field of human rights, health, LGBTQ rights, women’s rights, or migrants’ rights, as well as [with] trade unionists and representatives of the workers’ movement”.<sup>27</sup> Among the movement’s supporters are political parties, members of parliaments and powerful international figures such as the *World Health Organisation* (WHO) or the *Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS* (UNAIDS). On the negative side, ICRSE notices a deterioration of sex workers’ living conditions in the European sex industry, which forms part of an expanding informal sector characterised by a feminisation of migration, poverty and unorganised labour. These detrimental economic developments are reflected in the number of women entering sex work in countries affected by economic crises and welfare cuts. Austerity measures, housing shortages, the rise of the political right and xenophobic sentiments in a region where migrants form the majority of sex workers equally contribute to a hostile climate for sex workers.<sup>28</sup> Yet, ICRSE expresses particular concern about the propagation of

25 Kamala Kempadoo/Jo Doezema: *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance and Redefinition*, p. 21.

26 ICRSE: National Member Organisations, at: <http://www.sexworkeurope.org/node/464> (accessed on 28 February 2018).

27 ICRSE: Nothing about us without us! Ten Years of Sex Workers’ Rights Activism and Advocacy in Europe, Amsterdam 2015, at: [http://www.sexworkeurope.org/sites/default/files/userfiles/files/ICRSE\\_10years%20report\\_Decemberr2015\\_photo\\_final.pdf](http://www.sexworkeurope.org/sites/default/files/userfiles/files/ICRSE_10years%20report_Decemberr2015_photo_final.pdf), p. 16 (accessed on 6 June 2017).

28 ICRSE: For Decriminalisation and Justice: Sex Workers Demand Legal Reform and Social Change, Amsterdam 2016, at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/beyondslavery/sws/international-committee-on-rights-of-sex-workers-in-europe/for-decriminalisation-and-j> (accessed on 6 June 2017).

neo-abolitionist prostitution frameworks across Europe. The network claims that these marginalised and harmed sex workers, which necessitated continued resistance on the part of the European sex worker movement.

## Neo-Abolitionism & Repressive Policies in Europe

The neo-abolitionism constitutive of the current European context is a paradigm grounded on the presumption that men's desire combined with superior economic power is the root cause driving prostitution and women's exploitation. Since prostitution is regarded a gendered form of violence, paid sex can never be consented to, nor be an incentive to voluntary migration. Hence, there is no distinction between sex-trafficking and prostitution, as the former is seen as inevitably linked to the latter.<sup>29</sup> Women in prostitution, specifically migrants, are categorically regarded as victims in need of exit assistance. Employing an anti-trafficking discourse, feminist groups, conservative Christians and human rights defenders demand a complete abolition of prostitution. Over the past 20 years, international institutions such as the *United Nations* have been permeated by neo-abolitionist discourse, which has created obligations on nation states to combat trafficking especially through national prostitution laws.<sup>30</sup> The policy characteristic to neo-abolitionism is the criminalisation of sex buyers.<sup>31</sup> According to Elizabeth Bernstein, the support of such punitive measures marks "a carceral turn in feminist advocacy movements".<sup>32</sup> These developments shape the current climate of prostitution politics in Europe and explicate common connotations of prostitution and human trafficking, which, as I will demonstrate, sex worker activists strongly contest.

Neo-abolitionist legislation was first introduced by Sweden in 1999 which ultimately aimed at eradicating prostitution in the name of gender equality.<sup>33</sup> Despite the lack of evidence proving its intended effects and harsh criticism demonstrating its negative

29 Lisa Carson/Kathy Edwards: Prostitution and Sex Trafficking: What Are the Problems Represented to Be? A Discursive Analysis of Law and Policy in Sweden and Victoria, Australia, in: *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 34:1 (2011), pp. 63–87.

30 Jane Scoular/Anna Carline: A Critical Account of a 'Creeping Neo-abolitionism': Regulating Prostitution in England and Wales, in: *Criminology and Criminal Justice* 14:5 (2014), pp. 608–626.

31 Jacqueline Comte: Decriminalization of Sex Work: Feminist Discourses in Light of Research, in: *Sexuality and Culture* 18:1 (2014), pp. 196–217.

32 Elizabeth Bernstein: Carceral Politics as Gender Justice? The 'Traffic in Women' and Neoliberal Circuits of Crime, Sex, and Rights, in: *Theory and Society* 41:3 (2012), pp. 233–259, p. 233.

33 Jay Levy/Pye Jakobsson: Sweden's Abolitionist Discourse and Law: Effects on the Dynamics of Swedish Sex Work and on the Lives of Sweden's Sex Workers, in: *Criminology and Criminal Justice* 14:5 (2014), pp. 593–607.

consequences for sex workers<sup>34</sup>, the ‘Swedish model’<sup>35</sup> has been heavily promoted abroad. It proliferated particularly in Europe: by 2009, Finland, England and Wales had partly banned sex purchase, whereas Norway and Iceland had criminalised it fully. Neo-abolitionist legislation came into effect in Northern Ireland in 2015, as well as in France and the Republic of Ireland in 2016.<sup>36</sup> On account of its perceived “effectiveness [...] in reducing prostitution and trafficking of women and girls and thereby promoting gender equality”<sup>37</sup>, the Swedish model also became the official EU parliament stance in 2014. This urges EU member states to review their prostitution laws with regard to eradicating “a very obvious and utterly appalling violation of human dignity”<sup>38</sup> with an apparently “direct link to trafficking and organised crime”.<sup>39</sup>

Even within European countries where prostitution is legalised, there has been an increase in repressive regulation. Criticised as intrusive and harmful by sex workers, policies such as mandatory health consultations, condom use and forced registration have for instance taken effect in Germany in 2017.<sup>40</sup> These legal changes were motivated by a perceived need to fight human trafficking and demonstrate the profound influence of neo-abolitionist discourses on prostitution laws in Europe. In fact, a comparison of three European states pursuing either a prohibitionist, abolitionist or legalised model showed how measures to contain prostitution under strict government control have been increasingly implemented under all three jurisdictions.<sup>41</sup> It is this new adversarial

34 Ibid.

35 Also often designated ‘Nordic model/regime’ due to its spread across and similar application within Nordic countries, see May-Len Skilbrei/Charlotta Holmström: Is There a Nordic Prostitution Regime?, in: *Crime and Justice* 40:1 (2011), pp. 479–517.

36 BBC: Paying for Sex Becomes a Crime in NI as New Law Comes into Effect, 1 June 2015, at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-32955767>; BBC: Prostitution: Irish government introduces new law to make paying for sex a crime, 28 November 2014, at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30242641>; Angelique Chrisafis: France Passes Law Making it Illegal to Pay for Sex, in: *The Guardian*, 6 April 2016, at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/06/france-passes-law-illegal-to-pay-for-sex-criminalise-customers> (all accessed on 6 June 2017).

37 Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality: Report on Sexual Exploitation and Prostitution and its Impact on Gender Equality (2013/2103(INI)) (No. A7–0071/2014), 4 February 2014, at: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+REPORT+A7-2014-0071+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN> (accessed on 28 February 2018).

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Angela Herter/Emy Fem: Professed Protection, Pointless Provisions: Overview of the German Prostitutes Protection Act, 2 June 2017, at: [http://www.sexworkeurope.org/sites/default/files/userfiles/files/ICRSE\\_Overview%20of%20the%20German%20Prostitutes%20Protection%20Act\\_May2017\\_EN\\_02.pdf](http://www.sexworkeurope.org/sites/default/files/userfiles/files/ICRSE_Overview%20of%20the%20German%20Prostitutes%20Protection%20Act_May2017_EN_02.pdf) (accessed on 6 June 2017).

41 Phil Hubbard/Roger Matthews/Jane Scoular: Regulating Sex Work in the EU: Prostitute Women and the New Spaces of Exclusion, in: *Gender, Place and Culture*, 15:2 (2008), pp. 137–152.

context of neo-abolitionist prostitution opponents, laws and repressive policies which the contemporary sex worker movement in Europe attempts to counter through strategic framing aimed at self-representation, coalition-building and legislative change.

## Mine to Define: Reclaiming Self-Representation

First and foremost, the movement currently intends to reclaim power over self-representation in public discourses on sex work to counter negative images and to challenge the social stigma and exclusion activists see exacerbated in the context of neo-abolitionism and repressive policies. Here, frames of diversity and inclusion are used strategically to advance a variety of alternative narratives against the perceived reductionism of their opponents, to include especially vulnerable community members into the movement, and to proclaim their own expert position. These frames are expressed predominantly through cultural and media practices, as activists establish peer-led collectives which employ public communication, develop arts and performance projects, or set up alternative media outlets.

As one participant describes, negative representations of sex work have been a permanent and central focus of activism: “the public opinion is one of the greatest challenges sex worker activism has been struggling with for decades” (STAR activist). Activists in fact unanimously name social stigma, discrimination and exclusion stemming from these negative representations as major obstacles to activism: “Actually, one of the first [obstacles] is stigmatisation. For people it’s hard to be activists as sex workers.” (STRASS activist) or “Due to existing stigma and discrimination [sex workers] are still not encouraged enough to talk on their behalf” (STAR activist). Social discrimination keeps sex workers from organising, speaking out publicly and building a movement in the first place and is given as the main reason why many sex workers refrain from political engagement. Most, in fact, encounter multiple forms of discrimination, as one activist points out: “Sex workers tend to be a much larger proportion of black people, of working class people, of trans people, and so these are all interconnected and end up resulting in having even less of a voice” (SWOU activist). This intersection of multiple forms of discrimination further impedes sex workers’ political organisation. Consequentially, activists perceive the movement to still be small and ‘thin on the ground’. Widespread isolation, invisibility and individualisation both in private lives and at work places contribute to this.

Activists claim that representations of sex workers in mainstream media and popular culture propagate stigma and exclusion as media coverage of sex work centres on violence, exploitation and crime, whereas film and fiction portray sex workers as either miserable victims or glamorous seductresses. These simplified binary narratives are seen to be reflected in public discourses on sex work: “Happy hooker or victim. Empowered or

abused. Always one or the other. Never both, never neither”.<sup>42</sup> According to activists, abolitionist campaigns play a dominant role in the pervasiveness of negative images by perpetuating misinformation on sex workers’ supposed histories of mental illness, abuse, exploitation or substance addiction. Activists furthermore bemoan that their opponents use data from exit organisations and negative individual accounts to designate them as representative of the sex industry and instrumentalise them for their political aims:

Our experiences are transformed into arguments to manipulate and lie and push for criminalisation [...] you just become a useful cliché for abolitionists wanting to use your experience to further their agenda, reducing your life and agency to a story of victimhood and confusion.<sup>43</sup>

Participants consider this abolitionist strategy as unrepresentative, un-nuanced and misguided: “Why does a sex worker’s bad experience point to the tragedy of the entire profession?”<sup>44</sup> and “Saying that there are abuse survivors within an industry, so therefore that industry should be shut down, jobs taken away from people who need them, and the most basic human rights and safety taken away from the workers themselves, is a completely flawed, overly simplistic, naïve, patronising and privileged way to approach things.”<sup>45</sup> Activists hence emphasise that negative experiences must not be generalised, nor be used to further criminalise and put sex workers at risk while negating their personal and political agency. In fact, activists feel silenced by abolitionist strategies because negative biographies are politically exploited, while positive accounts are dismissed as those of an elite minority which supports pimps and traffickers: “They constantly call us privileged, they say that we’re not the sex workers that you should be listening to” (SWOU activist). Activists regard abolitionists’ agendas as fixed and impenetrable by sex workers’ input: “they’ve already made up their minds as well, they have a policy in case. So if you go and see them, they’re interested in stopping you working” (SWAI activist). There is widespread agreement in the movement that abolitionist misrepresentations and instrumentalisation of one-sided narratives further the stigmatisation of sex workers. Nevertheless, activists unfortunately find that abolitionists achieve high credibility and dominate in social perceptions of sex work:

42 SWOU: *Mine to Define: Survivors & Sex Workers Speak Out!* London 2015, at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58cea5cf197aea5216413671/t/58ceb4fff7c501ac42c5ddc/1489941812006/mine-to-define-web-edition.pdf>, p. 3 (accessed on 7 June 2017)

43 *Ibid.*

44 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Whorephobia and unchecked morals surrounding who should have sex with who, and for what reason, is so entrenched, that feminist theory cooked up in offices, or the odd sensational story of a regretful ex worker, is more than enough for people to stand by an opinion about sex work being wrong.<sup>46</sup>

This underlines the deep divides activists see between their own experiences and self-perception on the one hand, and the perceived simplifications and misrepresentations furthered by abolitionist opponents of prostitution on the other hand.

Activists hence employ several strategies aimed at self-representation and countering stigmatisation and exclusion. Firstly, peer-led<sup>47</sup> organisations enable activism as they provide a visible, accessible and protected networking platform. Across Europe, numerous collectives indeed formed as a direct reaction to neo-abolitionist influence and increased repression.<sup>48</sup> These actors publicly communicate via press releases, opinion statements or publish resources in which they present sex workers' lived realities, highlight issues and recommend policy measures. Many sustain an active online presence through websites and social media, which activists claim allows sex workers to "speak out without having to show their face" (ICRSE activist). Members furthermore engage in public speaking, academic debates and knowledge formation through community research. Activists frame these tactics as part of an evidence-based strategy: studies, statistics and supporters' statements are used widely in advocacy campaigns to refute neo-abolitionist policies and promote decriminalisation. Participants observe that these strategies brought some success: "I think the movement it definitely growing, there's more and more organisations speaking out, there's more and more debate in the press, in the media, which are getting a bit more evidence-based and taking the reality of sex workers' lives in perspective" (ICRSE activist). Sex worker activists thus present themselves as experts who, in contrast to their opponents, gain support by offering neutral and indisputable facts on the sex industry instead of engaging in ideological, sensationalist and moralist politics.

Furthermore, activists develop alternative media and engage in art and performance projects<sup>49</sup> which are aimed at "reclaiming arts [and] telling local and global sex work stories to break through stigma and stereotypes".<sup>50</sup> Overall, media and art projects not only cover a wide range of perspectives from different sectors of industry and the contexts of different

46 SWOU: Whorecore: Fucking Queer (& Getting Paid), London 2013, at: [http://archive.qzap.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object\\_id/422](http://archive.qzap.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/422) (accessed 22 March 2018).

47 Within these organisations, current (and in some cases, former) sex workers form at least a majority of members and play a leading role.

48 P. G. Maciotti/Giulia Garofalo Geymonat (eds.): *Sex Workers Speak. Who listens?*

49 See e. g. <http://www.radioava.org/>; <http://www.sexworkersopera.com/>; <https://londonsexworkerfilmfest.wordpress.com/> (all accessed on 28 February 2018).

50 Sex Workers' Opera: News, at: <http://www.sexworkersopera.com/news/> (accessed on 7 June 2017).

countries, but also provide a platform for the most marginalised sex workers such as migrants and ethnic minorities, people of colour, transgender and queer activists, as well as sex workers from the Global South.<sup>51</sup> Public appearances and displays of personal stories are framed as profoundly political, as pointed out: “In such an intensely whorephobic society, self-representation is a radical act”.<sup>52</sup> With these tactics, activists aspire to counter one-sided abolitionist narratives in an attempt at “winning the culture wars”.<sup>53</sup> Media and arts hence enable especially vulnerable activists to reclaim the prerogative over self-representation from their opponents, while at the same time being protected from stigma.

Here, diversity and inclusion are central prognostic frames used by activists who “reject the happy hooker/victim dichotomy”<sup>54</sup> and “seek to re-frame the dialogue to value those most affected by anti-sex worker representations and rhetoric”.<sup>55</sup> Some activists note that early movement’s framing of sex work as empowering has alienated people who consider themselves sex work survivors or human trafficking victims. These people report feeling that their stories were undesired within activism and feared they would give ground to abolitionists: “We are always fighting against those narratives of whore as victim and I felt like my experience contributed to that narrative. Then again if people could respect our work in the first place, there would be no pressure to not talk about negative experiences.”<sup>56</sup> Among participants, there is widespread agreement that both positive and negative narratives of sex work and sex workers need to be multiplied. This commitment to diversity and inclusion hence stems from a critical self-assessment of previous framing strategies and from the realisation that exclusively positive narratives have reproduced the reductionism of abolitionists.

In this regard, it is particularly noteworthy that the term ‘survivor’ is now being reclaimed by some sex workers. Initially only used by abolitionists to refer to former sex workers and thus portray prostitution as inherently abusive, activists now employ this term to align themselves with possible adherents who have had negative experiences in the sex industry. Activists claim they “object to the instrumentalisation of survivors’ voices”<sup>57</sup>, frame survivors’ and trafficking victims’ goals as coinciding with those of the

51 SWOU: Whorecore: Fucking Queer (& Getting Paid); SWOU: Femme/Whore, London 2014; SWOU: Trans Rentboys: Love Don’t Pay the Rent, London 2014; all at: <https://www.swarmcollective.org/zine/> (accessed on 7 June 2017).

52 London Sex Worker Film Festival (LSWFF): 2015 Programme, at: <https://londonsexworkerfilmfest.wordpress.com/programme/> (accessed on 7 June 2017).

53 x:talk: When Work is Sex: Bodies, Choice and Capitalism. Conference Programme, London 2016, at: <http://www.xtalkproject.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/When-Work-is-Sex-programme.pdf>, p. 2 (accessed on 22 March 2018)

54 LSWFF: 2015 Programme.

55 Ibid.

56 SWOU: Mine to Define: Survivors & Sex Workers Speak Out!, p. 13.

57 Ibid, p. 9.

movement, and intend to benefit from sensationalist abolitionist tactics by transforming them: “[...] take the stories from those so called ‘survivor-abolitionists’ and turn it around [...] and say ‘you try to use it and push for your agenda, actually we can just use it for ours as well’. I think that’s something that we need to use more and take advantage of more” (SWAI activist).

Consequentially, the inclusion of marginalised groups and an emphasis on diversity are a direct reaction to abolitionist campaigns and a counteractive co-option of their strategies. Through this, activists reclaim the prerogative of interpretation over diverse realities within sex work: “Listen to us, let us define our own experiences and our own lives.”<sup>58</sup> Following the motto ‘Mine to Define’, activists aim to “dismantle this oppressive narrative that survivors working in the sex industry need rescuing and are unable to speak for themselves.”<sup>59</sup> Regardless of the nature of the experience, the widely used slogan “Nothing about us without us!”<sup>60</sup> demonstrates again that activists reject stigma and exclusion further aggravated by their opponents, and instead demand recognition, inclusion, and the possibility for a diverse self-representation in public discourses on sex work. A self-representation which challenges stigma and exclusion is also pertinent to the movement’s attempt to build coalitions with agents in civil society.

## Fighting the Same Fight: Building Coalitions

A second strategic focus of the movement thus lies on coalition-building with other social movements and advocacy groups to create bargaining power from outside political institutions and to improve its political legitimacy. To this end, activists interact extensively with other agents in civil society and allude to potential allies by framing sex work as human and labour rights issues, or by amplifying the intersections between the sex worker movement and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT), migrants’, labour and feminist movements. A tactic regarded as potent here is claiming a position of expertise and thereby “getting different organisations to listen to the evidence and come out in favour” (SWOU activist), which parallels the evidence-based strategies pursued to counter abolitionist influence on representations of sex work.

In the context of the HIV epidemic, health care providers have contributed significantly to the movement’s development and still represent routine partners. Activists, however, increasingly perceive them as limiting in regards to political activities. A more promising partner is seen in the LGBT community where the movement has established partnerships

58 Ibid, p. 16.

59 Ibid, p. 4.

60 ICRSE: Nothing about us without us! Ten Years of Sex Workers’ Rights Activism and Advocacy in Europe, p. 1.

with NGOs (non-governmental organizations) such as the *International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association* (ILGA) or *Transgender Europe* (TGEU). Activists stress the role sex workers, especially those trans and of colour, have played in the struggle for LGBT rights and invoke shared experiences of violence, criminalisation, discrimination, and repression. Activists especially describe an existing solidarity and cross-fertilisation with the trans movement: “I think the trans agenda is quite crucial to the sex workers agenda [...] people who are becoming leaders of the trans movement, they always include sex workers’ rights as one of their demands.” (ICRSE activist) and “A lot of our activists are trans because a lot of sex workers are. I think that there’s lots of connections, and especially with feminism. A lot of time we spend arguing against feminists and those feminists that tend to be trans exclusionary, also tend to be sex worker exclusionary, so we’re all basically [...] fighting the same fight” (SWOU activist). Activists observe cross-fertilisations between themselves and LGBT movements, and hope that especially the growing successes of the trans movement will delineate and fuel their own struggle.

Furthermore, the movement has built successful alliances with human rights advocates through the strategic framing of sex workers’ rights as human rights and their inclusion into human rights policies. Activists rate the public influence and lobbying power of human rights organisations as considerable and have partnered with NGOs such as the *Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women* (GAATW) and the *Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants* (PICUM). In particular, AI’s 2015 policy on sex work decriminalisation brought massive attention to the movement’s cause. In many cases, cooperation with human rights organisations occurred as a direct reaction to abolitionist lobbying for criminalisation and the conflation of sex work and human trafficking.<sup>61</sup> Opposition to abolitionist strategies also underlies activists’ motivation “to be inclusive of migrant’s rights and make it one of our essential demands” (ICRSE activist): “We need to shift the discourse of trafficking, which is used by feminists and religious groups to actually deport migrants [...] and move it to migrants’ rights and undocumented workers’ rights” (ICRSE activist).

This attention to migrants’ rights stems from the movement’s allegation that instead of protecting victims of human trafficking, states employ contemporary laws on anti-trafficking and prostitution to reduce undesired immigration. By including migrant issues, the movement thus first and foremost tackles an omnipresent anti-trafficking discourse. Secondly, by debating “what it means to ask for migrants’ rights when migrants are so difficult to organise or to self-organise” (ICRSE activist), activists allude to the responsibility of another social actor, the labour movement: “trade unions are

61 GAATW: Moving Beyond ‘Supply and Demand’ Catchphrases: Assessing the Uses and Limitations of Demand-based Approaches in Anti-trafficking. Bangkok 2011, at: [http://www.gaatw.org/publications/MovingBeyond\\_SupplyandDemand\\_GAATW2011.pdf](http://www.gaatw.org/publications/MovingBeyond_SupplyandDemand_GAATW2011.pdf) (accessed 7 June 2017).

really letting down undocumented workers or migrant workers in general” (ICRSE activist). Consequently, the movement aims to join forces with the labour movement. Some affiliations with trade unions exist already but activists would like to achieve wider acceptance as workers:

Sex work is focusing on work, it really brings it back to labour rights and that we are part of the labour movement and we are workers [...] it doesn't matter if you like it or if you are empowered [...] some people love it, they still do it for the money, and it's still their job (ICRSE activist).

Here, the movement's prognostic framing of sex work as an economic activity is of particular centrality and employed to generate support in the fight for workers' rights, while simultaneously bridging ideological dichotomies. Additionally, activists emphasise shared problems and goals by highlighting the need for combating labour exploitation in various economic sectors: “for some women exploitation in a brothel is an escape from destitution or more acute exploitation in domestic work, agricultural work, factories and sweatshops”<sup>62</sup> and “for everyone, sex workers or not, the lower down on the economic/migration status food chain you are, the fewer options you have”.<sup>63</sup> This stresses that, to activists, human trafficking and exploitation are not confined to the sex industry, nor inherently linked to selling sex. Instead, diagnostic frames show that such ills are attributed to an economic precariousness, which also characterises many other industries. Through this framing, activists counter abolitionist conflation of human trafficking and prostitution and their often exclusive focus on the sex industry. Strategically, activists conclude that “sex workers have a lot to bring to the labour movement. We have to build tools to avoid exploitation”.<sup>64</sup> Yet, in practice criminalisation highly complicates linkages with the labour movement.

Most notably, activists also strategically appeal to feminist movements by framing sex work as reproductive labour<sup>65</sup> or by amplifying high levels of gendered-based violence as a shared problematic. Again, these grievances are argumentatively decoupled from sex work by diagnosing sexism as their root cause. The feminist movement is regarded a powerful ally, however, activists bemoan its currently strong abolitionist tendency. The resulting exclusion of sex workers and trans women is condemned as “one of the biggest flaws of the European feminist movement” (ICRSE activist). Activists claim that their voices become undermined by abolitionist feminists who diminish them to “non-political objects who

62 English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP): Home Affairs Select Committee Prostitution Inquiry, London 2016, at: <http://prostitutescollective.net/2016/02/home-affairs-select-committee-prostitution-inquiry/> (accessed on 22 March 2018)

63 SWOU: Mine to Define: Survivors & Sex Workers Speak Out!, p. 15.

64 SWOU: Whorecore: Fucking Queer (& Getting Paid).

65 x:talk: When Work is Sex: Bodies, Choice and Capitalism. Conference Programme.

can't make decisions for themselves"<sup>66</sup> and who "maintain a hierarchy between those who are the helpers and those who need the help".<sup>67</sup> Abolitionist feminists are diagnostically framed as harming both women and sex workers when claiming that women cannot consent to selling sex:

There is no difference—not one bit—between a rape denialist saying that a woman is lying about sexual violence and an abolitionist saying that a sex worker is suffering from false consciousness and doesn't know when she is being raped. Both are ignoring our lives, our realities, our truths. Both are part of the same patriarchal system that denies a woman's agency to define her own life and experiences.<sup>68</sup>

Thus, abolitionist feminists are said to propagate sexist oppression and engage in politics that go against core feminist ideas. Activists feel a strong necessity to weaken abolitionist influence on the direction and public appearance of feminist struggles: "People are really influenced by this, and that's a problem. We need to be trying in a way to convince some feminists" (SWOU activist). Many consider current increases in sex worker activism as directly linked to strengthened abolitionism: "Sex worker organisations are now finding that they have to come together, and I think it's this responsive activism" (SWAI activist). They urge feminist movements to "concentrate their resources on including and amplifying sex workers' voices in the movement and to stop promoting legal frameworks that have been shown to be detrimental to sex workers' rights".<sup>69</sup> Overall, activists intend to occupy more space within abolitionist-dominated feminism, create power at the grassroots-level and eventually re-appropriate influence on gender politics.

Even though the movement invests heavily into convincing allies, activists encounter frustrations especially within criminalised contexts, as a French activist reports:

we keep staying and continuing activism but it's really really hard. Also because we don't succeed in making of this subject a priority among political parties that could support us [...] left organisations are divided on the subject so they do not stand with us, we only have the health organisations and some few feminists and LGBT organisations. So we are not a massive movement and we face difficulties to draw in more massive social movements (STRASS activist).

66 SWOU: Whorecore: Fucking Queer (& Getting Paid).

67 Ibid.

68 SWOU: Mine to Define: Survivors & Sex Workers Speak Out!, p. 11.

69 ICRSE: Feminism Needs Sex Workers, Sex Workers Need Feminism: Towards a Sex-worker Inclusive Women's Rights Movement, Amsterdam 2016, at: <http://www.sexworkeurope.org/news/general-news/feminism-needs-sex-workers-sex-workers-need-feminism-sex-worker-inclusive-womens> (accessed on 8 June 2017).

Potential allies are in fact often reluctant to address the contested topic of sex work, are split over it ideologically or regard it as a minority issue. Nevertheless, participants indeed observe certain developments in coalition-building: “The resistance is getting stronger, there’s dissident voices in women’s rights, LGBT rights, human rights [groups] that are opposing criminalisation or at least criminalisation of clients.” (ICRSE activist) and “A lot of the successes that I’m seeing, presently, are smaller ones, like certain people in certain groups being more comfortable with starting to advocate for us” (SWOU activist).

According to activists, the movement has recorded progress in fighting back against neo-abolitionist policies and adverse attitudes prevalent among potential allies by pursuing a rights- and evidence-based approach, and by highlighting commonalities with other vulnerable social groups instead of negative particularities associated with the sex industry. Participants hope that the incremental changes observed at the individual and organisational grassroots-level can lead to wider support and acceptance among other social movement actors, which will eventually attribute greater political legitimacy and bargaining power to the sex worker movement. These resources are then essential to the movement’s fight against harmful legislation.

## Getting Involved with the Politics: Achieving Legislative Change

Legal matters are of central significance to the sex worker movement in Europe, specifically when navigating criminalised and repressive frameworks. Activists hence strategically target politicians and other political stakeholders to influence law-making procedures concerning sex work and to eventually achieve legislative change. Here, activists mainly employ a labour and human rights frame to combat criminalisation and forward decriminalisation as the only sensible alternative to neo-abolitionist laws and repressive policies. According to participants, struggles around neo-abolitionist criminalisation are currently particularly relevant in Europe: “especially in Europe, that’s where you’re seeing the biggest fights around the criminalisation of clients” (SWAI activist). Across Europe, numerous activist collectives have in fact been established in response to the introduction of new repressive laws: “Especially in the last decade, it’s been a response to further criminalisation that they are experiencing” (SWAI activist) and “The activism is happening but it does because it’s a backlash” (SWOU activist). On the one hand, contemporary sex worker activism is thus directly galvanised by and related to abolitionist criminalisation and repressive legal frameworks. On the other hand, this legal context also inhibits movement activities: “Instead of trying to set up projects to strengthen our communities, to report violence, to work with other organisations, we spend all our energy trying to fight back against [abolitionists’] proposals to criminalise sex work more” (ICRSE activist).

Activists experience criminalisation, be it through existing legal frameworks or opponents' lobbying campaigns, as severely restricting activism and community care as it occupies great capacities and prevents activists from addressing other pressing issues.

Yet, participants report strategical developments as they are "moving closer towards really trying to get involved with the politics" (SWOU activist). As condensed in the slogan "no bad women, just bad laws"<sup>70</sup>, the movement re-frames the debate around sex work from one centred on deviant individual behaviour to one situating the problematic of the sex industry within highly adverse policies and laws. Here, activists condemn both anti-human trafficking legislation and prostitution laws. In its study of UK anti-trafficking laws, local sex worker collective *x:talk*, for instance, found these "deliberately blurred the line between trafficking and prostitution"<sup>71</sup>, identified them to be a "battleground for opposing views about sex work"<sup>72</sup> and concluded that "anti-trafficking laws have changed the way people in the sex industry work"<sup>73</sup>. Activists claim such anti-trafficking legislation conceals a general criminalisation of sex work and immigration as it is applied arbitrarily to harass, arrest and detain especially migrant sex workers. Activists also largely reject existing prostitution policies and states' claims to protect sex workers. Fearing repercussions, sex workers rarely use legal measures intended to prevent their exploitation in prostitution, but rather suffer from their application through the police. Participants assert that criminalisation essentially hinders HIV prevention, undermines individuals' free choice of employment, and exacerbates stigma. Abolitionist campaigning is framed to have a central responsibility in this: The anti-sex worker lobby [...] contributes to dangerous settings under which abusive clients thrive by actively campaigning against sex work instead of supporting workers to gain better and safer conditions."<sup>74</sup>

Activists hence establish a direct relationship between increasing criminalisation and decreasing options for sex workers to influence their working conditions. Generally, activists protest being "bypassed, disparaged and ignored"<sup>75</sup> throughout legislative procedures. This, according to them, compromises their "right to participation and access to information"<sup>76</sup> and results in policies which do not "reflect the needs, priorities or lived experiences of sex workers".<sup>77</sup> These aspects provide further reasons for activists'

70 ECP: Know Your Rights: An A-Z for Sex Workers, London 2012, at: <http://prostitutescollective.net/know-your-rights/> (accessed on 8 June 2017).

71 *x:talk*: Human Rights, Sex Work and the Challenge of Trafficking: Human Rights Impact Assessment of Anti-trafficking Policy in the UK, London 2010, at: <http://www.xtalkproject.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/reportfinal1.pdf>, p. 7 (accessed on 22 March 2018).

72 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

74 SWOU: Mine to Define: Survivors & Sex Workers Speak Out!, p. 15.

75 ECP: Home Affairs Select Committee Prostitution Inquiry.

76 *x:talk*: Human Rights, Sex Work and the Challenge of Trafficking: Human Rights Impact Assessment of Anti-trafficking Policy in the UK, p. 34

77 *Ibid.*

increasingly frequent use of strategies aimed at legislative change. To fight back against harmful laws, activists align the labour and human rights frame. The recognition of sex work as a ‘livelihood strategy’ is presented to be crucial to adequately identify and address forced labour and exploitation within the sex industry: “problems occurring at work should be dealt with as employment issues, safe workplaces and fair employment should be rights enjoyed by workers in the sex industry regardless of their migration status”.<sup>78</sup> Activists also foreground sex workers’ political agency “to individually or collectively organise to change their terms of labour”.<sup>79</sup> Consequently, they demand full inclusion into policy-making procedures.

Tactically, activists are also entering new institutional spaces: “we’re starting to take it to parliament now, it’s no longer just on the street protesting, like it might have been before” (SWOU activist). An increasing number of petitions, letters and policy recommendations in which sex worker organisations object to harmful laws reflects this development towards political lobbying and advocacy. Activists closely follow and comment legislative plans, approach political parties for support, hold ‘evidence gathering events’ for members of parliament, or share tool-kits for campaigns against neo-abolitionist legislation.<sup>80</sup> Within these activities, activists again frame themselves as knowledgeable experts who have “detailed, well-formulated ideas about how the industry could be changed to make it fairer or safer”<sup>81</sup> and claim to be “ideally placed to contribute to discussions about what kinds of laws and policies should be applied to sex work”.<sup>82</sup> After long-standing grassroots resistance outside political channels, these tactics represent novelties to the sex worker movement in Europe and further substantiate sex workers’ claim to inclusion and self-representation in law-making processes.

Since abolitionist criminalisation efforts have forced activists to focus more on legislative strategies in the first place, they now intend to co-opt their opponents’ drive to their own advantage:

78 Ibid, p. 29.

79 Ibid.

80 ICRSE: 560 NGOs and 94 Academics ask MEPs to Reject Ms Honeyball’s Report: Letter to Members of European Parliament, Amsterdam 2014, at: <http://www.sexworkeurope.org/de/node/488>; ECP: Decriminalisation of Prostitution: The Evidence, London 2015, at: <http://prostitutescollective.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Online-Report.pdf>; SCOT-PEP: Decriminalisation Consultation Launch, at: <http://www.scot-pep.org.uk/news/decriminalisation-consultation-launch>; ICRSE: ‘Hands off our Clients!’ An Activism and Advocacy Guide for Challenging the ‘Swedish Model’ of Criminalising the Clients of Sex Workers in Europe, Amsterdam 2013, at: [http://www.sexworkeurope.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdfs/hands\\_off\\_sections\\_1-3.pdf](http://www.sexworkeurope.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdfs/hands_off_sections_1-3.pdf) (all accesses on 9 June 2017).

81 x:talk: Human Rights, Sex Work and the Challenge of Trafficking: Human Rights Impact Assessment of Anti-trafficking Policy in the UK, p. 22

82 Ibid.

Every six months there's one bill about the Nordic model and [MPs] keep on voting it down, it's clear that they're not happy with it but it's also clear that loads of people in parliament feel that the current system isn't working, so it feels like an opportunity, like now is the time (SWOU activist).

To this statement, another activist adds "Looking at Scotland, [activists] fought the fight against the criminalisation of clients but that hasn't stopped them from putting in a consultation for decrim[inalisation]" (SWAI activist). Specifically, the movement attempts to exploit political opportunities provided by abolitionist influence on legislation by responding to proposals for further criminalisation with demands for full decriminalisation of sex work. Participants unanimously support decriminalisation and declare this position to be widespread within the movement: "I literally have never met a sex worker that wants anything but decriminalisation" (SWOU activist). Decriminalisation, referring to the complete repeal of all criminal laws on sex work, is framed to be the only sensible alternative to neo-abolitionist frameworks and repressive policies. Drawing heavily on the experience of New Zealand, the only state with a decriminalised prostitution framework so far, decriminalisation is said to have effected "verifiable improvements in sex workers' health and safety".<sup>83</sup> Activists in Europe regard decriminalisation as an indispensable precondition to social de-stigmatisation, the recognition of sex work as labour, and the granting of employment, legal, health and safety rights. It therefore underlies all strategies the movement pursues towards other goals. Ultimately, a decriminalised legal framework decouples sex work from human trafficking and organised crime, which corresponds to the movement's call for a nuanced differentiation between forced and voluntary labour and migration.

Even though decriminalisation has been a long-standing demand of sex workers in Europe, the concept still features only marginally on political agendas and activists often struggle to push it further. Whereas some activists find institutional channels firmly barred, others who have successfully entered them nevertheless note that political supporters keep to personal agendas or openly depreciate sex workers in political spaces. Some participants claim that, unlike decriminalisation, neo-abolitionist legislation experiences such popularity in Europe because of its compatibility with the present economic and political system, which explains the low levels of support for decriminalisation. Especially in a period of heightened migration influx, activists allege, anti-trafficking discourses allow states to displace sex workers, tighten border security and deport migrants. Even in countries where selling sex is not outlawed, employment relationships in sex work often are, thus forcing sex workers into precarious forms of self-employment. This facilitation of economic exploitation is said to parallel other economic sectors. Due to the gendered

83 ECP: Fact & Fiction: Debunking Common Myths on Prostitution, London 2015, at: <http://prostitutescollective.net/2015/02/fact-fiction/> (accessed 22 March 2018).

nature of this process, participants condemn governments' double standards which "claim being feminist in targeting prostitution while at the same time cutting single mothers' benefits, deporting migrant workers and doing nothing against women's economic apartheid".<sup>84</sup> Activists hence see their success depending on a political will that supposedly favours neo-abolitionist and repressive legislation due to their use in other policy fields. In light of this, strategies employed at legislative change also hold stark arbitrariness and unpredictability for sex worker activists.

Consequentially, instead of simply averting neo-abolitionist legislation, achieving decriminalisation, and main-streaming sex work as an economic activity, participants express the desire to extend their political struggles and to ultimately, drive social change: "I think we need to enlarge our political perspective [...] to have perspectives that go beyond only the right to sell sex. Political consciousness and its organising, actually" (STRASS activist).

To activists, an expanded political perspective means especially departing from the liberal framework of choice and sexual self-determination reflected in common political slogans like 'My Body, My Business' (field notes). While long dominant in the movement, today many activists critically dismiss this approach and "acknowledge that an individual's 'choice' and 'agency' with regard to decisions about waged labour in capitalist societies is greatly limited".<sup>85</sup> This critical position also originates from the realisation that past ideological approaches entail serious restrictions within the contemporary context. In fact, a liberal framing of sex work around bodily autonomy and privacy rights has proven to be legally indefensible and an inadequate tool in labour disputes.<sup>86</sup> To not perpetuate "easy and misleading polarisations between positions pro- and against"<sup>87</sup> positions on sex work, activists intend to develop a profound political critique situating sex work in wider economic and social structures: "poverty, lack of documents for migrant women or workers, transphobia in many countries lead people to do sex work and we need to change this [...] But then it brings up a bigger question" (ICRSE activist).

As expressed in the slogan "Outlaw Poverty, Not Prostitutes"<sup>88</sup>, a position deliberating how involvement in sex work is tied to structural conditions has long existed within the movement, yet seems to gain more ground in the current context. Activists organise to "explore how radical and critical analyses can enrich and strengthen our activism"<sup>89</sup> and aim at "building counter-power in the sex industry and developing an

84 SWOU: Whorecore: Fucking Queer (& Getting Paid).

85 x:talk: Human Rights, Sex Work and the Challenge of Trafficking: Human Rights Impact Assessment of Anti-trafficking Policy in the UK, p. 29.

86 Katie Cruz: Unmanageable Work, (Un)liveable Lives: The UK Sex Industry, Labour Rights and the Welfare State, in: *Social & Legal Studies* 22:2 (2013), pp. 465–488.

87 x:talk: When Work is Sex: Bodies, Choice and Capitalism. Conference Programme, p. 6.

88 ECP: Know Your Rights: An A-Z for Sex Workers, London 2012.

89 SWOU: Conference Programme, Graeae Theatre London 5—7 November 2015.

anti-capitalist perspective”.<sup>90</sup> Many activists indeed forward demands for improved economic opportunities along with their legislative strategies, so sex work stops being one option among the very few ones that especially vulnerable populations have: “We fight for housing, benefits, higher wages and other resources so that any of us can leave prostitution if and when we want”<sup>91</sup> and “It’s not just saying, ‘sex work is work’ and ‘we want labour rights’ and ‘we want decriminalisation’, lots of organisations are also asking for social changes so that people don’t have to do sex work” (ICRSE activist).

According to activists, the further fight for the acceptance of sex work needs to necessarily be combined with a fight to expunge any prostitution motivated by economic hardship. Thus, by also acknowledging and addressing factors which make sex work a necessity rooted in unequal power relations rather than a choice, the movement is expanding its political scope and essentially reclaiming the abolitionist position itself. To activists, this expanded political vision frames sex work in a much broader context than neo-abolitionism, whose allegedly simplistic, conformist and ideological approach the movement eventually seeks to counter with a profoundly critical political analysis.

## Conclusion

Sex worker activists in Europe have sustained and institutionalised a transnational movement for more than 40 years, but now find themselves in a new adversarial context where neo-abolitionism and repressive policies have become increasingly influential and widespread. Within this context, the contemporary sex worker movement in Europe is strongly impacted, but continues to organise and mobilise. As demonstrated, activists strategically adjust to these new circumstances through framing processes which aim at self-representation, coalition-building and legislative change. Here, activists reject negative sex work narratives and their political instrumentalisation, oppose stigma and exclusion from public debates, civil society and policy-making processes, and fight back against increasingly criminalising and repressive legislation on prostitution and human trafficking. Against an opponent whose political agenda is perceived as misguidedly ideological, detached from reality, and exclusionary, activists emphasise the diversity of experiences in sex work, strive for the inclusion of marginalised groups and engage in coalition-building by highlighting intersections with other vulnerable social groups instead of negative particularities associated with the sex industry. In these struggles, activists continuously frame sex work as a human and labour rights issue and position themselves as experts whose demand for de-stigmatisation and decriminalisation is supported by the evidence of research findings, and who thus need to be consulted in all matters related to sex work.

90 x:talk: When Work is Sex: Bodies, Choice and Capitalism. Conference Programme, p. 2.

91 ECP: Know Your Rights: An A-Z for Sex Workers, London 2012.

While activists have reached a certain level of social acceptance, rallied prestigious allies to their cause and exerted pressure on political stakeholders, the confrontation with this new adversarial context has also brought them to realise the limitations of previous collective action frames. As a consequence of this, activists have not only developed new strategies or purposefully co-opted those of their opponents, but are also critically analysing the structural foundations of sex work in an attempt to expand their political perspective. The increased pervasiveness of neo-abolitionism and repressive policies in Europe has thus both greatly challenged the possibilities for sex workers' political organising, as well as sparked their renewed resistance. Further research is needed to determine whether these critical perspectives can gain enough substance within the movement to grow into concrete political visions, and if these will be potent enough to resonate with the general public, mainstream social movements and authorities in the ongoing political mobilisations of the sex worker movement in Europe.

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