Sex Work in Slovenia: Assessing the Needs of Sex Workers

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Abstract
The research comprehensively identifies the needs and problems of sex workers in Slovenia from the point of view of three groups of actors in a decriminalized setting. The objective of the rapid needs assessment was to identify the needs of sex workers as perceived by themselves. In order to gain a deeper insight into this topic, we analyzed the functioning of the organizations working with the population, and examined the perspective of the clients. The results of the study show that no aid programmes have been developed for sex workers, even though organizations from various fields often come in contact with this population. Sex workers express the need to be informed about various topics (health, the law, legal advice) and emphasize client relations as the primary issue. The findings indicate the need for the development of a specialized aid programmes to address the fields of advocacy, reducing social distress and providing psychosocial assistance.

Keywords
apartment prostitution, decriminalization, rapid needs assessment, sex work, sex workers

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Introduction

Prostitution represents one of the largest grey areas in the field of social security in Slovenia, and sex workers\(^1\) are one of its least accessible populations. This is associated with a stigma, which can be perceived in various forms regardless of the way in which this field is regulated in individual countries.

In Slovenia, prostitution is regulated under the Public Order and Peace Protection Act, and has been decriminalized since 2003\(^2\) (ZJRM-1, 2006). This means that it is no longer sanctioned or treated as a misdemeanour, but it is nevertheless not recognized as a legitimate form of work. Prostitution remains forbidden in public places, which is why some authors (Pajnik et al., 2017; Popov, 2008) consider the Slovenian model to be one of partial decriminalization. Such legislation does not provide for social security and health protection of sex workers,\(^3\) leaving them entirely to their own devices in this regard. The current model of regulation also retains the prohibition of the facilitation of prostitution, as defined under Article 175 of the Criminal Code (KZ-1, 2008) which penalizes participation in prostitution for the purpose of exploitation of another person and instructing, obtaining, or encouraging another person to engage in prostitution by force, threats, or deception.

This article explores the ways in which the policy framework and regulation of prostitution affects sex workers in Slovenia, particularly the organization of sex work and sex worker’s needs regarding their work, placing emphasis on the analysis of the needs of sex workers and their experiences. In our attempt to understand the position of sex workers, we focussed on the contextualization of sex work as a continuum of various work-related practices, which are formed according to specific policy frameworks governing the field (Altman, 1999). The article first presents the model of decriminalization of prostitution established in Slovenia and the position of sex workers through a reflection on the current state of sex work in Slovenia. It further explains the implementation of the mixed-method rapid needs assessment, which offered a multiperspective insight into the needs of sex workers from the perspective of three actors – sex workers, organizations, and professionals who come into contact with this population, and the clients of sex workers. Our main argument elaborated in the article is that the policy framework has a decisive influence on the organization of sex work and the needs of sex workers, and that the risks faced by sex workers are structurally reproduced through the lack of regulation in this field. This is presented through the empirical data of our research, arguing that the decriminalization is an essential prerequisite for the recognition of sex worker’s rights (Mossman, 2010), while it is not sufficient to eradicate all risky work-related practices. Given the results of the meta-analysis (Platt et al., 2018) of the regulation of sex work in various countries, a more repressive policy towards sex workers can be linked to a higher risk of violence from clients, increased potential for HIV infection and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and the non-use of protection. Criminalization also affects the organization of sex work, reducing the safety of sex workers and the presence of various support networks (Pitcher and Wijers, 2014). On the other hand, the model of decriminalization of prostitution is largely linked to the positive effects on the health of sex workers, as these structural determinants significantly reduce the incidence of HIV infections among this population (Shannon et al., 2014). Decriminalization also has a
positive impact on the safety of sex workers due to their increased awareness of their rights, ability to report crime, and autonomy at work (Abel et al., 2010; Sallmann, 2010). Our starting point after reviewing the literature was that the field is relatively poorly researched and that there is no specific help and support that would be offered to sex workers in the current model of decriminalization in the context of social protection. The research represents an important step towards understanding the hidden population and identifying and addressing the needs of sex workers in Slovenia.

The scope of prostitution in Slovenia cannot be accurately defined, but according to data from the Slovenian police and media, it is estimated that 3000 to 4000 persons are engaged in sex work (Pajnik, 2017). The authors (Pajnik and Fabijan, 2017; Šori, 2005) estimate that female heterosexual prostitution is prevalent in Slovenia, whereas male and transgender prostitution, albeit present, are more stigmatized and consequently more secluded. According to the Dutch organization TAMPEP (Sex Work in Europe, 2009), similar trends are characteristic of other European countries as well.

Research (Pajnik, 2008; Radačić and Pajnik, 2017; Šori, 2005) indicates that there are several types of prostitution in Slovenia with regard to the place of acquisition of clients or performing of activities. Over the past decade, due to the widespread use of mobile phones and online platforms, prostitution has been moving into apartments (Pajnik, 2017), which is also characteristic of the situation in Slovenia. Apartment prostitution takes place in a private apartment where services are offered by one or more persons. With this form of prostitution, the cost is greater, but hygiene and safety conditions are better, and the possibility of risky behaviours related to violence, drug use, and unprotected sexual relations is lower than in street prostitution (Abel, 2010; Abel et al., 2007; Cunningham and Shah, 2018; Krüsi et al., 2012; Weitzer, 2009). Research (Pajnik, 2008) shows that this form of prostitution is often characterized by an absence of pimp relationships and consequently an increased independence of sex workers. Apartment prostitution is the most common form of prostitution in Slovenia (Pajnik, 2008; Šori, 2005), as well as in general in Europe, the USA, and Australia (Harcourt and Donovan, 2005). Other frequent forms of prostitution in addition to apartment prostitution include escort services, hotel prostitution, and prostitution in massage parlours and nightclubs (Pajnik, 2008; Radačić and Pajnik, 2017; Šori, 2005). Street prostitution exists, but not in a visible form; it can be observed mainly in car parks and rest areas (e.g. along the motorway) (Pajnik, 2008).

In Slovenia, prostitution is more concentrated in urban areas, where due to larger populations there is also a greater demand for sexual services. This does not mean that prostitution is an exclusively urban phenomenon, as it is otherwise scattered throughout Slovenia, including rural areas (Pajnik, 2008, 2017; Šori, 2005). Prostitution is also related to tourism; it is present in tourist centres, where cross border activities, along the border with Italy, Croatia, and Austria, are not uncommon (Pajnik, 2017).

Prostitution is poorly researched in Slovenia, partly due to the inaccessibility of the population and the taboo nature of the topic. An important contribution to the understanding of sex work is the research conducted by the Peace Institute (Pajnik, 2002, 2008; Pajnik et al., 2017; Radačić and Pajnik, 2017), which offers a comprehensive insight into the characteristics of the everyday life of sex workers. The only social security programme for victims of forced prostitution and human trafficking is carried out by
the Ključ association, which also cooperates with the crime police in cases of criminal activity.

The ‘rapid needs assessment in the field of prostitution’ was part of a project for harm reduction in the field of prostitution entitled ‘Sem Ana in nisem tvoja Ančka’ (‘I am Ana and I am not your Ana doll’), which was a pilot project in 2017 with the aim of reducing harm in this field and improving working conditions through sensitization and informing of clients of sex workers. The main purpose of the rapid needs assessment was to examine the needs of sex workers, to highlight the problems of prostitution in Slovenia, and to plan the implementation of services in the field of harm reduction or other forms of aid to sex workers. In our research, we also included the perspective of clients, whom we may also understand from the perspective of violence towards or exploitation of sex workers, but in the context of this research, they offer additional insight into the extent and the problems of sex work.

**Method**

We employed the rapid needs assessment and response (RAR) methodology, which came into use in the field of public health in areas where a rapid response is required in situations associated with, for example, drug use or HIV infection (Stimson et al., 1999, 2006; Trautmann, 2004).

The needs assessment was based on information provided by the sex workers, their clients, professionals, and other individuals who are directly or indirectly associated with the field of prostitution. The objectives of the needs assessment were:

- To analyze the functioning of existing organizations in contact with the population (frequency, cause and method of working with sex workers, and the perceived specificities of the population);
- To identify the problems and needs of sex workers associated with their work; and
- To examine the perspective of the clients along with their experiences, and use this information to gain a different, less researched point of view.

**Study sample**

In the sample, we included organizations, sex workers, and their clients. The in-depth analysis included 20 organizations from all over Slovenia that are directly or indirectly associated with the field of prostitution. Fifteen sex workers participated in a semi-structured telephone interview, and the anonymous online questionnaire was completed by 51 female and male clients. More information on the characteristics of the sample is presented below.

**Data collection**

We used a mixed-method research approach. In the qualitative part of the research, we acquired data through telephone and personal interviews with sex workers and representatives of organizations. The quantitative part of the research was represented by a
web-based questionnaire intended for clients of sex workers. A more in-depth insight into the researched topic was enabled by methodological triangulation (Lobe, 2006), wherein we employed various methods of data collection (personal and telephone interviews, online questionnaire). Triangulation of data sources was also provided, as the study included the perspective of three groups of actors – female sex workers, their clients, and organizations. Data collection took place from June to September 2017. This study was performed in accordance with the Code of Ethics for researchers at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia.

**Sex workers**

Most of the sex workers’ contacts were obtained through various Slovenian web portals on which they advertise (Sloescort, Salomonov oglasi, avanture.net, oglasi.si), and some using the snowball sampling method. We conducted semi-structured telephone interviews with sex workers from all over Slovenia, in which we asked them about their needs, risks, and the difficulties they face in their work and in relationships with their clients. We obtained informed consent before starting the interview. The interviewer acquainted the respondents with the intentions and goals of the research, the option of refusing to participate in the research at any time, and the protection of their privacy and anonymity. We did not collect personal data of the respondents and we ensured their anonymity throughout the research. All the data obtained on web portals (work pseudonyms, contact numbers) were used only in the phase of obtaining contacts with sex workers and were not stored or were omitted from all subsequent phases of data processing and display.

Given the limited availability of sex workers’ contacts, phone calls were the most convenient way for us to establish contact. We were aware at the time of the interview that this type of method may be less favourable for sex workers in terms of their work and availability. A few respondents asked us if we could postpone the interview to a later hour due to their work, which we did. To avoid this ethical implication in the event of repeating the research, we could try a different method of establishing first contact, such as via a message on the web portal, a text message, or a note with the invitation to participate in the research. This type of method would be less interfering with the work and possible loss of earnings of sex workers due to their participation in the research.

The contacts of sex workers were obtained on four web-based portals where they advertise their work. The largest Slovenian online service operating exclusively in the field of prostitution is Sloescort, where we obtained the majority of the sex workers’ contacts. We also searched three other websites: Salomonov oglasi, avanture.net, and oglasi.si. We noticed that the number of ads changes daily; we have noticed both sign-offs, as well as new user registrations, suggesting a significant fluctuation within the field.

Altogether, we called 150 contacts and received answers from 15 (10%) of the sex workers. Based on the relatively poor response rate, we could not plan new areas for obtaining data to cover sex workers since, as mentioned previously, most prostitution in Slovenia takes place through telephone or online contact and in private premises.
**Organizations**

For the purpose of conducting a needs assessment on the part of organizations, we first made an overview of the organizations we assessed to be directly or indirectly associated with sex work in view of their field of operation. In particular, we focused on drug addiction, violence, and homelessness, and we contacted social work centres and organizations involved in mental health, youth, humanitarian activity, the LGBTQ population, and so on.

We contacted 71 organizations over the phone. In the initial conversations, we were interested in how often they faced topics related to prostitution and the sex worker population, the reasons why sex workers turn to them, and what forms of service they offered to this population.

Next, we invited the organizations that work with this population (at least once per year) to a meeting. We met with representatives of 20 organizations and individuals actively involved in the field of prostitution. In the meetings, we obtained in-depth information about their experiences, ways of working, and the specificity of the population through a semi-structured questionnaire.

**Clients**

We obtained the information from clients of sex workers through an anonymous online questionnaire that was designed using the 1KA web application. The link to the questionnaire for clients, active from 25 July to 9 August 2017, was published on two online portals to increase the reach of respondents. The first was the Sloescort forum, which enables exchanging experiences between clients, and an additional sample was obtained on the web page avanture.net, where we created a false profile of a sex worker and then provided anyone who was interested in our services a link to the online questionnaire.

The questionnaire included 10 short questions of the open and closed type. We were interested in how often they visited sex workers, what their experience was with visiting sex workers, and what problems they encountered. We also asked them if they could highlight one positive and one negative experience with visiting a sex worker.

The questionnaire was accessed by 286 people (click on the questionnaire) and completed by 51 respondents (18%).

**Results**

**Sample characteristics**

**Sex workers.** All 15 interviewed sex workers are engaged in apartment prostitution and deny involvement in a pimp relationship. Since they organize their work independently, they most frequently rent apartments for work, which they typically share with other sex workers. The length of their involvement in prostitution varies – from 1 week to several decades. Almost half of them come from outside of Slovenia and do not speak Slovenian. All 15 women advertise their services on online bulletins (Sloescort, Salomonov oglasnik, avanture.net, oglasi.si), some also on several different sites at the same time. They all use pseudonyms in the advertisements.
Organizations. Our sample represented 20 governmental and non-governmental organizations that work with our target population at least once a year. We covered the geographical area of all of Slovenia and various fields of action: illicit drug addiction, alcoholism, victims of human trafficking, homelessness, violence, LGBT populations, youth, police, social work centres, and human rights.

Clients. Of the 51 respondents, 50 were male. Nineteen persons (37%) were between 31 and 40 years of age, 17 persons (33%) between 41 and 50 years. The rest were either less than 20 years of age or older than 51. With regard to marital status, 3 persons (6%) did not wish to answer, 22 persons (42%) were single, and 26 persons (51%) were married or in a partner relationship. Of this, 24 people, that is almost half of the respondents (47%), would visit sex workers monthly, 14 (27%) would visit them annually, one person several times a week, and two persons once a week.

Needs assessment by sex workers

On the basis of conversations with 15 sex workers, we find that more than half (9) report problems with clients as the main problem encountered in their work. Two of them also mention financial trouble and vaginal moisture issues, while others (5) say they do not have problems at work.

We asked the sex workers to more specifically identify the problems with clients. They primarily pointed out levity (5), rudeness and vulgarity (3), violence or roughness (1), bargaining on payment (1), extension of the visit/service without additional charge, (1) and phone calls outside working hours (1). Sex workers have developed various coping strategies in response to problems with clients. One of these strategies is to set a higher price for their services, which is supposed to lead to ‘improving the clientele’, or to reduce problems with clients.

Reviewing these needs, we find that half of the interviewed sex workers would be most interested in gaining information about general and sexual health (8), as well as information on the legal regulation of prostitution in Slovenia and legal advice (6). They would like to participate in self-help groups (5); however, they are not interested in or believe that they do not need psychosocial counselling and therapy. They are also not interested in employment counselling, except for two participants who mentioned that they would be interested in information about how to establish an independent company (s.p.). The opinions of sex workers were the most divided in regard to socializing with one another; some were strongly in favour, while others strongly against it due to competition. A third of the interviewed sex workers were interested in various leisure activities.

Throughout our conversations with the sex workers, other topics would often come to light. One of these was the reason for entering prostitution. Two of the women told us they took up this work due to a poor economic situation and having to provide for a family. Their stances on prostitution as a form of work vary. One participant told us she enjoyed the work, while another sees it as psychological and physical strain. Two sex workers placed much importance on anonymity, among other things because they want to create a normal life in the future, which they associate with exiting prostitution.
**Needs assessment by organizations**

Of all the organizations in the sample (71), 20 (28%) reported that they often encountered this population (several times a year), and 8 (11%) organizations reported they did not regularly encounter this population, but were interested in it, or would encounter it only indirectly. Other organizations (43 or 61%) do not address this topic in their work. We included the first group of organizations in a second round, where we held meetings with their representatives and discussed this topic and their experiences in detail.

Representatives of the organizations operating in the field of drug use mentioned that people start engaging in prostitution because of the need for drugs or money. As a result, they cease engaging in prostitution when they cease using drugs. It is important to note that this pattern is not a rule; according to the respondents from organizations, the use of drugs can occur as a means to help cope with the negative consequences of prostitution. The dynamics of homelessness and prostitution function similarly as with drug use. In this case, prostitution can also be a means to provide lodging.

Various organizations pointed out that prostitution often goes hand-in-hand with human trafficking, violence, pimping, or other ways of exploitation. According to them, the victims of human trafficking often do not seek help due to ‘their own lack of interest in solving the problem’. This being a result of absence of taxation of sex work in Slovenia and low trust in institutions.

In addition to harm reduction, professionals emphasize the importance of psychotherapy and therapy groups, which they recognize as the most effective means of aid to overcome trauma, improve self-image, increase awareness of their own body, and set boundaries. They also place great importance on informing about the appropriate attitudes of professional workers in the field of health care, police, and various other fields working with this population.

**Client perspective**

Most clients (83%) had positive or mostly positive experiences, 6 (12%) define their experiences as negative or mostly negative, and one person did not answer the question. A positive experience most often pointed out is the attitude of sex workers – properly performed services and a professional attitude, willingness of sex workers to talk about personal topics, and a professional, friendly, and personal approach.

Positive experiences are often associated with a careful selection of sexual service providers, which includes visiting regular sex workers or sex workers who do not come from abroad (as they are more likely to be victims of human trafficking). Some visit women who have a high rating online, others try to decide on a meeting on the basis of a contact (e-mail, phone call).

Most respondents had had a negative experience with visiting a sex worker. The most common negative experiences reported are misdirection and derogations from the advertisements (age, body type). A major problem in the clients’ view is also the poor hygiene of certain sex workers (unpleasant smell, fungi, inflammation, herpes, unkemptness, non-use of depilation products), as well as inadequacy of the premises in which the service is being carried out (dirty sheets with stains from previous clients, used towels,
mattress on the floor, general disorderliness, dirty bathroom, musty odour, foul air, etc.). They also mentioned the poor discretion of the premises, which is linked to the presence of several sex workers or clients in an apartment at the same time.

Another negative aspect reported by the clients is the inappropriate attitudes of sex workers (disregard of the agreed term, a cold approach, arrogance, non-interest). They see this attitude as a result of drug use, and they feel that it is more common with sex workers from abroad. One client had a negative experience of becoming infected with a sexually transmitted disease after visiting a sex worker and a general fear of various infections. Clients also report inebriation and intoxication in sex workers, problems with theft of money, and occasional extortion by sex workers.

**Discussion**

The multiperspective research grants an important insight into a hidden population in a space where prostitution is not only stigmatized but also overlooked in terms of regulatory practices. The results interpreted below reflect the organization of sex work in the context of the decriminalization model and also demonstrate some of the needs of sex workers which have not yet been addressed in the existing regulation (e.g. social and health care security), while stressing the importance of decriminalization as an essential starting point for the corresponding legislation based on the voice of sex workers and working towards a safer work environments.

Most prominent at the macro level is the necessity for modification of the legal regulation, since it is an important factor in creating the conditions and context of sex work (Scoular, 2010). Despite the fact that prostitution is decriminalized in Slovenia, it is not perceived as a legitimate form of work, although this field is partly regulated by the standard classification of activities (SKD, 2008) and the standard classification of occupations (SKP-08, 2008), which allow sex workers to register their work under code 96.040 ‘Physical well-being activities’ or 96.090 ‘Other personal service activities’. In such documents, prostitution is concealed under the term ‘other services’, which suggests that it is not a particularly regulated activity in Slovenia (Pajnik, 2017). Registering this type of work means that the individual is formally engaged in a legitimate activity (as an independent entrepreneur), but this is not common practice. For sex workers, registration of their activity means the obligation to pay taxes, but, on the other hand, also the acquisition of all rights applicable in labour legislation, such as social security and health insurance, recognition of seniority, paid sick leave, and so on. Pajnik (2008) states that sex workers are most often unwilling to be identified as being involved in prostitution, as this stigmatizes them and reduces their chances of finding another occupation in the future. This was also confirmed in our research; two interviewees pointed out the importance of anonymity, which enables a future without the stigma.

Such statements also imply that sex workers perceive their activities as temporary arrangements, opportunities to improve their financial situation, which is why they do not wish to be identified with the role of a sex worker. The reality is often different, however. Despite the desire to exit and the perception of prostitution as a temporary solution, the period of engagement in prostitution is often extended by several years,
and it can lead to repeated exclusion or stigmatization because of drug use or homelessness.

The stigma of sex work is also associated with anonymity. During the process of data collection, it would often occur that the sex workers we contacted dismissed us and denied involvement in prostitution. We can link this phenomenon to Goffman’s (2014) concept of identity policy that individuals use to cope with stigma. The main feature of this identity policy is a role-play in which a person is represented externally as a ‘normal’ person (Ule, 2000) and makes sure to create an impression in others that is in the person’s own interest, that is, playing their own role in the context of restoring and revalidating moral social values (Goffman, 2014). The stigmatization of prostitution is at a relatively high level in Slovenia, which is why destigmatization and decriminalization are among the key orientations in the effort to improve the situation of sex workers (Benoit et al., 2017; Platt et al., 2018). According to Pajnik (2008), the poor working conditions and the difficulties faced by sex workers arise from the stigmatization of this field; they are not intrinsic to the phenomenon, but rather the result of restrictive legal measures, moralizing, and stigma.

There are no unambiguous solutions in terms of the best or the optimal model of regulation which would address the needs of a population this heterogeneous. A review of various models of regulation in Europe (Scoular, 2010) showed that conflicting regulation (the case of legalization in the Netherlands and the abolition in Sweden) results in similar outcomes and consequences for persons engaged in prostitution. Also of interest is the finding of research from New Zealand (Abel, 2014), which has shown different influences of the same model of regulation. In spite of decriminalization, street sex workers experience difficulties and inappropriate client relations more often than sex workers who work in apartments. Armstrong (2011) also notes that decriminalization, despite some positive effects, does not eliminate all the negative aspects of sex work, particularly those related to client violence. An important contribution of such a model of regulation is primarily reflected in better awareness of sex workers about the regulation of this field and, consequently, greater sensibility for the reporting of violent acts, and the relations between sex workers and the police were also improved (Armstrong, 2011; Krüsi et al., 2012). In terms of eliminating punitive laws towards sex work, decriminalization is a key contribution to ensuring better working conditions and reducing work-related risks of sex workers. The findings indicate the complexity of regulating this field, which makes it crucial for sex workers to be involved in the process of policy change, as also pointed out by the international organization TAMPEP (Sex Work in Europe, 2009) and some of the results of our study.

A deficiency of Slovenian legislation is also the absence of the provision of social security and health care for sex workers, which often puts them in a fragile situation. A study in the area of Slovenia (Pajnik, 2008) showed that sex workers supported legal regulation which would place a high level of importance on social security by introducing mandatory health checks and various aid programmes. The introduction of such a measure would also make sense in terms of the reduction of infections with sexually transmitted diseases, which represent a relatively large problem in prostitution. In fact, sex workers often opt for unprotected sexual intercourse, as they receive higher payment for it. Fear of STIs was mentioned by one of the participating clients of sex workers, and
the need to raise awareness of sexual health was stressed by several interviewed sex workers. We believe that sex work should be regulated with changes at the systemic level in terms of determining the basic working conditions of sex work, which would contribute to improving the social and health situation. On the basis of the findings of the study, the problematic areas identified include STIs, inappropriate relationships and hygiene, and unsuitability of the premises in which the service is performed, indicating the need for appropriate regulation of sex work. A sex work study from Canada (Benoit et al., 2017) showed that the said needs are addressed by a model of decriminalization regulating the field of sex work by introducing minimum working standards and taking into account the existing health and safety conditions which also regulate other professions. According to sex workers (Benoit et al., 2017), decriminalization and regulation have positive effects on health, both at the systemic and the individual level.

In the context of this research, problems with clients were shown to be the most common negative aspect of sex work despite the fact that the decriminalized setting allows sex workers to negotiate with potential customers more than in other models of regulation and, in turn, facilitate safer encounters while engaging in sex work (Lutnick and Cohan, 2009). Problems arise from inappropriate relationships of the clients towards sex workers, but also from non-compliance with the arrangements (bargaining on payment, extension of the visit/service without additional charge, phone calls outside working time). Negative client experience is often associated with the inability to set boundaries in relation to clients. Some interviewees consider client problems and inappropriate behaviour as stemming from the fact that clients do not perceive visiting a sex worker as a service, but as a type of personal contact characterized by mutual sympathy. A similar characteristic of apartment prostitution is also noted by Weitzer (2009), who points out it is characterized by a more intensive social interaction between the client and the sex worker. Consequently, friendly ties are more often formed between them, involving elements of romantic love (conversations, hugs, kisses, gifts, etc.), although sex work, due to its characteristics, could be said to embody Giddens’ (1992) concept of plastic sexuality in a way, deviating from the ideals of romantic love.

These types of relationships are also described by the clients who participated in our study. In their answers to the questionnaire, they specifically point out the personal attitude of sex workers as a positive feature. Clients describe it as a conversation, personal acceptance (not just perceiving them as a client), offering additional services (although they do not offer them otherwise), extending the meeting at no extra charge, and in some cases a special affection or sympathy, which may grow into keeping contact outside of visits. From the point of view of sex workers, such client relationships are a burdensome factor, as the workers must develop different strategies for demarcating professional and private life and sexuality in view of setting boundaries in relations with clients. Research (Syversten et al., 2013) has shown that sex workers separate sexuality within their relationship from commercial sex, namely by excluding certain services, such as kissing, from their range of customer services (Warr and Pyett, 1999).

The negative experiences perceived by sex workers are also associated with client violence, which was noted by one sex worker among the interviewees. Violence, psychological or physical, is said to be a constant in the life of sex workers, especially those working on the street (Farley, 2004). Violence is also reported by
interviewed representatives of social security organizations as a phenomenon heavily linked to prostitution. Through our conversations with sex workers, we found that women engaged in prostitution have a different perception of violence, not one of zero tolerance which may apply in society. Some forms of behaviour (e.g. compulsion to sexual intercourse without protection) that contain indications of violence, in some cases even rape, are not actually perceived as violence by the sex workers themselves. Farley (2004) addresses the normalization of rape in prostitution. She says (Farley, 2004) that rape may be perceived in society as part of the business and in some cases, it is even possible to perceive a belief that the woman who performs such work had provoked rape herself. The findings of the study related to the violence suffered by sex workers should be appropriately addressed in the future. Not only in the manner of declarative zero tolerance towards sexual violence in society, but also through raising awareness of zero tolerance towards sexual violence, in particular towards vulnerable and stigmatized target groups. In the case of sex workers, this does not only entail raising awareness that ‘nobody’ should cause them violence, but also to change the perception or definition of this phenomenon from their perspective.

Violence against sex workers most often remains unreported, which is also shown by the results of research in Slovenia (Fabijan, 2017). Women are often convinced that their reports would not be taken seriously or treated fairly (Matthews, 2008). Our research has shown that the sex workers are poorly informed about the laws governing the area of prostitution, which is another one of the potential reasons for their silence in relation to the police. This is also associated with the fear of police interventions, which may originate from bad past experience with national authorities (Fabijan, 2017) and low trust in institutions. Informing professional workers from various disciplines on the appropriate relationship and work with this population is therefore one of the key needs in harm reduction in this area and would contribute to better and less discriminatory treatment of sex workers.

Sex workers have developed various coping strategies in response to problems with clients. One of these is the aforementioned raising of prices with the desire to reduce client problems. Similar findings are noted by Fabijan (2017), who, however, points out that this strategy does not necessarily lead to a more secure working environment. On the other hand, selection, as a safety mechanism against negative experiences, was also mentioned by clients of sex workers. Some make sure about their selection in advance via phone call before visiting. Clients point out that they avoid visiting foreign women and tend to keep visiting the same sex worker to avoid potential negative experiences. Women from abroad are more often victims of human trafficking or are involved in pimp relationships, making them less ‘interested’ in their work and performing it more ‘industrially’. The clients define this as a cold, indifferent, or non-interested approach by the sex worker; according to Vanwesenbeeck (2005), it is a strategy for depersonalisation, which helps sex workers cope with emotional strain and establish a distance in relation to their work. This type of client behaviour pattern is also more often perceived by sex workers who use drugs. Drugs are also considered by representatives of organizations to be a means to mitigate the negative effects of sex work, and dependence may be the cause of entry into prostitution or its consequence.
So-called working apartments are also an important strategy that affects the sense of security. It is typical of apartment prostitution that the providers share their working apartments with other sex workers, which, in addition to financial advantages, brings a greater sense of security. Similar findings are noted by Fabijan (2017), who says that sex workers protect each other in the event of negative incidents from clients, thereby helping reduce the negative consequences of prostitution. Most prefer another worker to be present in the apartment during client visits, which, on the other hand, is identified by clients as a negative experience related to a lack of discretion. Grouping or cooperation between sex workers is also a good preventive strategy and reduces the risk of infection with sexually transmitted diseases, which was found by Cohan (2006) in the San Francisco study. The results of our research indicate the ambivalence of the views on the socializing of sex workers; some were distinctly for it, while other strongly against it due to competition. Strong competition among sex workers is also apparent from the fact that sex workers often do not provide their true information in their advertisements, making the latter misleading. Clients noted this as one of the negative aspects of prostitution in Slovenia, and the problem is closely linked to the physical ideals of a woman as dictated by social expectations. From the point of view of social constructionist theory, femininity is a socially constructed concept around which various social roles and expectations accumulate. And although the theory of existential feminism, as substantiated by Simone de Beauvoir (2013), defends the notion that it is sex workers who free sexuality from existing shackles, we find that the prevailing social discourse of femininity can also be perceived within prostitution.

Connecting sex workers is one of the key needs to be addressed in the fight for their rights. The necessity of self-organization and the creation of trade unions is also addressed by sex workers in a manifest (Sex Workers in Europe Manifesto, 2005). Attempts by sex workers to self-organize have been emerging in Slovenia in recent times. Networking between sex workers, as done elsewhere in the world, is crucial primarily because it would begin to express their needs and uphold their rights. It would also be more than necessary from a self-help perspective, as sex workers share a common stigma and the experience of living with it (Goffman, 2008).

Because of its specificity, sex work is often associated with other societal issues, such as human trafficking, violence, pimping, or other ways of exploitation, which causes the population to come into contact with organizations from various fields. Given the fact that most sex workers do not seek help from social welfare organizations (Sloan and Wahab, 2000), it would be reasonable to start by introducing various assistance programmes or upgrading existing ones. Giving recommendations on the upgrading of existing programmes refers to a greater understanding of the specificity of vulnerable target groups of women (Zorc-Maver and Zrim-Martinjak, 2013) and providing information and assistance to those users who, in addition to problems like homelessness, mental health problems, drug use, etc., are also faced with risks associated with sex work. In addition to raising awareness of general and sexual health and the regulation of prostitution in Slovenia, the interviewed sex workers also express an interest in legal advice and employment counselling, which is associated with the registration of an occupation. The field of prostitution requires a multidisciplinary and comprehensive approach, as well as broader societal and systemic changes that would lead to a better treatment of the
population and the development of specialized programmes in the field of social security. Based on the findings of our research, we can recommend the development of a specialized aid programmes, which, in addition to harm reduction, would also address advocacy, social and health security, and providing psychosocial assistance.

Regulation and policies in the field of prostitution often do not address the issues of discrimination and destigmatization of prostitution. It is precisely the stigmatization of sex work and sex workers that can (even within a decriminalized setting) make it more difficult to access social welfare services and exercise the rights arising from labour legislation. Although the decriminalization of sex work is a precondition to secure the labour and human rights of sex workers, the involvement of sex workers in policy development and facilitation of different modes of working are necessary to improve their working conditions and autonomy (Pitcher and Wijers, 2014).

Conclusion

The contextualization of sex work as work comparable to other professions requires the identification of the specifics and challenges of such work, which was the aim of the rapid needs assessment conducted as part of the research. Our research showed that sex work in Slovenia is strongly marked by an absence of aid programmes aimed at sex workers. Despite the decriminalized setting, sex work remains highly stigmatized, accompanied by an absence of public discourse about sex work and organizations that would establish programmes for sex workers. While the sex workers participating in the study primarily point out the need for harm reduction and information programmes, representatives of organizations place greater importance on programmes that would provide psychological and psychotherapeutic assistance. This divergence in thinking may be due to the heterogeneity of the field of prostitution as the sex workers we included in the research are engaged in apartment prostitution and are not users of social security programmes. Certainly, however, the inclusion of particularly vulnerable sex workers in programmes is important for solving their psychosocial distress and improving their situation. Importantly, interventions should address the actual needs of sex workers focusing on the perspective of harm reduction and on informing sex workers about various topics such as safe sex, health, legal regulation and rights, and so on. In addition to addressing the needs of sex workers in social welfare programmes, there is a need to destigmatize sex work on a broader social scale and to recognize it as a legitimate form of work, which can be seen as a starting point for establishing social policies and acknowledging workplace rights of sex workers. Through an insight into the needs of sex workers, the present research represents an important shift towards the principle of ‘collaborative governance’, which emphasizes an active role and perspective of sex workers in the process of changing the legislation policies regulating sex work. Considering the specifics of sex work, this is of great importance for improving and upgrading the (social) policies governing sex work to put voices of sex workers as agents of change, building the policies based on diverse (working) practices and experiences of sex workers rather than moral restraints towards it.
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Notes
1. This study predominantly uses the neutral form ‘sex worker’ to refer to female sex workers as there is a majority proportion of female prostitution in comparison to other types in Slovenia, and all the sex workers participating in our study are female.

2. Decriminalization is a regulatory model for prostitution which does not provide specific laws against prostitution (Macioti and Geymonat, 2016) when relating to a voluntary relationship between all the actors. Although the offering of sexual services is decriminalized, the act of intermediation or organization of prostitution still remains criminalized. In Slovenia, this is defined under Article 175 of the Criminal Code. The model has been established in Spain, Portugal, Poland, the Czech Republic, and since 2003, in Slovenia as well.

3. The article uses a term recognized in international scientific literature, ‘sex work’, when referring to women or men in prostitution (as a phenomenon in society). The authors of the article understand both the perspectives that attempt to equate sex work with other forms of work, as well as those which denounce the term, seeing any such activity as an act of violence which should not be denoted by the term ‘work’.

4. The Sloescort portal, where the sex workers advertise their services, allows clients to post their ratings according to the following criteria: appearance, congeniality and service.

5. The term refers to the field of the sex industry, which assumes the performance of various commercial sexual services against payment. This term is used by clients in the study to indicate the performance of sexual services characterized by an indifferent, distanced attitude of the sex worker towards the client, perceiving the client as merely part of the service.

References


Author biographies

Leja Markelj holds a M.A. in Social Pedagogy and is a researcher at the Peace Institute, Institute for Contemporary Social and Political Studies, Ljubljana. Her master thesis which studied the notions of motherhood and intimate relationship of female sex workers was awarded by the University Prešeren Award. She has participated in research projects that addressed sex work through a harm reduction perspective, in relation to violence, stigma, policy and discrimination.

Alisa Selan is a social pedagogue who obtained her Master’s Degree in 2018. She works with children with learning, emotional and behavioural difficulties. From 2017 to 2019 she was the president of the Freya Association, which aimed to provide help for sex workers in Slovenia, through projects such as I am Ana and I am not your Ana Doll and Rapid Needs Assessment.

Tjaša Dolinar obtained her Master’s degree in Social Pedagogy in 2017. Right after graduation she worked on a project, which focused on helping the families of children with emotional and behavioural difficulties. In her student years she, along with her colleagues, started the Freya Association and worked on enhancing wellbeing of people, who work in prostitution in Slovenia.

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