

“It’s nice here... Kind women and no penises,
what else do you want?” Exploring normative
discourses on gender and sex work.

AN EXPLORATION OF THE NORMATIVE DISCOURSES PRESENT IN THE LIVED PRACTICES OF WORKING
WITH AND FOR SEX WORKERS AT THE OVERWEEGHUIS IN GRONINGEN.



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In remembrance of Ada

Illustration by Jonna Bo Lammers

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Abstract

This thesis explores how normative discourses about the sex industry are present in the lived practices of people working for and with sex workers at a grassroots organisation, the Overweeghuis in Groningen. The normative discourses on sex work either aim to abolish the sex industry or destigmatise and normalise sex work. These discourses oppose each other in academic literature and political advocacy on the policies and treatment of sex workers in the Netherlands and internationally. Within this contentious normative environment, the Overweeghuis works with sex workers without taking an explicit stance within either discourse. However, in the lived practices of the Overweeghuis, both normative discourses are present in different practices. Although the practices are more negative towards the sex industry, this does not conflict with actors that adhere to more empowering beliefs about the sex industry. Through a phenomenological ethnographic analysis, this thesis demonstrates how the Overweeghuis inhabits a common ground between the two feminist discourses and what values from each discourse are represented in the lived practices at the Overweeghuis.

1. Introduction

“I feel so unhappy in this house that I will probably leave soon, if I can’t find a place to live, I will just go back to working (sex work)”, says Sylvia¹ as she is cutting the vegetables for the communal meal at the Overweeghuis that evening. I am worried about money all the time, and I feel so unsafe with the residents that are still using drugs”.

This quote was said to me during my ethnographic fieldwork at the Overweeghuis in Groningen. The Overweeghuis is a house in which women who feel stuck in the sex industry can find a place to stay for free and reconsider whether they want to continue working in the sex industry or stop. About 40 volunteers and social workers spend time at the house each week to support and accompany the residents during their stay. The volunteers and staff all have diverse backgrounds and beliefs about sex work and the residents—resulting in a patchwork of different views and norms in the house. The Overweeghuis officially does not mandate whether they favour stopping or continuing, and all the residents are entirely free to leave (Schreuder, 2020). However, implicitly most of the volunteers and staff want the women to leave the sex industry for good and going back to sex work is often not seen as a success story. In this way, the Overweeghuis is interacting with normative questions about sex work, such as, is sex work empowering for sex workers or is sex work harmful and forced upon the people working as sex workers?

Over my 15 months of fieldwork as a volunteer at the Overweeghuis in Groningen, I have had a lot of similar conversations to the quote at the beginning of the chapter. Each time, I feel conflicted. Should I convince her to stay in the house? Should I just let her leave? Will she be better off doing sex work? Should I want her to stay in the house if she feels unhappy and

¹ Within this thesis, I describe the stories and conversations I had with residents and volunteers. To ensure the anonymity of my interlocutors, I have merged several stories and distinctive backgrounds together within one vignette. To this end, the story retains all the elements of the observations I made at the Overweeghuis, yet it cannot be easily retraced to an actual person. Next to that, I have changed all the names of the interlocutors.

financially insecure? Or am I projecting my normativity and beliefs about sex work on her situation?

These are just some of the moral questions I confront during a shift. As such, I became motivated to study the ideological undergirding of beliefs about sex work and how the lived practice of the Overweeghuis was affected by the normative discourses of sex and the body both internationally and nationally.

The sex industry and sex work are contentious topics within feminism and wider society. Sex work² stands at the intersection of many societal debates about poverty, substance abuse, migration, gendered violence, and class. Most feminist literature agrees about the harm of these intersecting wrongs in the sex industry (Gesser, 2021; Sanders, 2004). However, the feminist perspective on the sex industry is undecided about its stance toward sex work; some feminists believe sex work should be abolished while others want to normalise and destigmatise sex work. As such, the topic of sex work creates an incommensurable rift between feminist advocacy groups and feminist academia. This thesis explores the beliefs of the most dominant feminist

² Many different words are used to describe the sex industry and the people that find themselves working in it. The main words to describe them are sex workers, prostitutes, whores or victims of sexual exploitation and trafficking. The most commonly used words are sex workers and prostitutes to describe the workers and sex work and prostitution to describe the concept of having sex for remuneration.

I am aware that the language surrounding sex work is highly politicised and that the words used to describe the sex industry are contentious. Furthermore, activists from different sides of the political spectrum have devised a vocabulary of words that adhere to their ideology (Global Network of Sexwork Projects, 2013). In my literature review I will not take a specific political stance on the morality of the sex industry. However, it will not be possible to conduct a literature review without using possibly contentious words. The word prostitution is often used by abolitionist movement (the oppression paradigm). Next to that, it carries with it a longer historical usage and thus a less neutral connotation than sex work. For the coherency of my argument, I will use the words sex worker to describe the people who get paid for sex and I will use sex buyer to describe the people who pay sex. By using these words, I do not presuppose a consensual nature of the sex industry. I have chosen to use these words because I do not believe that the term sex work excludes a possibly forced or psychologically traumatic experience. Like other labour, it can be done based on a consensual relationship or as exploitation akin to slavery (Ditmore, 2006). Moreover, I also do not presuppose the inherent violence and patriarchal structure associated to sex work that is assumed by radical feminism. Rather, I compare these narratives within a literature study.

paradigms on the sex industry, namely the sex-positive/empowerment paradigm and, the radical feminist/oppression paradigm. The former, intends to diminish the abuse and violence in the sex industry by normalising and decriminalising the sex industry. Yet, the latter, aims to diminish the violence and abuses of sex workers by abolishing the sex industry altogether. I have chosen to frame by description of the different paradigms along the concepts of the body, sexuality and normativity, because these concepts are viewed differently across discourses about the sex industry. The oppression and empowerment paradigm differ mostly in their views on the body and sexuality. In other words, they endorse a different expressions of the body and sexuality of sex worker. These differences permeate through their perceptions of the norms and regulations the sex industry should adhere to. For example, the empowerment paradigms views sex for remuneration as a use of the body and expression of sexuality that is not inherently harmful and should be destigmatised. Whereas, the oppression paradigms views this activity as an expression of male dominance over vulnerable women, thereby degrading the bodies of the women that do sex work (Jeffreys, 1995).

Therefore, the vision and policies these two paradigms propose differ greatly and they oppose and antagonise each other through political advocacy.³ Because of this tension, the two paradigms cannot effectively counter the abuses in the sex industry or improve the lived experience of sex workers. Both paradigms support policies that contradict each other; thereby creating chaotic and unreliable policy changes (Altink & Wagenaar, 2012).

³ Many scholars that research feminism and the sex industry have reported and laid out the differences between these two paradigms such as Weitzer (2010), Hewer (2021), Gesser (2020), Bernstein (2010), Srinivasan (2021) and Jeffreys (1997). However, I also experience the tension between the two paradigms first-hand at a conference about human trafficking and sexual exploitation. During the conference, advocates of the two paradigms would leave when someone of the opposing camp was giving a lecture, and they would roll their eyes or make hostile remarks whenever the other paradigm was mentioned. There had also been a heated discussion between two panelists that almost got out of hand, but regrettably I was not there when that happened. This experience and the literature on the rift between these two paradigms showed me how high the tensions between these groups get in an academic and political advocacy setting.

Within the everchanging political climate of regulating the sex industry, the Overweeghuis does not formally align itself with either paradigm. However, normative discourses permeate through the lived practice of the house in the actions and conversations of volunteers and residents.

By using a phenomenological lens, I will analyse auto ethnographic vignettes that I wrote while working as a volunteer at the Overweeghuis. Hence, my method of data collection consisted of auto ethnographic participant observation.

In January 2021, I started working as a volunteer at the Overweeghuis. During this time, I conducted participant observations and wrote vignettes on the lived practices of the Overweeghuis. Within these observations, I focused mainly on my experience and thoughts as a volunteer, thus practising autoethnography. Thereafter, I used a phenomenological lens to analyse the vignettes and frame my observations of the lived practices at the house.

A phenomenological approach observes phenomena, such as an experience, without holding it against an objective reality. Rather, everything is conceived as subjective and lived experiences. Multiple experiences of the same phenomenon can be different and contradict each other, without making one conception false or true. As ethnographer Robert Desjarlais, demonstrates, many realities can be true in the same context. In his ethnographic observation of a homeless shelter in Boston, he notices how the residents and staff conceive and experience the shelter in different ways (Desjarlais, 1997 p 36), where the staff members conceive the shelter as a luxurious, and peaceful place, the residents do not always share that enthusiasm and at times feel disoriented and unseen at the shelter. Hence, the task of the ethnographer is to report and demonstrate how these realities take place (Desjarlais & Jason Throop, 2011). In a similar vein, I observe life at the Overweeghuis as a patchwork of experiences and perceptions, where a phenomenon is experienced differently by every person at the house. Furthermore, every actor at the house is informed by their own normative perceptions of the sex industry. Therefore, a

phenomenological analysis allows me to study the lived reality of the different paradigms without stating the validity of one paradigm over the other.

The objective of this thesis is to analyse how normative discourses affect the lived practice of working for and with sex workers at the Overweeghuis in Groningen. Within academic literature and political advocacy the rift between the feminist paradigms causes tension and creates difficulties in making policies for the sex industry. Yet, there are no studies on the effects of the discourses in small NGO's and grassroot organisations that work with sex workers. Therefore, this thesis aims to add to the literature and understanding of how feminist paradigms are present in working with and for sex workers, based on the example of the Overweeghuis. These findings could inform future policies on the sex industry.

To reach this objective, I will answer the research question: How can we understand the lived practices of working with and for sex workers in the Overweeghuis through the concept of sex, the body and normativity?

My quote at the start of the chapter indicates how I interacted with normative discourses on sex work on small daily conversations with residents while being at the Overweeghuis. This thesis further explores how these discourses are present within some lived practices at the Overweeghuis. For this exploration, I will start by answering the following sub questions;

1. What are the most dominant normative discourses about sex work and how do they conceptualise the body and sexuality of sex workers?
2. How are the patriarchal, oppression, and empowerment paradigm present in the Dutch context of sex work?
3. What insights does a phenomenological and auto ethnographic description give on the lived practices at the Overweeghuis?

In the first chapter I will answer the first sub question by I taking the following steps; firstly, illuminate the concepts of normativity and phenomenological analysis in a conceptual framework. Secondly, I will describe the three most dominant normative discourses on sex work in international academic literature and political advocacy. Thirdly, I will illustrate how these normative discourse narrate and present the body and sexuality of sex workers. Fourthly, I will review the literature of other ethnographers on the body and sexuality of sex workers, to set forth how these concepts play out in various ethnographic settings. Thereby, I will illustrate how normativity on the body and sexuality of sex work contribute to the lived experience of stigmatisation of sex workers. Finally, I will discuss the policies the different put forward to alleviate the stigma and violence in the sex industry.

In the second chapter, I will illustrate the Dutch context of sex work, to the end of describing the national context in which the Overweeghuis is situated. In this chapter, I will outline the historical context and current Dutch policies and attitudes regarding sex work. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how the normative discourses are present within Dutch politics about sex work.

The third chapter gives an ethnographic description of the lived practices of the Overweeghuis. Within this description it will zoom in on the themes of the physical space of the house, gender, lived religion, safety, and stigma. Furthermore, this chapter will analyse how normative discourses affect the lived practices at the Overweeghuis; thereby answering the main research question.

1.1.1 Academic and societal relevance of the research

This research will contribute to the ethnographic understanding of lived practices at civil shelters and working with volunteers at grassroot organisations. Because there are no

ethnographies that describe a shelter for sex workers, I will use the example of the ethnographies of Robert Desjarlais and Courtney Bender, that demonstrate the nuance in the lived practice of a homeless shelter and a grassroots NGO (Bender, 2011; Desjarlais, 1997). Furthermore, this research serves as an example of encapsulating complexities of working with and for sex workers at a grassroots NGO. Thereby, interacting with feminist normative discourses on the sex industry.

In my ethnographic observations at the Overweeghuis, I noticed that differences of opinion were present and volunteers held different beliefs about the sex industry. However, these differences did not impair the volunteers and staff members to work together. Moreover, within the Overweeghuis the goals that feminists shared about the sex industry surfaced. Such as the goal to see the person behind the sex worker, destigmatise sex workers and give them a place in society. Through these shared objectives the Overweeghuis could inhabit the common ground between the paradigms.

Besides the lofty objective of empowering the agency of sex workers and aiding them in leaving the sex industry; the lived practice of the Overweeghuis was not always as neutral in its stances toward the sex industry as its website implied. This ethnography demonstrates how lived practices simultaneously embodied ideals from the oppression and the empowerment paradigm. For instance, by emphasizing the personal responsibility residents had in their lives, the practice moved toward the empowerment paradigm. However, the practice of encouraging residents to leave the sex industry reflects the ideals of the oppression paradigm. Through these practices the Overweeghuis places itself within the Dutch history both paternalising and empowering the agency of sex workers. However, the Overweeghuis also withstands the tension between secular and religious groups on the subject of sex work by giving space to rich experiences of lived religion at the Overweeghuis.

By critically analysing the lived practice at the Overweeghuis, the various layers of normativity encapsulating the concept of the sex industry come to light. Such as the practice of only allowing women into the Overweeghuis. Through this practice the belief that sex work is a female profession is further established. Moreover, the house was considered more safe and comfortable because of the absence of men at the house. Thus, equally confirming the victimisation of women by men in the sex industry. Thereby, the lived practice of the Overweeghuis reflects and nuances feminist conceptualisations on the body and sexuality present in the literature about sex work.

2. Literature review and conceptual framework

2.1 Introduction

Feminist academic literature has devoted considerable time exploring the issue of sex work (Sanders et al., 2012; Scoular, 2004). Yet, it is considered one of the most divisive issues on the feminist agenda today. Since sex work is related to labour, criminal justice, gender inequality and sexual freedom, It is discussed by liberal, marxist, postmodern and queer theorists.

Evidently, the conclusions all these different theorists arrive at divide feminist advocacy and subsequent policy recommendations for regulating sex work. Many scholars categorise the assumptions and moral arguments made by feminists two paradigms (Weitzer, 2005 p. 214; Gesser,2021;Sanders, O'Neill, Pitcher, 2009 p.5; Scoular, 2004). The abolitionist, radical feminist paradigm and the sex positive, legalisation paradigm. Ronald Weitzer, framed these paradigms as: the oppression and the empowerment paradigm.

These paradigms emerged in the second wave of feminism and were most prominent in the

1980s and 1990s (Goldstein, 2019). Consequently, during that time, many countries revisited and changed their policies on sex work (Mathiesen & Branam & Nobel, 2016).

In the oppression paradigm sex work is seen as an expression and producer of the patriarchal structure. In which sex in the sex industry is seen as the domination of men over women (Jeffreys, 1995). This perspective maintains that the capitalist and patriarchal society keeps women in a position where they can be objectified and used by men to their own detriment (Dworkin, 1993). The empowerment paradigm regards that there is no inherent harm to sex work, but rather that the harm is created by a stigma against sex work (Nussbaum, 1998, 2005; Weitzer, 2018) Moreover, it believes that the abuses in the sex industry would disappear if sex work is treated the same as other work and working conditions would improve ((Mossman, 2007 p.13). The two feminist paradigms oppose and counter the patriarchal paradigm on sex work that views sex work both as deviant female sexual expression, as well as a function in society to assuage male sexual urges (Bell, 1994). The patriarchal paradigm has historically and internationally been the most dominant paradigm to inform public opinion and policies on the sex industry. Although there are actors that want to reinstate patriarchal values into policies on sex work, these actors were not dominantly present within the Overweeghuis. Therefore, I will use this paradigm to illustrate the historically hegemonic concepts of sex work, the two feminist paradigms oppose

The patriarchal paradigm has been critiqued and opposed by these two paradigms (Gesser, 2021; Hewer, 2021; Weitzer, 2009, 2018). However, both feminist paradigms have also been critiqued to be one dimensional and to focus on anecdotal evidence that supports their perspective. Consequently, since the 1980s many (ethnographic) scholars have provided more nuanced reflections on the sex industry that highlight the complexity and variation of different contexts of sex workers and how this affects the harm they experience (Sanders, 2004; Weitzer, 2009).

This chapter starts out with defining the concepts of normativity and phenomenological

approach. Thereby, laying the groundwork for understanding normative discourses that play out in the literature about the sex industry. Moreover, the phenomenological approach is defined within the conceptual framework.

Secondly, I will describe how the body and sexuality of sex workers are conceptualised and viewed with the patriarchal, oppression, and empowerment paradigm.

Thirdly, I will describe the lived experience of sex workers by reviewing ethnographies on the experience of sex workers. Within this literature review, I will describe the body and sexuality in these ethnographies, but also the stigma that permeates the lives of sex workers and affect their lived experience and the violence in the sex industry.

The chapter will end by discussing the policies the empowerment and oppression paradigm suggest to undo the harms of the sex industry.

2.2 Normativity

2.2.1 Conceptual framework

The definition of normativity is heavily debated among philosophers and theorists (Finlay, 2019). Every philosophical tradition has its own understanding of how normativity can be defined, which are in turn entrenched in more philosophical arguments.

For the clarity and consistency of my argument, I have chosen to limit my understanding of normativity to a constructivist lens and adopt a Foucauldian conceptualisation of norms.

Foucault examines the relationship between norms and political power and is extensively used as the ontological departure point of many feminists theorists (Kelly, 2004).

Foucault describes norms as:

“to conceive the norm as a model of perfection that operates as a guide to action in any particular sphere of human activity, and normalisation correlatively as the movement by which people are brought under these norms” (Kelly, 2019 p. 2)

In other words, a norm is a model of reality that one ought to conform to. Moreover, it can be seen as what is considered to be normal and desirable behaviour. By normalising certain behaviour, people are moved to conform to the (new) norms. Consequently, when one deviates from these norms they are undesired and regarded as abnormal.

Normativity is regulated by society by determining who is desirable and “good” and who does not conform to the ideal image and is considered bad and undesirable. The hegemonic idea of what the ideal image constitutes is thus the norm in that context. Consequently, when bodies deviate from the hegemonic norms they are regarded as unnatural, bad and undesirable (Kelly,2004). In other words, the bodies that do not conform to the norms are stigmatised.

The differentiating factor between the patriarchal, oppression and empowerment paradigm is the norms they inscribed in the body and sex. They define how these concepts are demarcated and what they mean, but norms also define the evaluation of different expressions of the body and sexuality. As such, norms are the defining component separating the oppression from the empowerment paradigm. Because these paradigms maintain different norms about the body and sexuality, they evaluate the sex industry in a different manner.

However, norms are also the connection and common ground between the empowerment and the oppression paradigm. As feminist movements they both fight the hegemonic patriarchal normativity that stigmatises sex workers and puts them in a place of vulnerability and violence. In this sense, stigma is the normativity that both paradigms oppose, but fight in different ways.

2.2.2 Stigma

Stigma can be defined as: “imputation of inferior status to those who have either a visible discrediting trait (e.g. physical disability) or some perceived moral defect.” (Weitzer, 2018 p. 717) Furthermore, stigmatisation is a social process of imposing a negative stereotype on a group of people and casting them with a lower status, subsequently validating the discrimination this group faces. The status loss of being associated with a stigmatised group isolates this group (Cama & Brener & Wilson & Von Hippel, 2016). Stigma is a highly normative concept as the stigmatised people supposedly do not adhere to the hegemonic norms the society maintains (Cama & Brener & Wilson & Von Hippel, 2016).

To explore the stigma against sex work, Martha Nussbaum takes a historical genealogical approach and compares sex work to other occupations that are not stigmatised (anymore). As such, she demonstrates how the stigma against sex workers is a collage of historically constructed beliefs that are not rationally defensible (Nussbaum, 1998 p.723). To argue this point, she takes on the example of opera singers and philosophers, to ask money for these activities was stigmatised in the 18th and 19th century. However, now, asking for remuneration for such activities is completely normal and honourable. In other words, to earn money with a passionate activity such as singing, philosophising and sex was degraded and seen as improper. Consequently, to conduct a passionate activity for remuneration degraded the activity and the person conducting it. This stigma originated from the belief that pure passion was not displayed and that the passion was corrupted if remunerated. In our current society, this stigma has completely been eliminated to the point that many passionate activities receive remuneration (art, philosophy, caregiving) without stigma. Nussbaum thus concludes that the stigma on sex work is a remnant of historical, classist prejudices that can be dismantled as all other stigmatised professions have been destigmatised.

The problems many sex workers face can be attributed to the stigma they face in society. The stigma of sex workers is layered among multiple stigmatised traits, such as deviant

sexuality, drug use, mental illness, racism, lacking citizenship status, and non-conforming gender expression. By definition, sex workers embody the stigma of sexual deviancy, but many sex workers also experience other stigma's related to their health and place in society.

Sex-workers suffers from the stigma of sexual deviance, like members of the lgbtq+ community (Foucault, 1976 p.102). The activity of sex is riddled with normativity and the ideas of what bad and good sexuality constitutes (Nussbaum, 1998; Rubin, 1989). Sex for remuneration endangered monogamous heterosexual ideals, and thus constituted a "bad" expression of sexuality. Therefore, sex workers have historically been ostracised and stigmatised in western society (Bell, 1994; Boutellier, 1991).

Next to sexual deviance, many sex workers have intersecting identities that are also stigmatised such as lower-class status and their socio-economic precarity (Gesser, 2021). Like other marginalised groups in the lowest classes, the physical and material space of sex work is often also stigmatised because in the cases of some sex workers it intersects with drug use, disease, and physical violence (Desjarlais, 1997). Hence, many spaces sex workers inhabit are dangerous and prone to violence.

2.2.3 Phenomenological Approach

Phenomenology derives from the philosophical tradition used by Heidegger, Sartre, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. This philosophical discourse is typified as the basis underlying other types of philosophy as it distils the first aspect of thinking, observation. The various experiences are observed through structuring the palpable sensation of an experience. Such as describing the smell, touch, sound and what one sees. "Basically, phenomenology studies the structure of various types of experience ranging from perception, thought, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, and volition to bodily awareness, embodied action, and social activity, including linguistic activity." (Smith, 2018) Although the phenomenological analysis originates from this

philosophical tradition, it is used as a research method for much more practical and concrete objectives. As a qualitative research method, it is for instance used in therapy and rehabilitation research to better the understanding of an illness or wellbeing. In these areas, phenomenological analysis is able to capture the essence of an experience without burying it in normative presumptions of its significance. As such, the complexities and multifaceted nature of the experience can come to light (Finlay, 2009).

The main aspect that drives the practice of phenomenological analysis is the exploration of a phenomenon. This exploration is done through describing the phenomenon in a detailed, complex and vivid way. The phenomenological description incorporates four facets of description, the lived experience, looking with “fresh eyes” at the phenomenon, including a rich description and observing the relational process between the participants and the researcher (Finlay, 2009 p.481). Thus, the phenomenological analysis imbues a constructivist approach to the concepts of the body and sexuality of the sex worker.

2.3 The body defined

In this thesis, I will use a constructivist understanding of the bodies as “ sites in which social constructions of differences are mapped onto human beings.” (Brown & Gershon, 2017) The anatomical body with all its differences and peculiarities is interpreted and given meaning through social constructions, such as what the meaning is of the skin-color, sex, and abilities. In the following section, I will argue how “the body is subjected to systemic regimes – such as government regulation as a method of ensuring that bodies will behave in socially and politically accepted manners.” (Brown & Gershon, 2017). In other words, how the physical body presents itself and what bodies are represented in a field is subjected to political power and normativity. This refers for example to the way they dress, compose themselves, the noises, smells and movements they make and their physical attributes such as the colour of their skin,

height, abilities and gender. These norms do not only exist as political and governmental structures that manage the body, but are internalised to the extent that they materialise the existence of the body.

2.3.1 The patriarchal body of the sex worker

Within hegemonic patriarchal discourse the identity and body of sex workers is essentialised through assigning them certain qualities that are innate to their identity such as being victimised, lower class, traumatised or resilient. The generalisation of sex workers renders the individual experience of sex workers invisible. Moreover, the essentialisation can contribute to their marginalisation by othering their experience and justifying the labels put on them.

Through essentialising sex workers their own voices are not heard and the social, economic, spiritual and affective context of sex workers is not explored properly (Phillips, 2010).

Furthermore, the essentialisation means that the body of the sex worker finds itself at a strange place between being visible and invisible. The body of the sex worker is visible in discourse because it is extensively discussed and analysed. For example, the saying that it is the oldest profession gives the sex worker an existence, place and status in society that is very visible. Next to that, the bodies of sex workers are often displayed in media, books and films.

However, the recognition of the body of the sex worker does not necessarily humanise their existence. Through essentialisation, the inner life, character and person behind the sex worker becomes invisible as she is reduced to her sex work.

As such, the body of the sex worker is used as a symbol and function within society. Within the patriarchal paradigm the sex industry was viewed as a means to give well off men easy access to sex. The sex worker thus fulfilled this function in society. Moreover, the sex worker was also long seen as the opposition through which 'good' women were described. Thus being a "whore" serves the function to distinguish and define what the "proper" woman is. The

body of the sex worker is thus the symbol of deviance. (Bell, 1994). By inscribing the body of the body of a sex worker with deviancy to the established norms, they subsequently established those norms onto “good” and “bad” sexuality.

2.3.2 The body in the oppression paradigm

Andrea Dworkin, is a prominent radical feminist that gained (in)famy for radically being anti-prostitution, anti-pornography and militantly opposing herself against masculine domination. She perceived much of sexual relations to be a powerplay in which men asserted their dominance by objectifying women.

Her stance on sex work was heavily influenced by the notion that sex work was the most extreme expression of the patriarchy. Furthermore, in a speech at the University of Michigan, she describes sex work as the use of a woman’s body for sex by a man. “Prostitution is not an idea. It is the mouth, the vagina, the rectum, penetrated usually by a penis, sometimes hands, sometimes objects, by one man and then another and then another and then another and then another. That's what it is.” (Dworkin, 1993)

In this definition, she uses the body as the most defining aspect of what a sex worker/prostitute is. Because a women becomes a sex worker through what is done in and to her body. She defines the act of prostitution as degrading in itself, outside of the structural violence that accompanies it. Furthermore, the sex for money is described as an invasion of the body and essentially not any different than rape. Because the fact that sex work is compensated by money does not take away the unconsensual aspect of prostitution.

In Dworkin's perspective, the woman who is prostituted is turned into a sellable commodity in the eyes of her male clients. Thus, Dworkin contends that the discursive body of the sex worker is seen in society as a commodity and object. An anonymous body that is not a person, but is used a product to have sex with. Her radical feminism protests this image of sex

workers, and intends to humanise the person behind the sex worker's body. The women that are abused in sex work receive empathy and are seen as victims within the radical feminist perspective (Dworkin,1993). However, through her critique of the discursive body of the sex worker Dworkin solidifies some of the tenets of the patriarchal image of sex work. Namely, that the body of the sex worker is a female body that is being abused by the male body. Not only through its physical penetration in the body, but also through the notion that a body is objectified and degraded when engaged in sex work. Consequently, the oppression paradigm intends to abolish sex work, rather than rewrite the discursive body of the sex worker.

2.3.3 The body in the empowerment paradigm

The empowerment paradigm critiques the oppression paradigm in its one-dimensional conceptualisation of the sex worker's body. By emphasising the inherent victimisation in sex work, the oppression paradigm ignores the various ways in which sex workers can experience sex work. Moreover, the oppression paradigm reconstitutes the binary between the male and the female by understanding sex work as a struggle between male domination and female subjugation. Thus effectively essentialising the body of the sex worker as an oppressed, abused female body.

The empowerment paradigm recognises the harm that is done to sex workers, but assigns the cause of this harm to the marginalised place sex workers inhabit in society. Moreover, the empowerment paradigm intends to rewrite the discursive body of the sex worker. In other words, to change the stereotypes and stigma sex workers suffer from, to an image that is more nuanced and empowers the identity of sex workers. Through normalising and empowering the identity of sex workers, the empowerment paradigm hopes to undo the harm and essentialisation of sex workers.

One way in which the empowerment paradigm rewrites the sex worker's body is through

shining light on the agency of sex workers exercise in their choice to pursue sex work as an occupation. Thereby, emphasising how sex work can be used to escape economically dire situations and regain financial control over one's life. Sex work is a means to regain agency and is sometimes less oppressive than other occupations people of low economic status are doing. Thus, the relatively high pay of sex work enables sex workers agency that they would otherwise be denied.

According to this conceptualisation of sex work, the body of the sex worker is an instrument to escape poverty and regain agency. Thus, by using their bodies to their economic benefit, the sex worker is not victimised by the patriarchal structure. The body of the sex worker is resisting the norms of sexuality that frame female sexuality as serving the male interest. Rather, the "male" interest is exploited to the benefit of the sex workers. Moreover, by not behaving according to the patriarchal norms of how 'respectable' female bodies ought to behave; the sex workers' bodies are a site of resistance and deviance to these norms. Through rewriting the sex workers body, The empowerment paradigm wants to change the stigma on sex work and treat it as normal work. To the end that workers are not perceived as essential victims or fallen women by wider society. Thus, the empowerment paradigm also assumes that rewriting the sex workers' body would alleviate the marginalisation and harm that sex workers experience within the sex industry and wider society. Next to that, the empowerment paradigm intends to rewrite the norms of good and bad sexuality. The stigmatisation of the sex workers body is intimately tied to the conceptualisation of right and wrong sexuality.

2.4 Sexuality

2.4.1 Conceptual Framework of sexuality

Following the socially constructed definition of the body, I will also use the conceptualisation of sexuality as a bodily function that is inscribed with different significances across cultures

(Goettsch, 1989). According to sociologist Goettsch, “Sexuality is physical both in source and as it is experienced through stimulation of the body regardless of the source (such as the environment, another person, self-stimulation” (Goettsch,1989 p.253). However, how this sensation is interpreted by the individual is socially constructed and inscribed by cultural scripts of what can be seen as sexual contact. Thus, what bodily sensation is considered to be sexual is a social construct that is interpreted on an individual and societal level. For instance, attaching sexuality to contact between genitalia or sensations in one’s genitalia constructs the focus of sexuality on a particular erogenous zone while neglecting other zones or experiences as sexual (Goettsch,1989; Butler, 1990). Goettsch's conceptualisation of sexuality is abstract and distant from the lived experience of sexuality; however, to understand and analyse the lived use of the concept of sexuality such a distant conceptualisation makes clear how much of sexuality is influenced by cultural scripts on its meaning. Consequently, what is considered sex and value judgements of good and bad sexuality are constructs particular to cultural and historical contexts. In this section, I will evaluate how sexuality is interpreted in the three paradigms and how these interpretations shape the value judgements of sex work.

2.4.2 Patriarchal Sexuality

In her groundbreaking article *Thinking Sex*, anthropologist Gayle Rubin examines the discrimination of deviant sexual identities and its justifications in the late capitalist society of the United States (Rubin,1984). As one of the foundational texts of queer theory, she conceptualises what good sex is considered to be and how all practices that deviate from this ideal are legally prohibited in the United States in the 1980s. In the vein of the *History of Sexuality* by Michel Foucault, Rubin extensively elaborates on the need to accept ‘deviant’ sexual behaviour and remove institutional practices to pathologise nonconformist sexuality. To

illustrate how good and bad sexuality is distinguished and portrayed, she develops the model of the charmed circle and the outer limits of sexuality (Rubin, 1984; Foucault, 1976).



Figure 1 the charmed circle by Dr Gayle Rubin (Rubin, 1984)

According to this model, the inner circle represents the sexuality that is accepted and encouraged by patriarchal society and the outer circle is the deviant sexuality that is cast as abnormal, bad and unnatural. *Thinking Sex* is a critique to this categorisation of good and bad sex and thus advocates for a conceptualisation of sexuality that does not condemn certain

desires or sexual practices. Although *Thinking Sex* mostly writes about the discrimination of the queer community in the US, it also pays special attention to the discrimination and stigma of sex workers :

“Like homosexuals, prostitutes are a criminal sexual population stigmatized on the basis of sexual activity. ...The legal persecution of both populations is justified by an elaborate ideology which classifies them as dangerous and inferior undesirables who are not entitled to be left in peace” (Rubin, 1984 p. 156)

However, unlike homosexuality, sex work is not an unchanging sexual preference but rather an occupation that marginalises the workers that engage in sex work (Rubin, 1984; Gesser, 2021).

Thus, in the patriarchal paradigm, the body and sexuality of the sex worker are considered deviant and wrong. Moreover, the sex worker serves a function in society to demarcate norms about correct femininity.

2.4.3 Oppression Paradigm on Sexuality

According to the oppression paradigm, sex is a social construction, and the practice and nature of sex are permeated with social ideas of what sex is supposed to be and what it symbolises.

Consequently, sex is both an expression as well as a constitutive part of the relations between genders and how these relations are seen in society (Nussbaum,1995). Radical feminists contend that the activity of sex is permeated with social ideas about the “ubiquitous distortions of gender roles” (Nussbaum, 1995 p. 278; Hewer, 2021 p.11). Thus, the oppression paradigm recognises the social construction of sexuality, and perceive masculine domination to be a constitutive part of sex within the sex industry. Next to that, the oppression paradigm advocates that masculine domination ought to be abolished and opposed.

These assertions are mostly made by Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon. They are prominent radical feminists that gained (in)famy for radically being anti-prostitution, anti-pornography and militantly opposing themselves against masculine domination. They perceived much of sexual relations to be a powerplay in which men asserted their dominance by objectifying women. Although their ideology lost some public interest in the early 2000s, recently radical feminist work is revisited in light of the me too movement and the election of Donald Trump (Goldberg, 2019; Showden, 2012).

With regard to heterosexual sexuality, Dworkin and MacKinnon assert that heterosexual sexual relations are problematic because there is an asymmetrical power structure that determines the relationship between the man and the woman having sex. The prevalent male dominance in society shapes all interactions between men and women but is most purely expressed in sexual relations since they distil the essence of the difference between sexes in a heteronormative society. Consequently, sex exemplifies male domination in a patriarchal society. Dworkin and MacKinnon assert that men have been socialised to sexualise their dominance and therefore feel aroused by dominating women in sex. The need to dominate and “feel like a man” through dominating women during sex is the reason sexual exploitation and sex work exists. In sex work, the male client dominates the female sex worker and thus instrumentalises her body to assuage his sexual urges and uplift his self-image as a ‘real man’ (Nussbaum, 1995; Dworkin, 1993; 1987). As such, sex within sex work perpetuates a patriarchal practice of sex in which the female sex worker is dominated and forced by male clients. Therefore, the oppression paradigm condemns and opposes sex for remuneration.

2.4.4 The empowerment paradigm

Gayle Rubin was one of the first and founding sex positive feminists that countered both the radical feminists movement (oppression paradigm) as well as patriarchal norms of sexuality at

the end of the 20th century. She argued that there is no inherent wrong or right way of doing sex. Thereby, countering the oppression paradigm that judges male domination and sex work to be wrong aspects of sexuality. Her framework emerges out of a critique of the oppression paradigm, reconstituting a dichotomy between good and bad sex and inserting normative judgement on the different practices of sex, albeit on different terms than the patriarchal standard. Hence, she argues that the morality of sexual acts should not depend on the categories and practices that are deemed unnatural but rather “the way partners treat one another, the level of mutual consideration, the presence or absence of coercion, and quantity and quality of the pleasures they provide” (Rubin,1984 p.153).

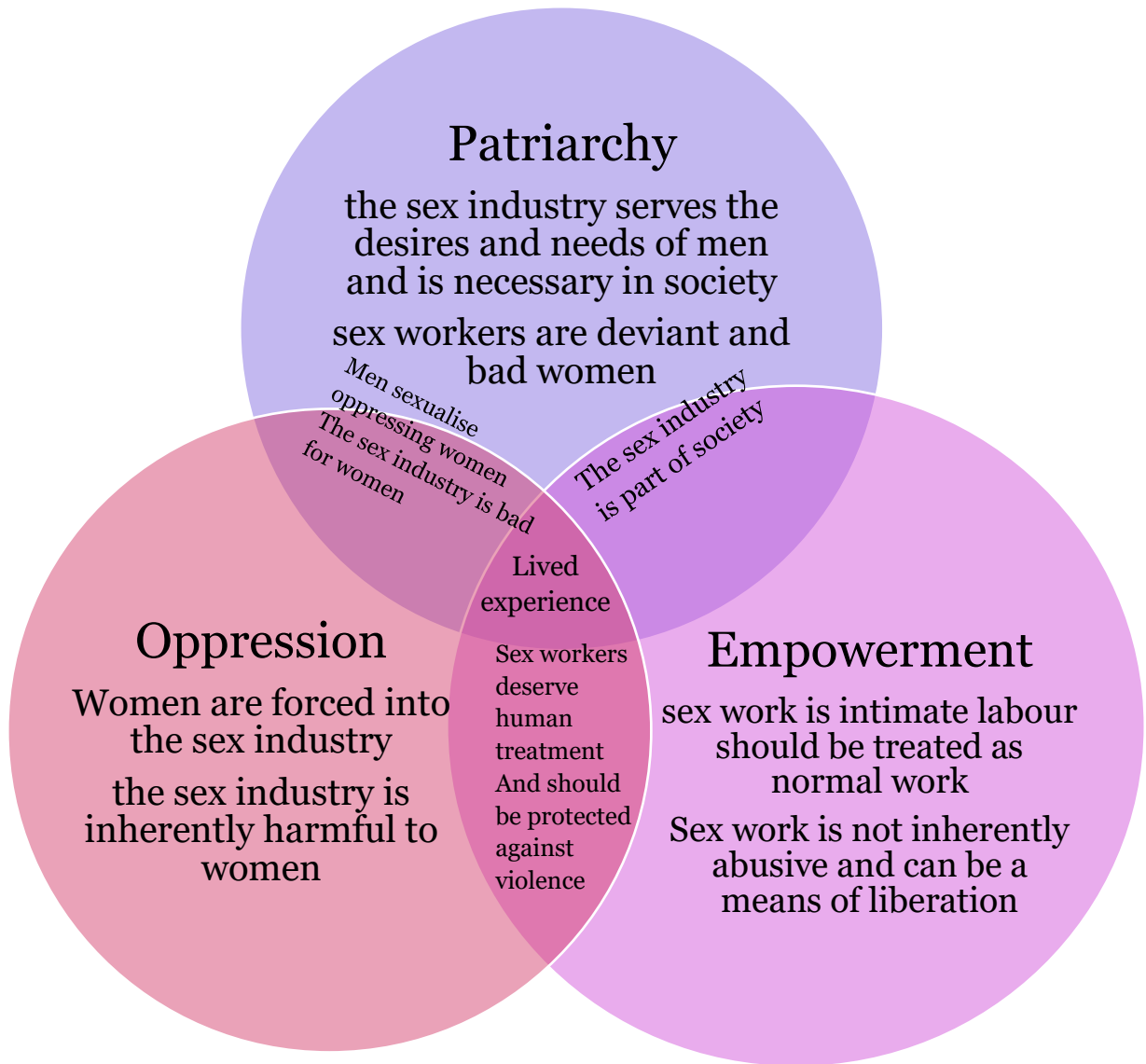


Figure 2 table of the paradigms

2.5 Ethnographic Realities

Several ethnographic accounts validate the effects of the patriarchal function of the sex worker.

The ethnographer Eileen Tsang documents how low tier sex workers give meaning to their work

by fulfilling a caring role in their clients life that is not fulfilled within their relations with women. Tsang's interlocutors were validating the masculinity through sex and emotional support. Through this labour, her interlocutors found professional fulfilment and spiritual meaning in giving their clients a sense of masculinity (Tsang & Lowe, 2019). Even though her interlocutors faced many challenges such as stigmatisation, poverty and violence, they used their benefactory function to men as a coping and to give meaning to their work. They saw themselves as discharging the sexual aggression of men so they would not rape, harass or commit other types of violence. As such, they were enabling the stability and harmony of society. These convictions validate the that the patriarchal paradigm sees sex worker's bodies as a means to harmonise society (Boutellier, 1991).

Tsang's ethnography reflects how the body of the sex worker is used in patriarchal paradigm. In another ethnography by the same Eileen Tsang, she describes how high tier sex workers use and enhance feminine traits to be validated within society and perform a desired form of femininity. Through this performance they gain clients and can thrive as sex workers. High tier sex workers in China attract clients through maintaining a petite feminine figure and interacting in a submissive and docile way with their clients (Tsang, 2019). Moreover, by feigning sexual innocence and virginity they were actively countering the deviance assigned to sex workers by the patriarchal paradigm. Moreover, their success and high self-esteem lies in taking agency in their sex work and using it to gain independence and a cosmopolitan identity and lifestyle. As such, the sex workers recognised the discourses that were played out on their body and used it for their benefit (Tsang, 2019). The agency and insight these sex workers reflect the vision of the empowerment paradigm on the body. In the sense that sex workers are independent actors that have the agency to shape their image to their own benefit. Moreover, the high tier sex workers Tsang interviewed actively opposed the victimhood status inferred upon sex workers by the oppression paradigm (Tsang, 2019).

In an auto ethnographic essay on her sex work and trauma, Lorelei Lee (2021) described how she overcame the sexual trauma she endured in her youth through sex work and kink. Within sex work, she retook the control over sex that was taken from her during sexual abuse. Thereby, redefining what sexuality meant to her. Moreover, it empowered her to benefit financially from sex work as it meant she could also benefit from sex herself. Yet, she struggled with the way the police and clients disrespected her based on her identity as a sex worker (Lee, 2021).

In the ethnographic work of Marcus et al, (2014) mostly underaged street based sex workers in Atlantic City, USA, demonstrated agency by choosing and influencing their 'pimps'. In these cases they would use men (that they called pimps or hustlers) to get a network and protection within the criminalised environment of the sex industry (Marcus et al., 2014). Moreover, the auto ethnographic essay of Ashley Paige, she described that as a homeless teen in the US, she sought out a pimp to help her do sex work, so she could earn money and survive on the streets. Although this relationship turned out to be abusive to her, she describes her relationship with this pimp taught her the skills to survive and thrive as a BDSM sex worker later in life. Through her sex work, she was able to find financial independence and escape the poverty of her family (Paige, 2021).

These ethnographies exemplify how all the paradigms are part of the lived experience for sex workers. At the one hand, the sex workers experience the gaze of the patriarchal paradigm that objectifies and violates them, however, they also actively interact with these expectations to survive within the sex industry. Moreover, all ethnographies attest to the violence sex workers experience in their daily lives, often at the hands of men, while themselves identifying as women. Although these ethnographies could be interpreted as violence against women, as is done in the oppression paradigm, the auto ethnographies emphasise the role of stigma within the violence they experienced. Moreover, they assign the danger in the sex industry more to its

stigmatised status, that makes their job secretive and invisible, rather than inherently violent gender dynamics (Yin Q, 2021)

2.5.1 Stigma as violence in the sex industry

As various ethnographies demonstrate, violence is a significant part of the lived experience of sex workers. Violence is often broadly defined as inflicting a physical injury to a non-consenting victim (Horning & Sanson & Thompson, 2014; Hewer, 2021 p. 178). In this definition of violence, the body is affected and it is seen as “a momentary disruption of a non-violent norm” (Hewer, 2021 p. 178). However, this definition is widely contested as psychological violence is ignored and violence is portrayed as incidental rather than a continuous subjection to ideas that hinder one's potential individual realisation (Hewer, 2021). In other words, the structural inequalities that thwart oppressed groups to reach their self-realisation, can be conceptualised as violence. Furthermore, structural violence can be more insidious than personal, physical violence because it is not remarked upon nor can it rely on traditional notions of liability with a perpetrator and victim.

Sex workers and in particular sex workers on the street are subjected to physical violence as well as structural violence. Moreover, their subjection to physical violence is a consequence of the structural violence they face. The societal ideas about sex work stigmatise the sex workers to the extent that they find themselves in dangerous and unsupervised spaces, violence against sex workers is normalised, and their epistemic authority is undermined. Thus, physical violence against sex workers occurs because they can easily be assaulted without consequence to the offender. Moreover, societal images about sex workers degrade their humanity and justify assault because they are ‘asking for it’ or do not possess sufficient humanity for the offender to empathise (Sanders, 2016). The complaints sex workers make about assault and physical

violence are not regarded through the same lens as other reports of assault due to their stigmatised identity (Lee, 2021; Paige, 2021). Thus, on a societal level the lived reality of sex workers cannot be detached from the violence they suffer as a consequence of their profession.

As Teela Sanders demonstrates in her ethnographic study on indoor based sex workers in the UK, the stigma influences every action a sex worker takes. The precautions they took to keep themselves safe and anonymous permeated through all the encounters in the sex industry, but also in their personal lives. Many sex workers feared they would lose, hurt or endanger their husband, children, and other loved ones if came out that they were sex workers. The personal stakes of doing sex work caused much mental distress on the sex workers and thus greatly affected their lived experience of sex work. However, Sanders clearly demonstrates how the distress was linked to societal perceptions and not the actual work in the sex industry.

Thus the lived experience of sex workers is heavily influenced by the stigma they faced in society. Accordingly, many modern feminist policies have dedicated attention to strategizing how to eradicate the stigma on sex workers.

2.6 Modern feminist policy on sex work

Although feminist debates might be divergent in their ontological stances of sex and the body, both paradigms admit that the current state of the affairs causes suffering to many sex workers. They both advocate for more effective policies to combat violence and criminality in the sex industry (Lopez-Embury & Sanders, 2009). However, their policy recommendations vary greatly. The empowerment paradigm supports policies that advance the decriminalisation and legalisation of sex work to the end that it is shed from its stigma and considered as any other emotional and physical job. Whilst most feminists that adhere to the oppression paradigm advocate for the eradication of sex work altogether through the implementation of the Nordic Model.

2.6.1 The Nordic Model

The Nordic Model is a set of policies regarding sex work that decriminalise selling sex, but criminalise paying for sex. It is thus not prohibited to be a sex worker and to advertise sexual services. However, it is illegal to solicit sex for payment and to effectively pay for sex. As a result, sex buyers are liable to prosecution and sex workers are protected against criminal charges (Mathiesen, Branam, Noble, 2016).

The rationale behind these policies is that the power imbalance between the sex worker and the sex buyer is equalised, such that the sex worker can press charges against a possibly violent client. Moreover, the stigma of sex work is shifted from the sex worker to the sex buyer. The Nordic Model grounds their policy in the premise that the sex worker has a lower socio-economic status and thus less power than the sex buyer (Mathieson et al., 2015). Furthermore, it assumes that sex workers are coerced into the sex industry, either by human traffickers, poverty or sexual trauma. Sex buyers have the privilege to choose to buy sexual services and this privilege gives them the responsibility for the act. Furthermore, without its consumers, the sex industry would not exist, since the demand for sex workers incentivises the exploitation of sex workers.

The success of the Nordic Model is measured in the reduction of human trafficking and the size of the sex industry in general. The estimates indicate that human trafficking has reduced in Sweden since the instalment of the Nordic Model and Sweden is seen as an undesirable destination for human traffickers.

The Nordic Model has been criticised for simplifying the reality of sex work as imbedded in global migration and capitalist structures (Augustin, 2015). Furthermore, ignoring the complex and nuanced situations (migrant) sex workers find themselves in. Moreover, by positioning sex workers as victims of sex buyers, the wealth inequality and agency of migrant sex workers is undervalued. Thus ignoring how sex work can be the most suitable survival for people disadvantaged by capitalist and imperialist structures.

Feminist theorist Amia Srinivasan connects the Swedish Model to the tendency of carceral politics to solve the issues of the lower class. By proposing individual punishment as the solution to systemic inequality endemic to capitalism. Next to that, she argues that the Nordic Model is an idealistic policy that harms sex workers in practice by taking away their opportunity to work in visible and controlled spaces (Srinivasan, 2021 p 154). Consequently, by assigning the cause of sex work to male domination, the sex workers that entered the industry because of poverty are overlooked.

2.6.2 Legalisation and Decriminalisation

Feminist activists that support the empowerment paradigm, often advocate to legalise most forms of sex work and enable sex workers to unionise. Accordingly, they argue that intertwining of the criminal network and sex work disappears, since it does not have to be done as part of the criminal underworld. Next to that, sex workers can legally defend themselves against exploitation and abuse in their work. By pulling sex workers out of illegality they do not suffer from the many abuses caused by their marginality. Moreover, the stigma against the sex industry can be properly countered if sex work is legally treated the same as any other emotionally and physically intimate job.

Many countries have already experimented with various degrees of legalisation, and the results have been extensively debated among both paradigms.

In areas where sex work is legalised, it is legal to buy and sell sex, and the government aims to conduct this practice in a safe and controlled manner. Sex workers can be registered, licensed and be subjected to mandatory health checks. The motivation behind legalising sex work is often to diminish crimes related to sex work and protect public safety and health (Mossman,

2007 p.12). All aspects of the sex industry that do not fall into the legal market are met with punitive measures and thus criminalised.

The legalisation model has been critiqued for creating a shadow market next to the legal sex market in which unlicensed and illegal sex is sold, such as sex with undocumented people.

Therefore, the legalisation model follows a two tier system of legalisation and criminalisation of the sex industry (Mossman, 2007).

Decriminalisation aims to counter this problem by decriminalising sex work, but refraining from regulating the industry. In other words, there are no special regulations in place that are specifically aimed at the sex industry. Rather, sex work is treated like other professions and sex workers fall under existing statutes and regulations for workers. Importantly, the distinction is made between voluntary sex work and forced sex work. In this forced sex work, human trafficking and sex with minors is still criminalised (Mossman, 2007).

Both Decriminalisation and legalisation policies have been critiqued by the oppression paradigm for stimulating human trafficking, exploitation of sex workers, and using minors as sex workers (Mathieson et al., 2015) Because the sex market is bigger in states that have a degree of legalisation or discrimination, the illegal sex market expands in these states as well. Moreover, the sex industry is still heavily intertwined with criminal networks. Hence, it remains difficult to debate the results of complete legalization and decriminalisation since sex work is still stigmatised in all countries that have legalised prostitution (Mathieson et al., 2015)

Consequently, the sex industry still remains in the shadows of the open, legal economy and suffers from its marginalisation. However, sociologist and criminologist Weitzer notes that stigma lags behind of the reforms made to decriminalise the sex industry. According to Weitzer, decriminalisation is a necessary condition for destigmatisation but not the sole cause of stigma. Thus, more reforms of public opinion and media representation should be made to fully destigmatise the sex industry (Weitzer, 2018 p.722). Weitzer further suggest that this positive representation should entail that the sex worker announces “ that he or she had full agency

when entering sex work; is currently in control of his/her working conditions and interactions with clients; defines the work as a service profession like any other or as a form of support or therapy for clients; denial of harm; condemnation of the stigmatisers; or distinguishing their echelon (e.g. escorting) from what they consider disreputable forms of sex work (e.g. street prostitution)” (Weitzer, 2018 p. 722). This information changes the prevalent image of the sex worker as a victim or sinful person, to an agentic professional (Lopez-Embury & Sanders, 2009). Furthermore, destigmatisation prevents the threat of exposure that is often used to keep sex workers from exiting the industry or charging against violent clients and managers (Bovenkerk, 2009).

While destigmatisation and legalisation might improve the image of sex workers and pull the industry into more visible spaces, the solution Weitzer proposes would deny the violent experiences many sex workers suffer (Hewer, 2021). Consequently, the Nordic model as well as legalisation and decriminalisation have not yet provided a sustainable solution to the violence in the sex industry.

2.7 Conclusion

Both the empowerment and the oppression paradigm oppose and aim to change patriarchal conceptualisations of the body, sexuality and sex work. Moreover, they both oppose the dehumanising gaze on the sex worker and the violence sex workers encounter within the sex industry and society at large. Therefore, they both seek to transform the status quo of the sex industry. However, both paradigms see different aspects of the sex industry as changeable and others as inherent (Srinivasan, 2021). As a consequence the practical solutions they both propose to alleviate the harms of the sex industry vary greatly, and put both paradigms in opposing camps of the international debate on sex work.

The oppression paradigm thrives to the ideal of abolishing the practice of sex work, while leaving other norms of sexuality intact. On the other hand, the empowerment paradigm employs

a pragmatic approach to the violence in the sex industry, by supporting policies that keep the sex industry intact. Yet, the empowerment paradigm seeks to transform deeply ingrained norms about sexuality and gender, thus dismantling the stigma sex workers experience.

In this sense, both paradigms combine idealistic and pragmatic elements in their approach of sex work (Hewer, 2021).

Within academia, the empowerment and the oppression paradigms are separated in different schools of thought, grounded in different normative perceptions. However, ethnographic accounts of the sex industry demonstrate how the different paradigms simultaneously exist within the lived experience of sex workers. Moreover, in the practice of writing policy and working with sex workers, the lines between the paradigms are blurry and sometimes invisible. As I will demonstrate below, the Dutch history of attitudes and policies toward sex work is an example of how the empowerment and oppression paradigm simultaneously overlap, oppose, and support each other.

3 The Dutch Context of the discourse of sex work

3.1 Introduction

The Netherlands upholds a reputation of progressive sexual ideas and policies (Post et al., 2019) A significant part of this reputation is the legalisation of sex work and the permission of red light districts in cities such as Amsterdam. However, behind the progressive front outsiders see of this industry, a jungle of legislation, policies and regulations direct the practice of sex work in

the Netherlands. These policies are based on different beliefs about the morality of sex work. Consequently as beliefs about sexuality, morality and the body changed in the Netherlands, so did the policies that regulated sex work (Wagenaar & Altink, 2012).

This chapter describes the evolution of the perception of sex work in the Netherlands, and how these changes affected the policies implemented for sex work. Consequently, illustrating the context in which the Overweeghuis emerged and exists.

3.2 Historical Context of Sex Work in the Netherlands

In the last century the public opinion and policies of sex work have changed drastically in the Netherlands (Boutellier, 1991 p. 201). It has shifted from full criminalisation, to decriminalisation and legalisation. In every policy shift both feminist groups as well as religious and liberal groups have led the discussions that have eventually shaped the policies adopted.

The following section will describe the history of policies of sex work in the Netherlands and the beliefs undergirding these policies. Furthermore, I will describe the societal discussion that took place before policy changes were installed.

During the 19th century the Netherlands maintained a liberal attitude toward sex work. It was allowed to be a sex worker and laws were installed to regulate the practice and the women working as sex workers. Moreover, sex work was considered to be a necessary evil to assuage the biological urges of men (Boutellier, 1991) This permission of sex work was critiqued for its contribution to the spread of venereal diseases. Therefore, during the French occupation (1810-1813), a system of regimentation was installed that licensed sex workers and mandated health checks that aimed to curb the spread of venereal diseases (Boutellier,1991; Outshoorn, 2012). During this time, the patriarchal vision of sex work maintained that the sex workers were serving broader society in keeping men sexually satisfied and healthy. Yet, in the late 19th century the first wave of feminism criticised the system of regimentation since the responsibilities for the diseases was placed on the women instead of the men visiting sex

workers. Protestant and feminist groups campaigned for the prohibition of sex work as it was undermining family life and public values of purity (Boutellier,1991). Parallel to this, medical specialists promoted sexual abstinence as a healthy lifestyle. As such, sex work became a perversion and the state was compelled to intervene and prohibit prostitution. This campaign eventually led to the Morality laws of 1911 that prohibited prostitution and especially the use of pimping and facilitating prostitution (Boutellier, 1991; Outshoorn, 2012).

As intimated before, the feminist movement played a big part in the campaign leading up to the Morality Laws and they shaped the laws in the sense that the criminal accountability fell on the men coercing women into the sex industry. As such, women who worked in this industry were not criminalised as they were seen as women in need of redemption (Outshoorn, 2012 p. 234). What is more, the morality laws were implemented in a time when religious parties were at a majority in the Parliament (Outshoorn, 2012 p. 234). Thus, the feminist and puritan Christian groups worked together to restrain male sexuality that worked to the detriment of women.

Around the same time other European countries adopted similar policies, such as in Denmark in 1901, Germany in 1927 and Sweden in 1918 (Post, 2019; Outshoorn, 2012). Interestingly, Dutch laws have never criminalised sex workers as happened in other countries.

Although the morality laws of 1911 remained legally unchallenged until the 1960s, the practice of sex work continued mostly uncontrolled by authorities. Most brothels worked out of private houses and the old laws of regimentation were practically implemented.

In the 1960's long standing norms about religion, sexuality and class were challenged and new discourses emerged. At the same time, the religious parties lost their parliamentary majority 1967 (Outshoorn, 2012 p.234). The new secular parliament opened up the space to renew long standing policies on the regulation of sexuality. From the 1960s onward, many issues concerning sexuality were debated within society and politics. As such, sex work became a heavily debated topic within parliament, like many other sexual themes, such as abortion, contraception, homosexuality and lesbianism, (Boutellier,1991 p.205; Outshoorn, 2012 p.235).

Within these discourses, sex work was mostly framed as a private matter that the government and morality laws should only minimally regulate (Boutellier, 1991). Thus, the morality of sex work was not questioned extensively and regulations were mainly concerned about the public disturbance of red light districts (Boutellier, 1991 p.206). This was a shift from the previous decades in which sex work was framed as a public morality cause.

The debates about the morality of sex work quickly re-emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, in which the abolition of sex work was again put on the international feminist agenda by feminists from the oppression paradigm. However, the feminist movement in the Netherlands turned largely away from the oppression paradigm and adopted a predominantly sex positive perspective on issues such as sex work in the late 20th century. Tellingly, the First World Whores Congress was hosted in Amsterdam in 1975. In this Congress, sex workers discussed the various issues concerning sex work and advocated for the legalisation of sex work. Moreover, they advocated establishing a clear legal distinction between forced and voluntary prostitution. A decade later, a union of sex workers was established in Amsterdam, called the Red Thread (Rode draad). The Union advocates for the legalisation of brothels, and improved legal services for trafficked women. It achieved its goal in 1999 when the ban on brothels was lifted and regulations were adopted to give residence permits to trafficked women (Outshoorn, 2012 p 235).

The discourse undergirding all these policy changes was the empowerment paradigm; since it advocated for sexual freedom and that the government would refrain from moralising and infringing the private lives of individuals. This also followed the large wave of secularisation that started in the 1960s. The greatest ideal followed in the discourse was the need for self-determination (Outshoorn, 2012 p 235). Legalising sex work fell neatly into this ideal since sex workers could make their own choices on whether they wanted to work in the sex industry or not. Thus, by legalising sex work, the Dutch acted upon their view of “enlightened nationalism”

and tolerance, permitting drugs, gay rights, legal euthanasia and liberal abortion policies (Post, 2019).

However, in the decades after the legalization of sex work the national attitude toward sex work grew increasingly more negative about the sex industry. Furthermore, the image of the sex worker in Dutch society changed from an independent worker to a victim of human trafficking and exploitation (Post, 2019 p.110). This shift was caused by criminal cases, memoirs and media attention that highlighted the criminal and violent aspects of the sex industry. Firstly, the Sneeep case in which 78 women were found to be trafficked by Turkish criminals and public reports showing the prevalence of abuse and exploitation within the sex industry caused national outrage that motivated political leaders to take action to curb the occurrence of human trafficking (Bovenkerk, 2009). Thus, soon after sex work was legalised it was being restricted by policies that would supposedly ensure the safety of sex workers and prevent human trafficking. Moreover, political parties, such as the Christian democrats (CDA), linked trafficking to illegal migration which infused the discourse of human trafficking with pre-existing xenophobic sentiments (Outshoorn, 2012 p.236). As such women coming outside of Europe were refused work permits because they would be victims of human trafficking. Thus, if a migrant women consented to sex work she needed to be deported because she was entering the Netherlands under the false pretences of being trafficked. On the other hand, if she did not consent, she was trafficked, she was a victim and she could not get a work permit to work as a sex worker in the Netherlands (Outshoorn, 2012 p.237). In practice, the regulation of these permits did not ensure the safety of migrant sex workers, rather it led to a two-tier system in which the unlicensed sector was completely criminalised. This sector included under-aged and undocumented sex workers. Moreover, pimping and coercion were still considered to occur frequently in the sex industry despite the regulations and legalisation (Huisman & Kleemans, 2014).

At the end of the 2000s a famous memoir of an ex prostitute came out, that described the experience of voluntary sex workers (Outshoorn, 2012; Schaapman, 2007). The revelations

of the memoirs and new reports did not indicate a major change in the Dutch sex industry due to this legalisation. This lack of improvement disillusioned the Dutch public and the sex industry was perceived to be ridden with criminality and foreign influence (Huisman & Kleemans, 2014). The moral panic about loverboys emerged at the same time. In this panic, the fear prevailed that men (with migrant backgrounds) were seducing young dutch girls and forcing them into the sex industry (Bovenkerk, 2009).

Thus, at the end of the oos, the dream that legalisation would change the industry was shattered by the many reports demonstrating the prevalence of human trafficking and abuse. Moreover, the general consensus among academics researching the effects of legalisation, was that the implementation of legislation needed to be improved. However, they did not oppose legalisation all together (Outshoorn, 2012 p. 239). Accordingly, after these extensive evaluations and public outcry of the abuse within the sex industry, the Dutch government started to debate the possible solutions to the wrongs that still occurred within the sex industry. Within this debate a strong dichotomy was made between voluntary sex work and forced prostitution (Post et al, 2019 p 109; Outshoorn, 2012). The state was held responsible to fight the practice of forced prostitution in all its forms (Post,2019 p. 109). Furthermore, the local authorities had to design a policy that fit with the local circumstances. As such, the legislation of sex work was decentralised and left to the authority of municipalities. Next to that, the system of permits and licenses for the sex businesses was tightened (Post, 2019 p. 109). In 2009, a new regulation was developed to regulate prostitution further and combat the abuses in the sex industry (Post et al; 2019 p.110). In 2014 the bill was amended and there were parliamentary debates to penalise abuse of sex workers who are victims of human trafficking. Moreover, in the new regulations the emphasis lay on the special nature of the sex industry and the victims of abuse within the sex industry. As such, it became mandatory to license sex businesses, register as a sex worker and the minimum age to work was lifted from 18 to 21. This bill aimed to improve the insight of

local authorities into what was happening in sex businesses in their municipality. Moreover, the aim was to protect the sex worker from harm.

3.2.1 Current Dutch regulations of sex work

The policies in place to regulate sex work in the Netherlands are partially determined by the municipalities that make the decisions on the locations and permits sex workers receive. For each city the sex worker needs a specific permit. Through giving out permits the municipality can estimate how many sex workers work within their territory. Moreover, the civil servants are trained to recognise signs of human trafficking and coercion in the applicants. Consequently, the system of giving out permits functions as a measure to ensure the safety of the sex industry in the Netherlands. Next to that, the civil servants inform potential sex workers on the laws and regulations regarding sex work in their area (Gemeentebld, 2016)..

The locations designated for legal sex work in the Netherlands are window prostitution (raamprostitutie) and specific streets and areas in which street prostitution (tippelzone) is allowed and facilitated via a special parking place with increased security (afwerkplek). In these zones many social workers are present and they often talk to the workers to ensure their safety and wellbeing. For instance, in Groningen, the salvation army has installed living rooms in which sex workers can get coffee and relax. In these 'living rooms' social workers and volunteers are present that can inform sex workers on the available services and organisations for sex workers. Moreover, they are actively informed about programs intended to aid them in stepping out of the sex industry (Gemeentebld, 2016). The same level of surveillance and safety cannot be given to sex workers that do not work in these designated areas. Consequently they often face different regulations and are prone to different risks. Whether working outside of the designated areas is permitted is mandated by the municipality. There are thus differences in the local situations for sex workers working from home or in massage salons or sex clubs.

When sex workers get started they need to get a permit if they want to work independently (zzp). If they work for a brothel, sex club or escort company, that company gives them a permit and is responsible for the paperwork required for a permit . However, the requirements for permits also differ per municipality.

Because of the unclear regulations regarding permits and the increasing public concerns about the safety of sex workers, the Dutch parliament adopted new bill to further regulate sex work on a national level, this bill is intended to further drive out the abuses within the sex industry and combat human trafficking.

The bill regulates the permits sex workers require, by stating that everyone without a permit practices illegal prostitution and possibly human trafficking.

Thus, to work in the sex industry one needs to be at least 21 years old, self-reliant, and prove not to be a victim of human trafficking and forced prostitution. Moreover, sex workers need to be adequately informed about the risks of the sex industry and their rights and duties before the Dutch law. The permits can be retracted when the municipality finds that the sex worker is not self-reliant or suspects to be working under coercion.

3.3 Morality politics and the paradigms within Dutch policies

The new regulations on sex work arose from the pragmatic need to regulate sex work on a national level. In this sense, the regulations do not strictly follow the normativity of either the oppression or empowerment paradigm. However, the oppression paradigm is reflected in the explicit concern for human trafficking and forced sex work in the regulations. Moreover, by funding exit programs, and closing down streetwalking areas, the policies intend to shrink the sex industry in the Netherlands.

As empowerment activist and sociologist Sietske Altink argues, the aspects of violence, coercion and human trafficking in the sex industry are already illegal and the regulation is not changing in the combat for these issues by strengthening the need for permits. Furthermore, she

states this regulation sets sex work apart from other work and thus further stigmatises sex workers. Through the use of permits, sex workers are paternalized by giving civil servants more authority to give out permits and strengthening police controls on sex workers.

The new law that is regulating sex work is heavily debated in national media and has been a contentious issue in the formation of the parliamentary cabinet. The highly politicised nature of the law demonstrates the morality politics at play in the formation and formulation of the policies of sex work (Altink, 2019).

Morality politics is a concept used by legal sociologists Altink and Wagenaar to describe the moral concerns and outrages that influence the making of policies around certain morally sensitive topics such as sex work, euthanasia, and abortion. Within these topic areas, the policies are more influenced by public outrages than the pragmatic concerns and solutions to an issue. Furthermore, support for a certain policy is used to denote a larger commitment to a moral cause that is linked, but not necessarily relevant, to the topic. In terms of sex work, the issue is often linked to women's rights, bodily autonomy, human trafficking and sexual violence. The policies are thus used to state a moralistic and political standpoint about broader political issues, and used to gain political support (Altink & Wagenaar, 2012).

The national debate on the new sex work regulations exemplifies morality politics, since the new regulation is framed as a means to combat human trafficking and ensure women's safety and rights. Moreover, the opponents of the regulation use arguments of bodily autonomy and freedom of sexual expression. Thus, the debate on sex work in the Netherlands plays out along the lines of the empowerment and oppression paradigm.

3.3.1 Divisive debates on the regulation of sex work

This divide was especially clear during a televised debate on NPO 1 between a parliamentarian from the Christian Union Party (Christen Unie) and Dr Ine Vanwesenbeeck a professor of sexual wellbeing at the university of Utrecht and affiliated to the sex positive organisations of sex

workexpertise and Rutgers (NWS, 2017). The professional background of the debaters already assigned them to the oppression and the empowerment paradigm of feminist thoughts on prostitution. Mirjam Bikker profiles herself clearly into the oppression paradigm with her statements on the necessity of abolishing sex work and considering this a human right. Whereas Dr Ine Vanwesenbeeck emphasises the need for normalising sex work. Moreover, the host refers to the secular religious divide on the issues about sex work by referring to the article that Dr Vanwesenbeeck wrote, titled “Free sex workers from Christian compassion”. Next to that, the host asks Mirjam Bikker about her ideological underpinnings that might have motivated the law. To this Mirjam Bikker replies that she is motivated to ensure the wellbeing of women and does not meddle her (implied christian) background with those objectives. This statement, does not only highlight the assumed role of christian organisations within the discourse, but also extends the regulation of sex work as an issue on the wellbeing of women. The extension of the law to wider issues happens repeatedly throughout the debate. Consequently, clearly emphasising the role of morality politics in the discourse on the new regulation of sex work.

As was done in historic debates of the 1980s, in this debate the speakers divert from the implementation of the new law to speak about pimping, womens rights, and rape. Furthermore, Mirjam Bikker states that every righteous feminist should be against women having sex against their will, thus implying that sex work is having sex against ones will and that she is on the side of feminism. While Dr Ine Vanwesenbeeck replies that she believes in the autonomy and freedom of women among which sex workers that should have the autonomy to do sex work(NPO radio, 2022).

In sum, the fragment demonstrates how the national debate over sex work plays out in the political and public arena. Moreover, it shows how the academic feminist debates bleed into national discourses and laws on sex work.

3.4 Conclusion

Throughout history, the Dutch laws and public attitudes on sex work have shifted and changed often. However, the changes often moved along an existing spectrum of values; between the empowerment or the oppression paradigm. In the 18th century the regulations of regimentation, but tolerance likened the later morals of the empowerment paradigm and legalisation. The morality laws of 1911, moved toward the oppression paradigm. Not only in its commitment to abolish sex work and protect women in the sex industry, but also in the makeup of Christian and first wave feminist groups that pushed these laws into existence. A few decades later, the Dutch stance on sex work had moved back to the values of the empowerment paradigm. Although the Netherlands consistently incorporated empowerment values in their policies from the 1960s to the early 2000s, the political landscape began to move to the oppression paradigm again in the 2010s to combat the abuse and trafficking in the sex industry.

Within these cyclical turns, morality politics dictated the way the discourse was held; public moral panics about abuse within the sex industry has motivated politicians to change or adapt policies to appease public opinion. Nevertheless, it remains challenging to evaluate whether the policy implementations are disadvantageous to the sex workers, because they are motivated by morality politics.

4 Methodology

To explore how normative discourses affect the lived practice of the Overweeghuis, I will be using qualitative research methods. Within this methodology, I will be using ethnographic observations to gather my data and analyse it through a phenomenological lens.

Since the Overweeghuis is such a dynamic and fluid place, the best way to capture the lived practice of the house was through a long period of participant observation. As such, I could see the various dynamics and practices among different groups of residents. By keeping the adage that the researcher cannot be separated from their research, I have supplemented ethnographic vignettes with auto ethnographic observations.

Being a volunteer and ethnographer, was a profoundly personal experience. I could not take distance from my research, since my encounters at the house deeply affected me and shaped the way I see the sex industry and society today. Therefore, I have incorporated my personal journey into the methodology of this research through an auto ethnographic phenomenological analysis.

In my analysis, I was inspired by the ethnography a homeless shelter by Robert Desjarlais. By using a phenomenological analysis, it gives space to the complexity and multiple layers of experience within a shelter house. Within the following chapter, I will describe my use of phenomenological analysis, auto ethnography and data collection.

4.1 Practicing phenomenological ethnography

In a phenomenological ethnography the phenomenon is first thoroughly observed before it is analysed. Within an ethnography this means that the circumstances and interactions of a group of people are described and the researcher contributes to the research process by being a participant in the group. The lived experience of the researcher is described in such a way that it accompanies the reader in experiencing the phenomenon through the eyes of the writer.

Moreover, the meaning that is created within a world is analysed through the eyes of the researcher as they are as much an actor in the experience as the phenomenon observed. The method of auto ethnography stems from the practice of ethnography, but takes an autobiographical turn. Through an auto ethnography various layers of consciousness are explored. As anthropologist Dr Ellis depicts in her methodological novel on auto ethnography, *The Ethnographic 1*: “*back and forth auto ethnographers gaze: first they look through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition.*” (Ellis, 2004 p.37).

An auto ethnography is, thus, an account of the experiences of the researcher within a certain context.

4.1.1 Lived practices

The lived practice stands close to the examination of the lived experience, but does not speak of the experience that one individual experiences, but rather what practices are held within a group and how these practices are lived through by the participants. As such, the term lived practice refers to practice as a living, sensuous, and generative experience, that flows through the individual participants but is not determined by one person. Moreover, the setting influences what is done and how it is done. Thus, by observing the lived practice, the researcher emphasises the actions and the “doing”.

In putting phenomenological analysis, auto ethnography, and the lived practice together, a method emerges that sensuously examines the lived practice.

4.2 Using a phenomenological analysis

I have chosen to use a phenomenological approach for my analysis because it emphasises my own lived-experience and the intersubjectivity of the research context. Through a phenomenological perspective, the anthropologist is seen as a research participant that participates “sensuously” in the experience. As such, the lived experience of the researcher cannot act as an arbiter or producer of an objective truth or reality. As such, the experience is observed and studied without interpreting and valuing their validity and ‘truthfulness’. As the anthropologist Kim Knibbe describes: : *“views on reality are not evaluated for their truth, or analysed as forms of ‘false consciousness’, as society worshipping itself or as psychological constructs. Rather, they are understood as experiences of reality that arise out of the daily life and practical concerns of people, without reducing them to socio-economic conditions or principles external to the situation itself.”* (Knibbe & Versteeg, 2008 p.49).

As a volunteer at the Overweeghuis, I am not competent in making claims about the entirety of the lived practice of the Overweeghuis, since I only experience snippets of everything that is going on a daily basis at the house. In view of this limitation, I will analyse my position and perceptions of sex work and how my volunteer work influences them. In addition, I will bring my reflections in conversation with the academic literature and political debates about sex work. Moreover, I will reflect on these statements by analysing my perception and not implying another person’s reality (Pitard, 2016).

4.3 Data collection

I started volunteering at the Overweeghuis in January 2021, I usually went to the house about once or twice a week for a shift of four hours. I often took shifts during the evening from 17.00 until 22.00 o’clock because these shifts were the most lively and interesting. We would eat together with the residents and then play a game or watch a movie. My choice of the evening

shifts meant that I did not always spend time with the professional staff, since they went home for the evening. Therefore, I spent more time with the residents and other volunteers. The day after my shift I would write a reflection on my evening or the thoughts that I had during the evening. Around the time I started volunteering, I also decided I wanted to do an ethnography of the Overweeghuis or write my thesis about sex work in the Netherlands. I started reading up a lot on sex work theories and ideologies. During my shifts and whilst writing my vignettes, I would connect my experiences in the Overweeghuis with the books I was reading. As such, it was not only my interaction with the Overweeghuis that influenced my thinking but also the literature I was reading.

I noticed that by simply observing the everyday life at the Overweeghuis, it would be hard for me to answer my research question: “How can we understand the lived practices of working with and for sex workers in the Overweeghuis against the background of normative discourses on sex work in the Netherlands?” The broader reflections that spoke to this question were usually done more during seminars and workshops that were organised for volunteers. Since these events allowed the volunteers to interact together (usually there was only one or two volunteers per shift) and to reflect on what was happening in the house. That is why I have emphasised these events in the analysis. For my analysis, I have reviewed the vignettes I wrote about the Overweeghuis and summarised the sentiments and conclusions I drew on the subjects of sex, the body and morality. Furthermore, I have described the space of the Overweeghuis and its rules to set the stage of the lived practice at the Overweeghuis.

5 Analysis and Ethnography

5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the lived practices of working with and for sex workers at the Overweeghuis against the background of normative discourses on sex work in the Netherlands. The Overweeghuis is a shelter house in the city of Groningen that hosts women coming from the sex industry. The house hosts any woman with a background in sex work, and helps them in their reconsideration of leaving or remaining within the sex industry. In this shelter, residents, volunteers and the staff all come with their normative assumptions, backgrounds and experiences on the issue of sex work and working with sex workers. Together, all these people and the formal structure of the shelter house create the lived practice of working with and for sex workers at the Overweeghuis.

In my observations about the Overweeghuis, many aspects of the empowerment and oppression paradigm were present in the lived practice. Within the formal structure of the Overweeghuis, the ideological organisations tied to the Overweeghuis and the house rules of the Overweeghuis interacted with national and municipal policies on sex work in the Netherlands. Moreover, themes such as the body of the sex worker, sexuality, and stigma were present in many interactions and practices. These themes affected the lived practices on a formal level, within house rules and mission statements of the Overweeghuis, but also in many informal interactions between residents and volunteers. The practices in which the paradigms were mostly present, were in the house rules, allowing only women into the house, creating a safe space, giving personal responsibility, religious experiences, and in differentiating between volunteers and residents.

In this ethnographic chapter, I will delineate how the Overweeghuis can be understood against the background of normative discourses on sex work in the Netherlands. For this, I will describe how the Overweeghuis places itself between the existing organisations and institutions that work with and for sex workers in the North of the Netherlands. Next to that, I will describe the lived practice in the Overweeghuis through an auto ethnographic lens. Within this auto ethnography, I will specifically look at the presence of the empowerment and the oppression paradigm within the lived practices at the Overweeghuis. I will support these observations with vignettes on how the concepts of the body, sexuality and stigma lived in the Overweeghuis.

In this chapter, I will use excerpts from my vignettes to give life and context to my analysis. I will denote these excerpts by indenting the vignette from the main body of text. Next to that, I will denote my autoethnographic reflections and quotes within the text by writing them in italics.

5.2 The Overweeghuis

The house is an old manor house on a busy street, on the outside nothing indicates the official function of the house, except for the plastic blinds at one of the windows and the security system. The inside of the house is decorated with light green, turquoise and pink colours that come back in the large glass stained windows. In the hallway an imposing staircase leads up to the rooms of the residents. The ground floor has an office, a living room, a small kitchen, two student rooms, two showers and a “crisis room”. Behind the house is a large garden with a cherry tree, flowerbeds, a little garden shed, and a table and chairs. The smell of cigarettes is infused in the pillows on the chairs and ash stains the table. The house is furnished with Ikea furniture with light pink accents and a clean neutral look. In the living room a house plants, occasional bouquets of flowers and a light pink velvet

couch with blankets and cushions.

Throughout the house little postcards and printed out papers reflect bible texts or a poem about being in a dark space and going to a light space.

The Overweeghuis provides provisional shelter; the intended stay of the residents is three months, during which they can recover and think about what they want to do in life. During their stay, their basic needs of having a roof above their head, food and safety are covered. Moreover, volunteers are always present in the Overweeghuis to ensure that the residents can talk to friendly faces and that there is a nice atmosphere in the house. Sometimes the house is busy, completely filled with six residents, two students and two volunteers per shift. Other times, there are only one or two residents and the house is quiet and almost empty. Every day is different at the house because every person influences the dynamic of the house in a variety of ways. The fluidity and everchanging dynamics at the house are characterised by the various types of people that live in the house, the residents come from all layers of the sex industry and society. Their backgrounds, motivations, and goals vary greatly, from wanting treatment with addictions to needing a temporary place to stay during a covid lockdown.

5.2.1 The structure of the Overweeghuis

The motivation to be inviting to as many people as possible also translates into the house rules and policies within the Overweeghuis. The Overweeghuis accepts anyone into the house without needing a reference (verwijzing) from another organisation. Moreover, drug users and undocumented women are also welcome in the house. In this sense, the house is welcome to anyone who has been involved in the sex industry at any level. Through this policy, the Overweeghuis does not discriminate between the various types of sex workers and also does not define the term either sex work or human trafficking through their policy of entrance. Moreover,

the name, House of Reconsideration (Overweeghuis), emphasises that the residents of the house are free to reconsider whether they want to leave or remain within the sex industry. Thus giving the sex workers agency in deciding what is best in their situation. When a resident decides to return to the sex industry, she is free to do so without any consequences, and she is usually free to return to the house when she wants to reconsider her situation again. When she wants to leave the sex industry, the Overweeghuis connects her to an organisation that helps her in finding employment, helps with addiction or trauma therapy.

During their time at the Overweeghuis, the residents have to adhere to a few house rules, such as cooking for everyone once a week, doing a weekly cleaning task, and being home before 11 o'clock in the evening. Next to these practical requirements, the women at the house are not allowed to continue doing sex work nor leave the house for one or several nights without the permission of the project leader. These rules were set in place to ensure that the Overweeghuis would achieve the goal of recovering and reconsidering. According to the project leader, it proved imperative to the harmony and tranquillity in the house that these rules were instituted and followed.

5.2.2 Making the Overweeghuis

Although the idea of beginning a house that catered to the specific needs of female sex workers had drifted in the minds of the founders for a few years, the initiative received funding and support from the municipality of Groningen when the tippelzone in Groningen was closing. Thus, Overweeghuis was founded in 2019 to alleviate the transition of the street-based sex workers in Groningen to other forms of sex work, employment or care. In this sense, it was a response to a policy that stemmed from the oppression paradigm. As shown in chapter 3, in the last years, public opinion and policies have moved in the direction of the oppression paradigm (Outshoorn, 2012). Many municipalities have chosen to close zones of street prostitution (tippelzones), and sex work is increasingly more regulated. Furthermore, the image of sex

workers in public discourse emphasises the vulnerabilities of (female) sex workers within the sex industry.

Within this political climate, the Overweeghuis received its funding and support. As such, the project of the Overweeghuis is influenced by the oppression paradigm through the motivation of funding exit programs for women in the sex industry. However, the Overweeghuis simultaneously incorporates aspects of the empowerment paradigm by leaving out the necessity for residents to leave the sex industry. Consequently, the Overweeghuis places itself between both paradigms, not endorsing or refuting either one. The structure of the Overweeghuis creates a space that leaves open all the options and interpretations of sex work, usually made by either one paradigm. Thereby, the Overweeghuis is not alienating any stakeholders within the landscape of sex industry and all its aid workers, be it secular, religious, supporting empowerment or oppression paradigm.

Even though the Overweeghuis formally places itself between all the debates about sex work, the lived practice in the Overweeghuis is more fluid in taking a stance on the sex industry. In the day to day practices of the Overweeghuis the backgrounds of the volunteers, staff and residents became apparent and determined the ideology practised within the Overweeghuis. Moreover, the normativity of the lived practice was also present in the design of the Overweeghuis and the how the Overweeghuis tried to make the shelter a beneficial place for its residents.

5.3 Creating a safe space at the Overweeghuis

“ all this pink stuff... I don't like it... it's not my style”

Resident -

“All this drama... well that's what you get with a house full of women”

Social worker -

In the ethnography on shelters for the homeless in Boston, Robert Desjarlais describes how the design of the shelter mirrors the assumed internal life of the residents. With its erratic, irrational design and incomplete structure; the shelter aligned with the inner lives of the residents that struggled to find rest and order in their own lives. The design of this shelter served the interest of making the shelter less hospitable to the end of making residents wanting to leave the shelter.

By observing the Overweeghuis through a similar lens, I observed that the house was intentionally decorated to give off an atmosphere of serenity and homeliness. Except for the office, the house hid away all its signs that this was a hierarchical institution. The message the design of the house transmitted was of the informal and feminine nature of the house. Moreover, inspirational messages, prayers, and poems were placed around the house. In this sense, similarly to the design of the shelter Desjarlais observed, the house assumed the chaotic inner lives of the residents. However, the Overweeghuis tried to counter this by designing the house in a serene and homely manner. With its design the house not only attempted to make the residents feel safe, it also exuded a particular, soft femininity. The decoration of the Overweeghuis was distinctly feminine, as one resident once observed, it would look different if it were a house for men.

The explicit femininity in the house was also obvious in the random comments made by residents, volunteers and staff. Such as, “in a house full of women there is always going to be gossip”. Next to that, the topics of conversation were often about feminine topics such as menstruation, childbirth, makeup and skincare. I felt this feminine space created a safety to speak openly about female bodies that would have been impossible if men had been present in the house. The intimate little details of menstruation or showing stretch marks from a pregnancy were discussed without any shame or hesitation. Furthermore, some of the activities in the house were feminine, there were sauna days, shopping trips to the second hand store and photo shoots.

The language used in the house often denotes the specific femininity in the house. The residents were not only called residents (bewoonsters) but more often called the women (vrouwen), the ladies (dames) or the girls (meiden). When these terms are used everyone knows it was about the residents and not the volunteers or staff, even though everyone is a woman in the house. Once I observed how a resident with short hair and masculine clothes was asked by a fellow resident why she wanted to have short hair and how long she had had short hair. Clearly denoting the peculiarity of having short “boyish” hair. Residents that presented themselves as more masculine were sometimes uncomfortable in the explicit traditional femininity in the house. Sometimes, they explicitly remarked or made jokes about how girly everything was. Moreover, the masculinity of these residents is often marked as different, such as liking to do “men’s work” and preferring to be around men. In these senses the notions of masculinity and femininity were emphasised in the Overweeghuis.



Figure 3 the entrance



Figure 4 the living room



Figure 5 self-made decorations

5.4 Gender at the Overweeghuis

Gender takes a special place in the house, because only women are allowed to enter and live in the house. In this sense, gender is one of the most significant components determining the lived practice at the Overweeghuis. In other words, the body of the residents, staff and volunteers determines their place in the Overweeghuis. As intimated before, this thesis uses the definition of body as a site that hosts societal discourses and embodies the values of society.

In the practice of only letting women into the house, the Overweeghuis was determining what bodies were considered women and which were not. As such, the Overweeghuis was creating discourse on the body of the sex worker as well. Since only women are allowed to be in the Overweeghuis, the body of the sex worker is seen as a female body.

Occasionally transwomen would stay at the Overweeghuis. In these cases I did not notice that their identity was treated any differently by the staff. In my time at the Overweeghuis, I sometimes overheard transphobic comments. One resident said that she thought it was strange that they were allowed into the house even though they were actually men. However, when a transwomen actually stayed at the house, I did not notice that she received a transphobic treatment by other residents or volunteers. They were considered women and their treatment was the same as the other residents. Consequently, the female space in the Overweeghuis included women in all their varieties.

In a conversation I had with a resident she mentioned that she was very happy that men were not allowed into the house. In this way she could express herself freely and she could also be ugly at times. In this sense the house was freed from the male gaze and the relations between women took precedence over their relations with men. In this sense, the Overweeghuis institutionalised the difference between male and female bodies; thereby making male bodies

suspicious and dangerous and female bodies safe and victimised.

5.4.1 Women cannot be dangerous

The premise of feeling less safe with men than with women was not only an idea put forward by the residents themselves, but it was also present in the choices and interactions volunteers had with the residents. During a seminar on closeness and distance for volunteers the conversation steered towards physical touch between volunteers and residents. This vignette showed me how the undergirding belief that women could not be harmful to the residents was integrated in the lived practice of the Overweeghuis.

The conference was large and the uncomfortably warm, large windows were letting in the last sunbeams of the warm spring day. In the middle of the room the tables were placed into a large square that could have fitted double the people that attended the seminar. Scattered around the room were other chairs and tables, that gave the room a professional and impersonal outlook.

“It is always the same volunteers that join these sessions”, Mara noticed as she was preparing the PowerPoint on a tv. She was right, only five volunteers had joined and they had attended many other workshops organised by the staff of the Overweeghuis.

Through the chatter Mara started up the PowerPoint presentation and opened on the line of what was a good balance between feeling too close to a resident or too distant.

Quickly we moved to the practical expressions of closeness and discussed among ourselves whether it was okay to give gifts, money and phone numbers to residents.

Among the volunteers present many agreed that they would not feel comfortable giving gifts and expressing affection through these ways with the residents. However, in terms of hugging and physical closeness the group quickly reached the consensus that it was

okay and even good to express affection in such a way. A hug was a way of comforting that did not require language or communication and it felt natural to hug when a resident was suffering. However, the discussion arose on whether one should ask for explicit consent before hugging a resident. In this discussion a volunteer was against it because it would undermine the naturalness of the interaction. Moreover, the volunteer did not see the harm in hugging.

I brought into the conversation that I was sometimes a bit hesitant in hugging without explicit consent because we were working with a group of traumatised women who were often traumatised in physical touch. To this, the leader of the workshop added that this was true because sometimes women could also be traffickers or inflict trauma on other women. Nevertheless, the conversation moved quickly to the ways in which hugging and physical touch was craved by a resident and how it provided a way to console without needing any words.

Later I reflected on this discussion and I thought that the discussion would have been very different if men would also be volunteers. The physical touch of men was considered very differently than the physical touch of women. Although intellectually I believed it was important to ask for consent before a hug; intuitively, I also considered the physical touch of men as more threatening and sexual than that of a woman. The idea that a hug from a woman would not be as threatening or uncomfortable for a survivor of sexual violence was thus not surprising to me. This premise also resonated with the prejudice that women cannot be perpetrators of violence. The very fact that we were all women seemed to exclude us from perpetrating violence and triggering trauma on the residents. Although this experience and assumption was more nuanced by the comment of the leader of the workshop, the lived practice of the Overweeghuis reflects this assumption by considering that a female space is safe from these types of violence came back in the lived practice of the Overweeghuis. The insurance of safety of the Overweeghuis was in part due to the female bodies and the femininity the Overweeghuis exuded. As such, the

assumption that women cannot be dangerous was integrated into the structure of the Overweeghuis, the perceptions of the residents and the actions of the volunteers. As one resident once said:

“It’s all women here... I like that. If I walk out of the shower I don’t want some man being there, getting horny on me...no, it is very important that there are no men here.”

Consequently, she felt safe at a women’s only space, because she did not feel sexualised when only women were around. The safety residents felt at the Overweeghuis thus also relied on not feeling objectified and sexualised as they had experienced in their work. Creating the Overweeghuis as an asexual place was thus also imperative to the safety of the Overweeghuis.

5.4.2 The Overweeghuis as an asexual place

I also noticed that the Overweeghuis felt like a safe space to me because there weren’t any men around, my relationship to my body changed because I was not watched or regarded in a sexual way. I became conscious of this change at the house soon after I started volunteering and started to contribute to making the house asexual as well. The rationale of asexualising the Overweeghuis, felt like an implicit contract that most volunteers, staff and residents contributed to. On the one hand, it was formally institutionalised by only allowing women into the house. On the other hand, asexualising was an action (or inaction) that was repeated and fortified every day. The formal policy was undergirded by the assumption that women could not sexualise each other and that the trauma many residents endured was inflicted by men. Moreover, this policy assumed that gender was a determining factor in triggering certain memories or unwanted behaviour, and thoughts. In reflecting on these practices, I noticed how I was also contributing to asexualising the house.

I noticed how I was contributing to the policy of asexualising by specifically praising the residents on aspects of their skills and personality, instead of their appearance. Moreover, I noticed that I

consciously refrained from telling residents about my own bisexuality, even though topics such as dating and partners regularly came up. I did not want the people in the house to know that I was bisexual or dating women out of fear of making them uncomfortable and they would assume I was sexualising them.

In this sense, I was contributing to the politics of a-sexualising and enforced the heteronormative assumptions that undergirded the politics of a-sexualising. The heteronormativity in this interaction was apparent because it was assumed that because we were all women we could not sexualise each other. Thus, the sexualising was done by men, and women were excluded from this role.

With its implicit politics of asexualisation, the Overweeghuis was countering the patriarchal paradigm that sexualises and objectifies the bodies of sex workers. In its asexualisation, the practice of the Overweeghuis emphasised the other aspects the talents and personality of its residents. By asexualising the Overweeghuis also integrates aspect of the oppression paradigm, since it assumes the sex in the sex industry to have been harmful to the sex workers. Moreover, considering men to create danger within the Overweeghuis, is another aspect of the oppression paradigm that was reflected in the oppression paradigm. Thus, around the topic of sex the lived practice of the Overweeghuis leaned towards the oppression paradigm.

5.5 Talking about sex and romance at the Overweeghuis

Sex was not often talked about among volunteers and staff, but some residents openly talked about their sex work experiences. In these talks they also never mentioned that it was liberating or transformative. However, to some, sex work was a pragmatic decision that they talked about in a business-like manner, to others, it was a pain they could not articulate. For instance, one of the residents, Sylvia, mentioned that she was glad that she stopped doing sex work.

“ I miss the money and the excitement of seeing many new places. But I was so tired of being with so many different men every day ... it’s not nice, sometimes they think they can do everything because they pay me, but that’s not how it works. And I am healthier now that I stopped”.

Maria, was also neutral about her time in the sex industry, she was happy when she worked because she was earning money and she needed to send money to her children in her homeland. She never mentioned that she liked or disliked doing sex work. However, she talked extensively about the good conditions and bad red light districts across the country and how she experienced working in the different cities, the safety conditions, hygiene and clients differed in every place.

There was a large difference in how residents talked about clients, some residents spoke very openly about the details of their sex work, while others avoided the topic completely, only sometimes mentioning that something happened back when they were “working”. The word working was used to denote sex work. Although this choice of words would politically indicate the adherence to the empowerment paradigm, it referred here to a refusal to say the word prostitution or sex work out loud. I noticed that it was often the residents with a troubled and traumatised memory to the sex industry avoided the topic of sex work or would use the word “work” when speaking about it.

Similarly to sex, the love life of the residents was treated as a contentious topic by the volunteers and staff. Some residents fell deeply in love in their time at the Overweeghuis. This occurrence was usually seen with suspicion by the volunteers and staff. I noticed that the men they fell in love with stayed abstract and distant, since it was not their personhood, but rather their actions and the way they made the women feel were discussed. Often when a resident talked about a man that she was seeing or being in love a tension arose in the volunteers and there was an automatic mistrust of the men in their life, even men that seemed to help the residents were often critically regarded. This mistrust emphasised the exclusivity of the feminine space.

In sum, around the themes of sexuality and gender, the lived practice at the

Overweeghuis incorporated both aspects of the empowerment, as well as the oppression paradigm. The empowerment paradigm was mostly present in the interactions of the residents, in which they described how sex work had helped them financially and was also a source of finding excitement in their lives. Yet, the oppression paradigm was more present in the interactions of volunteers and residents that had experienced a lot of violence within the sex industry. The lived practice of the Overweeghuis tried to ensure a sense of safety by incorporating the values of the oppression paradigm, by not allowing men into the house and by asexualising the residents. Because of these practices, the Overweeghuis leaned more towards the oppression paradigm on the subject of sexuality.

5.6 Responsibility and empathy at the Overweeghuis

In other instances, the lived practice of the Overweeghuis moved towards the empowerment paradigm. In the contact with volunteers the responsibility for doing sex work was often assigned to the women themselves. They bore the responsibility to step out of the sex industry and start a new life. In the office hung a printed quote that said that one cannot save someone but only love them while they figure it out themselves. This quote was often repeated to the volunteers. This quote told the volunteers that they should not aim to save the residents, nor that they should feel responsible for them succeeding or failing. In this sense, the quote was professing the values of the empowerment paradigm, of giving sex workers agency in deciding their own fate. However, the quote also indicated that the women needed saving or stood at a difficult time in their lives.



Figure 6 decoration in the office

The assumption that the responsibility of sex work laid on the women themselves was often mostly present in seminars organised to support the volunteers. The seminars were organised a few times a year and were an opportunity for volunteers to meet each other outside of the setting of the house. We would discuss the issues and difficulties we faced at the house and how to cope with them. There were training sessions around a certain theme, such as recognising signs of abuse and managing closeness with residents; but there were also intervision meetings in which a small group of volunteers would discuss situations they faced at the Overweeghuis and how to handle them.

These seminars zoomed out of the day to day activities within the house and were a chance for volunteers to discuss their experiences and work through what happened in the house. In one intervision meeting a young volunteer asked whether it was not out of the necessity of money that women did sex work. To this the leader of the seminar, a professional who worked mostly with psychiatric patients, decidedly said no. There is always something else drawing women

back into their old network. The leading cause of people engaging in sex work was thus not their dependency on the money, but lay rather in the fear of leaving behind a toxic but familiar environment, according to the leader.

In another seminar for volunteers, one volunteer remarked that she always felt like she really wanted to help the women but that it doesn't always matter she does because sometimes they made a mess out of their life again ("ze maakt er zelf weer een potje van"). In these occurrences the volunteers and staff were maintaining both a similarity to the women by staying out of the victim label and giving them agency over their own life. The assumption that the residents were responsible for their own life was repeated often during the seminar. This phrase was said in the context to assure the volunteers that they were not responsible for the residents' wellbeing and success. However it also demarcated an aspect of the empowerment paradigm in the sense that agency of the residents was recognised and their engagement in sex work was an agentic decision of the residents. In this way it reflected the values of the empowerment paradigm that engaging in sex work is a decision and that this decision should be made by sex workers themselves.

Assigning responsibility to the residents to change their lives was a means to empower them to take agency in their lives. However, the assigning such individual responsibility also came at the cost of undermining the structural inequalities and stigma residents faced in their lives.

5.7 Working with stigma at the Overweeghuis

Stigma was always present in the lives of the residents at the Overweeghuis. Within their existence as sex workers and often in the intersecting identities and lifestyles, they were exposed to stigma to various degrees. As was seen in chapter 1 (pages 33, 34) stigma is widely reported and research in the context of sex work; some literature even states that stigma is the most violent aspect of having an existence as a sex worker (Sanders, 2016; Weitzer, 2018). Naturally,

the concept of stigma was also present in the Overweeghuis.

In the design of the Overweeghuis, the founders were inspired to design the structure of the Overweeghuis in such a way that the effects of stigma would be alleviated through interactions with volunteers. The idea was that volunteers and residents would stand next to each other as equals instead of reproducing the hierarchy of a social worker and their client. As a staff member commented:

“At the Overweeghuis, we destigmatise women, we tell them that we accept them and like them even if they have worked as a sex worker... this is often very special for them”

Through this motivation, the Overweeghuis was also intended as a space in which people from different segments of society could learn to understand each other. Both the residents, as the volunteers, came from diverse backgrounds and faced unique challenges, this means that they cannot be fitted into a single minded collectively. Yet, their position at the Overweeghuis made them play a different role in the lived practice at the Overweeghuis.

Despite exceptions and differences between volunteers in general most volunteers inhabit a more privileged position within society than the residents of the Overweeghuis. The family and societal backgrounds of many volunteers and residents often differs, for instance, having the time and space to volunteer could be considered a privilege. As such, many volunteers did not face the same kinds of challenges nor had the same upbringing as the residents. Although the house intended on diminishing the differences between residents and volunteers, the societal differences and stigma of the residents still seeped through the good intentions of volunteers. I noticed this in the small comments made on the residents in which the difference between volunteers and residents was emphasised. When a resident went back to her old network of friends and boyfriends that she had during her time in the sex industry, volunteers often questioned her choice of going back. Attributing it to a lack of self-respect or confidence.

“The familiar might be abusive, but this abuse feels safer to ‘the women’ than starting a new unknown life.”

Another thing that was often said was that this level of care and selflessness was something unknown to ‘the women’. They had maybe never received a birthday party or other ‘normal’ acts of kindness. The volunteers introduced the residents to a culture that they considered more valuable than the culture the residents were used to in the sex industry. As one volunteer said about a resident:

“Sometimes I had to tell her, don’t talk to people like that, she has to learn how normal people communicate with each other, this will also be needed when she gets a normal job and life.”

As such, the prejudices and stigma of sex workers pervaded the well-intended actions of the volunteers.

However, the residents also noticed the difference and prejudices of the volunteers and often remarked that the volunteers were babysitting them or complained that they had to adhere to paternalising rules. Some residents felt they had more insight into what was good for themselves and other residents since they came from the same background. Volunteers were often not deemed capable of understanding everything the residents went through. As one resident remarked:

“There is a lot that the volunteers don’t see or notice and then we (the residents) have to help each other...”

Therefore, within the Overweeghuis the most institutionalised difference between people was that between residents and volunteers. The aim of the Overweeghuis was to diminish the differences between sex workers and society (e.g. the volunteers); yet, there were still incommensurable differences that the good intentions of all the people at the Overweeghuis could not bridge.

The difference between volunteers and residents is reflected in many analyses of social shelters. As Goffmann and Desjarlais state in their analyses of social shelters: “the most salient

difference within shelters is that between staff and patients" (Desjarlais,1994 p 263 quoting from Goffmann;1962 p 111). In the ethnography shelter blues, Desjarlais uses the term drama of difference to describe differing and sometimes contradicting interests and perceptions between staff and guests at a homeless shelter in Boston. In this example, the residents of the shelter live by a system of values and meaning from the streets of Boston, while the staff tends to live by Anglo-American, capitalist middle class values. Moreover, the shelter Desjarlais observed primarily hosted people whose sense of reality and experience did not coincide with that of "regular" society. The drama of misunderstanding and misrepresenting these differences between staff and residents happened on an almost subconscious level, according to Desjarlais (Desjarlais, 1994 p 37).

At the Overweeghuis, a similar drama of difference took place between volunteers and residents. The background and values of many residents and volunteers differed and they navigated through life in almost parallel worlds that did not intersect or meet outside of the Overweeghuis. The values, habits and communication manners of residents and volunteers differed which led to the habit of interpreting behaviour of residents among volunteers and staff. The movements, looks, and behaviour of residents was scrutinised to discover what the resident was feeling, thinking and doing. In this way, the volunteers tried to get closer to the residents and understand the world that they lived in. The interest and interpretation of the volunteers was motivated with a concern for the safety and wellbeing of the residents. The world that the residents came from was seen as a dangerous world with lesser morality than the world of the volunteers. Consequently, the volunteers wanted to overcome the drama of difference by making the residents join their world. In this sense, the world of the sex industry was still stigmatised and regarded as negative, but the residents were not inherently tied to this stigma and world.

The drama of difference thus played out in cultural differences between volunteers and residents. Within this difference the sex workers milieu of the residents was viewed as dangerous and inferior to the "normal society" the volunteers were inhabiting.

However, a theme in which both residents and volunteers build intimate connections was religion. Through their faith, many volunteers and residents found strength and the motivation to be at the Overweeghuis. As such, the some volunteers and residents united around their shared faith and religion was integrated into the lived practices at the Overweeghuis.

5.8 Religion at the Overweeghuis

As intimated in the third chapter, the history policies on sex work in the Netherlands in heavily influenced by religious actors and beliefs. In national debates secular and religious advocates often stand in opposition to each other. In these debates the secular advocates often accuses the religious actors of mixing their policies with their Christian convictions to the detriment of the sex workers (Vanwesenbeeck, 2022). As such, religion is viewed with suspicion by secular actors working with sex workers. In feminist normative discourses about the sex industry, religious actors have mostly aligned themselves with the oppression paradigm, as they share the goal of abolishing the sex industry (Bernstein, 2010). Yet, in the lived experience of sex workers, religion forms a source of strength and support, both to exit the sex industry, as well as to continue working as a sex worker (Gesser, 2020; Tsang & Lowe, 2019)

The Overweeghuis, officially profiles itself as a secular organisation, yet many organisations tied to the Overweeghuis work from a Christian vocation. Moreover, the lived practices are infused with little religious rituals, such as prayer before dinner and attending church with some residents. Therefore, lived religion and formal religious ties are also present in the house.

5.8.1 Religion in the structure of the Overweeghuis

Formal religious vocations are firstly visible in the organisations tied to the Overweeghuis, such as Quartermasters, Terwille and the Salvation Army (Leger des Heils). All these organisations work from a Christian vocation within the field of social care in the province of Groningen. They cooperate with the Overweeghuis by providing a follow up process (vervolgtraject) to the women that decide to leave the sex industry. Next to that Salvation Army is more embedded in the structure by also providing staff members to the house as dispatched workers. Furthermore, the house is tied to the faith based organisation quartermasters which coordinates the volunteers working for the Overweeghuis. As such, the staff and volunteers often come from a Christian background. Thus, similarly to the ambiguous stance the Overweeghuis takes on the sex work, the Overweeghuis also inhabits an ambiguous space between secular and religious organisations. The mission statement, official documents and the website of the organisation do not mention a religious motivation to start the house. Nevertheless, the within the lived practice in the Overweeghuis religion takes an important role in shaping practices in the Overweeghuis among volunteers, staff and residents.

5.8.2 Religious experiences in the Overweeghuis

“At the Overweeghuis, I got the time to feel close to God... that really happened there.”

Resident -

Religion is subtly present within many day to day activities and permeates the lived practice of the house by inviting residents to church, praying before dinner and thanking God when a good experience happens. As such, religion was harmoniously connected to the lived practice of the Overweeghuis. Within the Overweeghuis many residents shared the motivation to reconnect with their faith and find spiritual guidance through religion. One conversation I had with a former resident reflected the spiritual journey some residents went on during their time at the Overweeghuis:

The sun shines brightly on the bench in the garden where I sit with Sylvia, she left the Overweeghuis a few months ago and she is now living in a guided living house with a family. Her eyes shine brightly as she tells me about how she wants to study to become a cook. She wants to take a new step in life, leave behind all the drama and focus on herself. When she is in pain or finds it hard to focus on this long term goal she reads from the bible; it gives her hope and she feels a closer connection to Jesus: "It helps me a lot to pray and think about everything that happened, I also write a lot down on my laptop, when all my feelings come back." "I don't remember you feeling this close of a connection to God when you lived here?" I remark. "We talked mostly about your tarot cards and spirituality back then."

"Yes, but I was already thinking about God back then a lot too. I just had trouble accepting he was the only one, I believed in all these different spiritual things, but in the past months I learned to accept he was the only one that could save me."

Oh how was that process for you? How come you realised this?

It was mostly in the house that I got transferred to after I stayed here. There I prayed every day and everyone was very religious. That was beautiful to see and it had a big impact on me... I am reading a lot now and the bible says that there is only one God. If that is what is written down, I need to accept that."

At the Overweeghuis many residents reconnected with their faith and shared their spiritual journey with the volunteers. Where Sylvia was discovering different spiritual and religious movements during her time at the Overweeghuis, being placed at a Christian faith based organisation after the Overweeghuis consolidated her Christian faith.

Religion did not only support the residents during their time at the Overweeghuis, it was an integral part of their motivation to exit the sex industry. As one resident Rhonda explained:

"God has shown me how to love. I didn't know what love was before I met God, I was supplementing love with all kinds of things, like drugs and money, but when I met God I didn't need all that. I stopped all my addictions because of Him. And now I know love.. and I am

learning to love myself, because He loves me. And that is why I am not working in prostitution anymore. The bible says that love and sex is intended in marriage between man and woman, and I don't want to live in sin anymore”

Thus, with the motivation of living closer to God, Rhonda (and other residents) decided to stay away from the sex industry.

Because I met residents at a phase in their lives where they take steps to change their lifestyle, they were also concentrating on spiritual guidance and finding strength and meaning in their new lives. Some residents concentrated on reading the bible and connected with volunteers through their shared faith. As one resident told me:

“I got a lot closer to God here, I like talking about it with a volunteer that I am close with who is going to the same church as I am... we pray together sometimes as well. I also pray for the other women here, they ask me to pray for them because it helps them in their darkest times. Being with God and praying has saved my life, I wouldn't have been able to resist all the temptations of money and drugs at the house if it weren't for Him.”

Although she considered herself to be Christian before coming to the Overweeghuis, she described how she got closer to her faith at the Overweeghuis. It was a source of strength and gave her a meaningful connection with some volunteers. As such faith, and especially protestant Christian faith, was present in many daily activities and interactions at the Overweeghuis. religion signified an important motivation and source of strength to exit the sex industry for the residents.

5.9 Morality politics at the Overweeghuis

“I feel like I should have this strong opinion about sex work... but it's difficult..”

A friend-

Morality politics is the motivation of the general public to engage with a certain moral topic and enact change upon it. Sociologists Wagenaar and Altink observe how morality politics play out

in Dutch policies on the subject of sex work. They argue that sex work is often connected to broader societal ideals, such as human trafficking, violence against women or sexual freedom. The confoundment of these ideals has created moral panics about the sex industry and consequently has inspired quick and inconsequent changes in the regulations around sex work in the last decades.

Morality politics was present in the lived practice of the Overweeghuis in various ways. Firstly, the subject of sex work motivates volunteers sufficiently to volunteer their time to the Overweeghuis. Secondly, the existence of the Overweeghuis as a civil initiative shows how the subject of sex work is taken up by civil society. Moreover, sex work is seen as something that needs the engagement of civil society. Lastly, the reactions from people and media outside of the Overweeghuis was engaged and opinionated, quickly connecting the conversations to principles such as sexual freedom, protection of women and psychological distress. Yet in the lived practice, politics was not often talked about.

All volunteers, by definition, shared an interest in spending time and effort in helping the Overweeghuis and its residents. In conversation we often spoke of the nuanced outlook this work had given us on people that engaged in the sex industry. Nonetheless, the discourse of sex work in the Netherlands was often not discussed in the Overweeghuis. The political aspect of volunteering did not permeate the daily life at the Overweeghuis. Sometimes volunteers would mention a show that they had seen about human trafficking or sex work. However they would not comment extensively or give a strong opinion on these issues. It was clear that the women living at the Overweeghuis were always the centre of the attention and that it was not proper to discuss all this extensively in their presence. I refrained from elaborating on the books I read about sex work, since I felt it would politicise and divide the safe space at the Overweeghuis. As such, the divisive political tensions on sex work in the international and national discourse did not surface among the volunteers of the Overweeghuis. The tension and hostility present in international conferences on sex work was not present in the house and the various ideological

and religious backgrounds of volunteers, staff and residents was not a point of tension within the house.

5.10 The Overweeghuis and me



Figure 7 photo of me as a volunteer

At the Overweeghuis, I came into contact with a way of life that was distant from my upbringing and social relationships. Sometimes, the world of the residents felt so foreign to me that, at times, I saw my social world as a better, safer place with healthier relationships and a better way of loving. I was often stunned at the life courses and struggles the residents faced. I had trouble comprehending how people could have abused them so badly and continued to ruin their lives through manipulation, blackmail and physical abuse.

The following vignette represented my doubts, thoughts, but mostly conflicting feelings towards the sex industry.

Sometimes, like today, I feel so insecure interacting with some of the residents because I feel that without experiencing the sex industry and the background they have, I am too naïve to understand, let alone help them in some way.

Today, Susana told me her life story that was infused with domestic abuse, incest, drug addiction, and obviously sex work. She talked about all this in a rational manner, like the story did not affect her that much, or as if it wasn't about her at all.

When she spoke about the sexual assault she experienced recently, more emotion emerged and she kept repeating the same detailed story of what had happened during the assault. When she was talking, I empathised and I felt the assault as if it happened within my own body. However, this was not the aspect of our conversation that upset me the most. She kept repeating how this experience was her fault and how she should take responsibility for what had happened to her. I strongly disagreed with this perception, and it pained me to see her assign herself fault for something that was so horrible, and that was very obviously not her fault.

Yet, now that I am reflecting on it, I think giving herself responsibility was a way of coping with the experience. Taking the fault and responsibility means that she had control over the situation and therefore could prevent it from happening again. But, if it had not been her fault, there was nothing that she could have done differently to prevent the assault.

On the one hand, I want to convince her these abuses are not her fault, but I also don't want to take away her coping mechanism or make her feel as a powerless victim.

When I am trying to make sense of these experiences at the Overweeghuis, I am constantly pulled between the empowerment and the oppression paradigm. Ideologically speaking, I agree with the empowerment paradigm; I believe different expressions of sexuality should be accepted. Moreover, I believe that viewing the sex industry as violence against women is too simplistic and disregards the intersectional forms of violence sex workers face. Yet, when I heard Susana's story, I was so angry and hated the men who did this to her. I also want to abolish the sex industry to ensure this abuse does not happen to anyone else. Yet, I don't want to disempower Susana by treating her as a victim since she was so set on avoiding that label on herself. Although she clearly demonstrated signs of post-traumatic stress, I am not the one that should negate her coping, let alone disprove her perception.

The vignette about Susana could be used to support arguments for the oppression and the empowerment paradigm. Through the lens of the oppression paradigm, this vignette is a perfect example of the violence and abuse women suffer at the hands of men. Yet, looking at this situation through an empowerment lens shows how the stigma of being a sex worker is internalised in Susana's perception. She is stigmatising herself by blaming herself for being assaulted. Next to that, she was afraid of reporting the incident to the police because of all the instances in which police officers had disregarded and stigmatised her. These factors enabled the violence against Susana to take place.

In sum, the violence Susana experienced was at the hands of violent men. At the same time, more factors than just gendered power relations played into her assault, such as stigma, internalised stigma, unsupervised spaces, and fear of the police.

5.11 Concluding Discussion

As intimated before, the Overweeghuis holds an ambiguous place within the national and international discourse of sex work. It is both open to the empowerment and the oppression paradigm as it leaves the choice of continuing or stopping sex work up to the sex worker. However, the lived practice within the Overweeghuis between staff, volunteers and residents often strays more towards the oppression paradigm.

The sentiment of viewing the sex industry in a negative light was prominently present within the Overweeghuis. Even though the structure and rules of the house stated that the residents were free to return to their work in the sex industry, volunteers and staff were often disappointed when the residents returned to their sex work. There was a general consensus that sex work has hurt the women that live in the house and has severely traumatised them. Therefore, many volunteers and staff voiced their concern when a resident returned to the sex

industry or engaged with people she knew from her work. Among volunteers and staff, loverboys and pimps were often found as a reason for women to engage in sex work. There was a strong suspicion that men attached to the women at Overweeghuis had the wrong intentions with them.

The tendency towards the oppression paradigm could be attributed to the makeup of residents present in my time at the Overweeghuis, as many struggled with addiction, domestic abuse and psychological distress that kept them in the sex industry despite their desire to leave the sex industry. Moreover, the Overweeghuis mostly attracts sex workers that are struggling in the sex industry and that need a place to rest. Therefore, the makeup of residents might not be representative of the overall population of sex workers in the Netherlands. As such, the practice in the Overweeghuis could have been merely reacting to the needs of the residents and it was not proclaiming its political motivations from these actions.

The residents were struggling with various problems connected to, but not always inherent to working in the sex industry, such as addiction, domestic abuse, uncertain migrant status and mental illness. Similarly to Gesser's observations in her interviews with street-based sex workers in the US, the residents faced a multiplicity of stigmas that were related to their varying identities as sex workers, drug users, migrants and other stigmatised identities. As such, the practices of the Overweeghuis are reflecting findings in the ethnographic literature about the sex industry. As Tsang and Sanders notice in their ethnographies, sex workers' stigma permeates all aspects of their lives. Moreover, it colours their interactions with the outside world (Sanders, 2004; Tsang, 2020). Similarly, stigma permeated through the lived practices at the house and created a drama of difference between volunteers and residents. In these differences, the culture of the volunteers was deemed superior to the culture of the residents. This was done both by the volunteers as well as by the residents themselves.

As was seen earlier in the definition of stigma by Cama, Brenner, Wilson and Von Hippel, stigma is:

a social process of imposing a negative stereotype on a group of people and casting them with a lower status, subsequently validating the discrimination this group faces. The status loss of being associated with a stigmatised group isolates this group (Cama et al., 2016).

In revisiting this definition in light of the practices at the house, we see that the lived practice is not validating the discrimination the group (sex workers) faces; however, it does cast a lower status on some practices within the sex industry. Namely, the culture of sex workers and their background in the sex industry is seen as something negative they should overcome to live a 'normal' life in 'normal' society. Thereby confirming that sex work does not conform to hegemonic norms in society. In this sense, the practices only partially challenged the stigma against sex workers, only destigmatising the sex worker while leaving the stigma on the sex industry unchallenged. Because sex for remuneration was frowned upon, the sex industry was negatively viewed and not destigmatised at the Overweeghuis. As such, the normative discourse informing sexuality was primarily informed through the oppression paradigm. Yet, this was also informed by the needs and wishes of the residents, thereby designing the practices to suit the needs of the residents. Because of the residents' varying issues, the staff emphasised the need to give every resident individual care and approach that suited her needs and specific issues (maatwerk). The emphasis on individual care is not original or new within the field of social work (Meurs, 2016). As one of the social workers mentioned, it is used as a rhetoric solution to all social problems.

Nevertheless, the common ground between the oppression and empowerment paradigm was also found in the individual care and concern for women in the sex industry. Therefore, individual care did not only signify the practical solution to sex workers' problems, but also a theoretical solution to the rift between the oppression and the empowerment paradigm.

6 Conclusion

To answer the question: How can we understand the lived practices of working with and for sex workers in the Overweeghuis through normative conceptualisations of sex and the body, I looked at my ethnographic field work through an phenomenological lens. Furthermore, I connected normative discourses present in feminist literature about sex work with lived practices at the Overweeghuis.

The literature on sex work identifies three main paradigms that conceptualise the body and sexuality of sex workers; namely, the patriarchal, oppression, and empowerment paradigm. The first two paradigms uphold the values that sex for remuneration should not be the correct way of having sex nor earning money. Thereby, differentiating sex work from other types of intimate labour and of other kinds of sex. The patriarchal paradigm determines through a process of stigmatisation, in which the sex worker's body serves as a symbol of female deviancy and a function for male lust. Both the empowerment, and the oppression paradigm oppose the patriarchal vision of sex work and aim to destigmatise and humanise sex workers. However, the two paradigms differ on the solution to the patriarchal paradigm. The oppression paradigm sees sex work as male violence against women. Therefore, they see sex work as non-consensual sex and intend to abolish the sex industry by criminalising people that have sex with sex workers (Dworkin, 1993; Jeffreys, 1997; Hewer, 2021; Gesser, 2020; Scoular, 2004). On the other hand, the empowerment paradigm considers sex work to be just another physically and emotionally intimate job (Nussbaum, 1997). Accordingly, this paradigm aims to destigmatise and decriminalise sex work, to the end that it is treated as any other profession. The empowerment paradigm contends that the violence and abuse in the sex industry can only be properly countered when sex work is a visible and legal part of society (Bruckert & Hannem, 2013; Lee, 2021; Sanders, 2016; Sanders et al., 2012; Wagenaar et al., n.d.; Weitzer, 2018). On a

conceptual level, the empowerment paradigm opposes the norms of the oppression paradigm that view sex in the sex industry as inherently harmful; rather, the empowerment paradigm aspires to undo the norms surrounding sexuality and accept various expressions of sex and the body into society. Moreover, it sees sex workers as actors that change and liberate norms on sexuality.

Dutch policies on sex work have historically moved from one paradigm to the other, increasingly taking more distance from the patriarchal paradigm (Outshoorn, 2012; Post, 2019). In the past years, the oppression paradigm has exerted more influence in the current policies of sex work in the Netherlands. In this political climate, the project of the Overweeghuis was started and funded.

At the Overweeghuis the norms that placed sex workers at the margins of society were not questioned. Sex was mostly seen through a heteronormative lens and sex for remuneration was frowned upon by many volunteers and staff members. As such, the stigma residents faced was not undone by reconceptualising longstanding norms of sexuality, as is done in the oppression paradigm. Rather, residents were destigmatised by emphasising their personality, talents and worth as people beyond their history in sex work. By individualising and destigmatising residents, the Overweeghuis stands at the intersection where the oppression and empowerment paradigm meet, namely, in dismantling the stigma on sex workers. One of the main goals of the Overweeghuis was to erase the difference between sex workers and volunteers, thus, lessening the stigma on sex workers. In its endeavours to humanise and see the individuality of residents the Overweeghuis is embodying the values both the empowerment and oppression paradigm support. Both paradigms fight the degradation and stigmatisation of sex workers by patriarchal values. Next to that, the Overweeghuis aims to find pragmatic solution to the various struggles of the residents, such as drug addiction, residence permits, domestic abuse, and human trafficking. In this sense, the Overweeghuis gives space to the intersectional struggles residents face. Nonetheless, prejudice, stigma and distrust seep into the lived practice

of the Overweeghuis. The societally different position between volunteers and residents is replicated in the house rules of the Overweeghuis, but also in the interactions between volunteers and residents.

The residents and volunteers performed a drama of difference in which the social world of the volunteers was seen as safer, more loving and normal as opposed to the social world some residents came from, which was characterised by poverty, domestic abuse and exploitation. Through this, a normative judgement was made about the norms and values within the culture of the sex industry. When regarding the individual residents' behaviour, some of her peculiarities were excused by being socialised in the undesirable culture. In this sense, the institutional aspect of the struggles of the residents was recognised. However, contrary to this perception, the residents were held individually responsible for making changes in their lives that would incorporate them better into 'normal society'. These practices were contested by some residents through joking about the mismatched power relations between volunteers and residents, or by leaving the house. Thus, the residents and volunteers were divided on the in their places in society and cultural backgrounds.

The practices that united volunteers and residents were religion and creating a female safe space. Many residents shared their religious experiences at the house with the volunteers, or they shared small religious rituals such as prayer together. Moreover, volunteers and residents shared a female experience and connected through themes such as motherhood, menstruation and cosmetics. Although both these practices could be part of the empowerment and the oppression paradigm, at the house, the practices were undergirded by a distrust of men and a religious motivation to exit the sex industry. Thus, these practices also leaned more towards the oppression paradigm.

In conclusion, the lived practice of the Overweeghuis is evermoving, fluid and nuanced; it cannot be put into the box of the empowerment or oppression paradigm, nor can it function as an example of a normatively neutral organisation. The Overweeghuis manoeuvres itself between

the paradigms, not fixing itself on one stance. A reason this fluidity happens in the Overweeghuis is because it is not an organisation that concerns itself with political advocacy, therefore, the volunteers and staff are not making their political motivations explicitly known. In the lived practice at the Overweeghuis, one does not need to take an explicit political stance to help the residents. Although the Overweeghuis does not take a blatant political stance, I found that most practices at the Overweeghuis were more informed by the oppression paradigm than the empowerment paradigm.

However, being part of the oppression paradigm did not mean the space excluded actors and sentiments usually paired with the empowerment paradigm. Thus, in the both in the formal practices of the organisation as well as in the lived practices, the empowerment and oppression paradigm were working together to ensure a better quality of life for sex workers.

7 Bibliography

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