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Abstract

Sex workers in Spain are routinely criminalized, most recently as a result of the current administration's campaigns to outlaw sex work using feminist justifications. Mainstream feminism supports the idea that sex workers are passive victims of prostitution, gender violence, and body exploitation who require protection and defense (Bernstein 2007; 2010). Such accounts of what could be referred to as "punitive feminism" are frequently shared in official and public discourses without taking into account the perspectives and lived experiences of sex workers. When sex workers advocate for themselves, they are portrayed as "pimps" or individuals who have the so-called privilege of choosing to engage in sex work, which keeps them out of the mainstream feminist circles. Drawing on five months of ethnographic fieldwork between July and December 2022 in Catalunya, Spain, this thesis explores everyday forms of resistance among sex workers and their allies. Going beyond the agency/victim dichotomy, I understand resistance as a tool that sex workers use to continue to work and support themselves financially. Through participant observation, interviews, online observation, and visual ethnography, I examine sex workers' individual and collective acts of solidarity, community building, creation of alternative spaces, and rule-bending due to their systematic vulnerability (Scott 1985; Bourgois 2002). In opposition to the discourses and practices of punitive feminism, I argue that sex workers seek to reconstruct their own feminist space in order to negotiate against measures that marginalize and criminalize them as working-class sex workers and immigrants. Their actions are a counter-response to the punishment and re-moralization they face for their alleged transgression of norms (Juliano 2004; 2009). Sex workers, united by the *Feminismo de las Putas* [feminism of whores], oppose the "class-cleaning" (Juliano 2009), "criminalization of poverty" (Wacquant 2008), and "sexual moralization" (Smith & Mac, 2018) of the state and feminism.

Keywords

Sex Work · Spain · Everyday Resistance · Punitive Feminism · Work/labor · Criminalization

1. Introduction

“¡Las putas unidas jamás serán vencidas, las putas unidas jamás serán vencidas!”¹
“The whores united will never be defeated, the whores united will never be defeated!”
(Lyrics from a protest song)



[The stage where sex workers and allies gave speeches]
Image Credit: Photo taken by Noemi Chiavassa 17/02/2022 Barcelona.

On December 17th, during the International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers, a banner reading “Against the Criminalization of Sex Workers, of the Working Class, of Sexual Dissidents” served as the backdrop for the howls of protest by sex workers and their allies. The phrase, “Yo también soy puta” [I am a whore, too], illustrates how an attack on sex workers is seen as an attack on the civil rights of all, as anthropologist Dolores Juliano (2004) noted. The case of sex workers shows the ease with which certain groups can be targeted and forced to live a life in which they cannot rely on the law, denying the most basic human rights. In fact, sex work in Spain is neither legal nor illegal, in Spanish *alegal*. Many people in Spain, including governmental and non-governmental organizations, have discussed and enacted laws regarding sex work over the past few decades. However, the voices of sex workers have been systematically excluded from the policy-making processes. What is most striking is how a significant portion of the Spanish feminist movement has transformed into a staunch advocate for sex work prohibition and criminalization, exerting significant influence over governmental organizations to this end (cf. Halley *et al.* 2019). Beyond governmental restrictions and feminist marginalization, sex workers resist the imposition of the “prostitute victim” narrative, especially on migrant sex workers. According to TAMPEP, an international organization that supports the human rights of migrant sex workers in Europe, 90% of sex workers were migrants in 2008. Of these, 49% were from Latin America (2009, 25)². Most of my interlocutors are female sex workers from Latin America. How and through what practices do

¹ Sung by sex workers at public demonstrations. It comes from the Chilean song and slogan “¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!” used by mass working-class mobilizations during the campaign and election of Salvador Allende.

² Latin America 49%, Central Europe 24%, Africa 18%, Eastern Europe 4%, West Europe 3%, Balkan 1%, Asia 1% (TAMPEP 2009, 25). Because sex work is not recognized, there are no official statistics regarding the number of sex workers and where they come from. This is the most reliable source I found, as statistics, especially more recent ones, are usually compiled by NGOs working to abolish prostitution.

migrant sex workers resist in this double process of marginalization and criminalization as migrants and sex workers by the state and feminist mainstream circles? Instead of analyzing resistance as agency, I move beyond the agent/victim dichotomy. Thus, I examine the complexity of sex workers' resistance as individual and collective strategies for economic survival. In doing so, I look at the intersection of sex workers and migrants, who also face punishment tied to race and national identity (Smith & Mac 2018). This thesis unites the study of resistance with a feminist perspective.

In Spain, the criminalization of sex work is presented as a feminist project. According to this view, sex work is not work. It is a trafficking system based on gender violence and sexual exploitation. In recent years, sex workers, already the target of Francisco Franco's dictatorship, have again become the target of a wave of local and national legislation (Venceslao Pueyo, Trallero, Genera 2021). In the name of feminist causes, fines for street prostitutes and new bans on online and offline advertising of sex work are now being imposed on sex workers. The center-left government in Spain, which came to power in 2019, has earned the distinction of being the country's most progressive and feminist administration ever (El Salto 2022). Yet, the Pedro Sánchez administration adopted a completely paternalistic and punitive attitude toward sex workers. Irene Montero, self-declared abolitionist feminist³ and the Minister of Equality, stated that *prostitution* is a form of nonconsensual violence against women (El Plural 2020). She vowed that she would vehemently support legislation that would outlaw sex work, considered as trafficking of women (ibid.). In October 2022, the "Ley Orgánica de Garantía Integral de la Libertad Sexual" [Law of the Integral Guarantee of Sexual Freedom], also known as "Ley del Solo Sí Es Sí" [Law Only Yes is Yes], went into effect. This measure meant to protect sexual freedom and consent yet denied sex workers the ability to publicize their services. A second bill is currently being debated in Parliament, and if passed, it would criminalize clients. There is no distinction between sex trafficking and sex work in either of these two measures.

The punitive turn against sex workers is not only visible in laws and regulations but also is manifested in the discourses of mainstream Spanish feminist movements. These movements, which in other contexts are referred to as punitive feminist movement (Bernstein 2007), view prostitution solely as slavery and prostitutes as victims (Cobo 2011; de Miguel 2015). The rise of this hegemonic narrative about sex work has not spared Catalunya. The northeastern region is characterized by widespread youth activism and social movements which have historically shown more tolerance, understanding, and cooperation with sex workers than other parts of Spain (cf. Feixa Pàmols, Sánchez García, Nofre Mateo 2014). In response to punitive measures, sex workers have been engaged in counter-acts of resistance and fight for decades. Everyday forms of resistance (Scott 1985) are therefore driven by the need to continue (sex) work and life and are concretized in the creation of alternative spaces where to work, gather, and protest and in the utilization of legal loopholes. In doing so, sex workers have transformed marginalization into a site of resistance and radical possibility (hooks 1984). Sex workers are therefore united by their opposition to the criminalization of sex work and by their belonging to an alternative feminism, or what they refer to as, *el feminismo de las putas* [the feminism of whores]. In this feminism, there is a space for the rights of *putas y migras* [whores and migrants]. Most sex workers come from Latin America undocumented and suffer marginalization, stigmatization, and unwantedness (cf. Young 1999; Wacquant 2001; Brandáriz 2007; Delgado 2011). Sex workers resist not only as sex workers but also as working-class immigrants performing an unrecognized occupation, which already hinders legal residency in Europe.

This study is based on five months of ethnographic research in Catalunya⁴. I conducted twenty in-depth, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews with sex workers and their allies. I participated in numerous protests and public demonstrations and attended movie screenings,

³Europa Press "Montero se declara "abolicionista" de la prostitución" [Montero calls herself an "abolitionist" of prostitution] Accessed 04.05.2023 <https://youtu.be/S5FDVIBxXzs>

⁴ In this thesis, I intentionally use the Catalan name "Catalunya" to refer to the region, instead of the English term.

workshops, book presentations, thematic guided tours, lectures, and conferences. Sex workers I met in the field worked in a variety of sectors: street prostitution, escorting, pornography, self-creation of online erotic content⁵, prostitution in saunas, apartments, clubs, sexual assistance, BDSM⁶, and burlesque performers. In designing and conducting my ethnographic research, I joined the call of Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995) for an engaged, militant, and interventionist anthropology committed to social justice and human rights. I positioned myself in the field not only as a researcher but also as an ally of sex workers, by actively involving and volunteering in projects that promote the rights of sex workers in addition to socializing with my interlocutors. My positionality made it impossible for me to enter abolitionist (and punitive feminist) spaces. In understanding these spaces, I relied mainly on the resources available in the “mediascape”⁷ (Appadurai 1996, 33), such as online conferences and content of digital feminists (Semenzin 2022) on Instagram (images, videos) about “abolishing prostitution”. As a result of observing the interactions in a Telegram group composed primarily of sex workers, but also some non-sex worker activists, the online sphere took on a central role in understanding their daily concerns and struggles.

This thesis examines the persistent challenges that sex workers in Catalunya face daily. In response to the criminalization project, sex workers have mobilized various forms of resistance to assert their rights and to sustain their livelihoods. Through meticulous research, the study aims to uncover the complex factors contributing to relation between resistance and punitivism and fully understand its intricacies. First, I situate my research within the existing anthropological debate on resistance and punitivism. This approach helps me to emphasize sex workers’ individual and collective actions as rebellions against government policies and feminist exclusion and marginalization. Thus, sex workers are resisting dominant narratives that ignore their voices. I then outline my findings in three sections that unpack sex workers’ resistance to the state, punitive feminism, and the institutionalization of punitive feminism. Resistance occurs through navigating policy, occupying, and then creating spaces for sex workers. Finally, I show that sex workers’ resistance is symptomatic of increasing punitivism and criminalization. State and punitive feminism not only deny their human rights but also make them more invisible and vulnerable (cf. Amnesty International 2023).

2. Theoretical Perspective

“Many people want to stop us from selling sex, or just ensure they don’t have to look at us. But we are notoriously hard to get rid of, at least through criminal law”.
(Smith & Mac 2018, 1)

“Us whores are everywhere. We are somebody’s sisters, somebody else’s parents, we can be your cousins, your friends, your partners, and you may not even know it”.
(Andrea, Interview, September 2022)

My research is situated within ongoing anthropological debates about resistance, marginalization, and punitivism. These debates have implications for the understanding of resistance, as it is at the root of marginalizing and punitive practices of social control and ordering. Drawing on anthropological and interdisciplinary debates in the studies of gender and sexuality, this chapter lays out the connection between sex work, resistance and punitivism. Overall, my work goes beyond the reproduction of the agent/victim dichotomy related to sex work, by addressing resistance as a necessity for sex workers to continue working and remaining economically self-sufficient.

⁵ Only Fans, Patreon, Telegram.

⁶ Specifically, dominatrices and their helpers.

⁷ Repertoires of images and narratives in which the worlds of consumption, news, and politics are mixed through the circulation of images (Appadurai 1996, 33).

2.1 Studies on Sex Work

Over the past few months, when I happened to discuss my research with someone, I have often been asked about my interviewees' reasons for engaging in sex work. It often feels like a search for the most emotional and shocking reason. It is difficult to recognize that some people engage in sex work because of the monetization of sexuality and intimacy. As a result, sex workers are dichotomously portrayed as either sexually exploited or sexually empowered. Conversely, for sex workers, sex work is the solution to the lack of better-paying jobs. Jobs are particularly limited for non-Western migrant sex workers who enter the country without documentation. Typically, these jobs are cleaning and elder care, both as feminized as sex work, without contracts, and extremely underpaid. Sex work is thus a strategy for adequate economic self-sufficiency. Recognizing it as such, however, requires a reconceptualization of the meanings given to the body, sexuality, and intimacy (cf. Day 2007; Boris & Salazar Parreñas 2010; Kimberly Key Hoang 2015; Canova 2020).

As anthropologist Sophie Day notes in her London-based work "On the game: women and sex work" (2007), narratives of sex work have been shaped by Christian precepts of heterosexuality and monogamy. As a result, it is difficult to understand sex work as *work*. This obscures the fact that, as in any other profession, there is a boundary between work life and private life. This separation is fundamental to legitimizing the profession as such. To this end, sex workers create different types of sexual activity at work and at home, two metaphorically separate bodies. Similarly, in "Intimate labors" (2010), Rhacel Salazar Parreñas describes the remapping of sex workers' erotic bodily geography. In Tokyo, as a strategy for separating personal and professional lives, sex workers avoid contact between certain bodily parts, such as mouth-to-mouth kissing. However, Kimberly Hoang's (2015) fieldwork in Vietnam shows that the lowest-paid women engage in direct sex for money, suppressing their feelings of disgust.

Drawing on research in gender and sexuality, I argue that the failure to recognize sex work is rooted in the moral preconceptions ascribed to intimacy and sexuality. But morality is strictly contextual. In her ethnography "Frontier intimacies" (2020) in the Chaco region of Paraguay, anthropologist Paola Canova explores the monetization of sexual liaisons between Ayoreo women and non-Ayoreo men. The involvement of money is not seen as a moral problem, but rather as a constitutive part of the sexual encounter. In order to reconceptualize intimacy and sexuality, I had to reimagine feminism. In this thesis, therefore, I address "decolonial feminism" as a break with Western feminist hegemonic and counterhegemonic narratives of gender and sexuality (cf. Espinosa Miñoso 2022). In doing so, I have delved deeply into complexity without falling into the "good/bad" dichotomy. My research elaborates on feminist studies of intimacy, sexuality, and the bodies of sex workers by using them as a foundation for understanding resistance.

2.2 Sex Workers and Resistance

In the 1980s and 1990s, anthropologists and theorists James Scott (1985; 1990) and Michel de Certeau (1984) agreed that resistance is a common phenomenon triggered by situations of exploitation, oppression, and marginalization. Scott (1985) conceptualizes resistance as everyday individual and collective covert acts of opposition and self-help against domination. Along with Scott, French philosopher Michel De Certeau (1984) defines resistance as an attempt to subvert the social hierarchy, or, in the words of sex workers: to oppose power structures. Resistance is closely tied to social class and is based on an inescapable relationship between those who have property, political power, and the means of production exploiting those who do not (Thompson 1963). In my research, resistance includes individual actions, such as sidestepping the Immigration Law as an immigrant sex worker through "sham marriage". Resistance also includes collective actions, such as protests, that are deeply rooted in everyday experience. As sex workers in a marginalized and excluded community, they are most affected by "statification", the process defined by the German political scientist Joachim Hirsch (1983) as the infusion of the state in every aspect of life. Statification manifests itself in the prosaic presence of the state in the everyday lives of sex workers

(cf. Painter 2006) and, in the “state of exception” (Agamben 2005) that sex workers are constantly confronted with. For instance, in case of a sudden police raid on the streets where sex workers work, Adriana, one of my interlocutors, goes to the store to buy eggs for herself and her *compañeras* [fellow sex workers], which are thrown as a sign of protest to drive the police away.

Feminist scholars have written much about resistance as a means of challenging power structures. Key contributors include Elizabeth Grosz, Donna Haraway, and bell hooks, who committed to showing resistance as arising from the need to cope with gender, racial, sexual, and class oppression and inequalities. In Elizabeth Grosz’s “Notes towards a corporeal feminism” (1987), the body emerges as a pivotal site of resistance, as it is both a means of distributing power and a potential object of resistance to power. In bell hooks’ “Feminist Theory: from margin to center” (1984) the resisting bodies are those of African women against colonial oppression and patriarchal, class and racial domination. These two works guide me in understanding the bodies of sex workers as resisting different forms of marginalization, stigmatization, and punishment when e.g., queer, trans, and racialized. Through Donna Haraway’s “A cyborg manifesto” (1991), I reflect on the actual capacity of resistance to subvert power relations. While in Spain sex workers’ resistance has allowed them to work within the established order, in New Zealand and in the Caribbeans sex workers’ resistance has even led to the decriminalization of sex work (Abel & Armstrong 2022; Kempadoo 2004).

Resistance also includes subtle forms, such as silence, civil disobedience, and creating communities of solidarity (Scott 1985, hooks 1984). Furthermore, sex workers also resist narratives of victimhood and salvation on their behalf. In the remarkable work “Under western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourse” (1984), Chandra Mohanty critiques how Western feminisms assume that women in non-Western areas are passive victims of patriarchal oppression. I indeed noticed, during my fieldwork, that this assumption is often made about non-Western female sex workers. Moreover, the difficulty for non-Western women to be heard within feminist debates (Spivak 1988) increases when these subjects are also sex workers. Just as sex workers face simplistic narratives, Lila Abu-Lughod, in “Do Muslim women need saving?” (2002), challenges simplistic Western narratives of victimhood and salvation by emphasizing Muslim women’s resistance to patriarchal power structures. Victimhood narratives have historically been the driving force in some branches of the feminist movement to demand legislative change and criminal sanctions, such as in the U.S. feminist campaign against pornography in the 1980s (Duggan & Hunter 2006).

Understanding sex work requires moving beyond the inaccurate representation of migrant sex workers as victims and the dichotomous representations of sex work and sex workers as either good/bad, saint/whore, strong/weak, and independent/submissive (Agustín 2007; Motterle 2023). The discourse of abolitionist feminism insists that sex workers are victims, passive, exploited, without decision-making power, forced into prostitution, alone and defenseless, with little or no intellectual capacity, dangerous and delinquent, and evil (Pateman, 1988; MacKinnon, 1989; Barry, 1979). The “prostitute as victim” narrative is often countered by resorting to dichotomizing the sex worker as a “pure agent”. In contrast, my thesis attempts to show the nuances by outlining a “multifaceted and multilayered picture of the lives of sex workers” (Dewey & Zheng 2013, 25), instead of presenting sex work as black or white without any complexities (Lamas 2016). I understand resistance as the individual and collective creation of alternative strategies in the face of imposed policies and exclusionary spaces and discourses. Resistance is thus an act of self-determination and freedom for those who have been historically oppressed and marginalized (hooks 1984). Sex workers are sexual dissidents, united in a new feminism, the *feminismo de las putas*, which invokes a “unity of speech, politics, and practices, and forges a link between sexual expression, oppositional politics, and claims to public space” (Duggan & Hunter 2006, 5). In the next section, I elaborate on how scholars have dealt with the embedding of punishment within the neoliberal socioeconomic-political structure.

2.3 Resisting against Punitivism

As the sociologist and social anthropologist, Loïc J.D. Wacquant (2009) argues, neoliberalism employs a carceral approach towards society. That is, in some parts of the world, such as the U.S., Western Europe, and Latin America, punitive measures have replaced social policies. The retreat of the welfare state has been accompanied by the rise of a new type of state, the punitive and carceral state, which prioritizes surveillance, punishment, and criminalization of activities that were not considered criminal, such as homelessness, drug use, and sex work. The carceral state operates through a moral-based identification of the *bad* actors, who are typically already subjected to marginalization. As a result, punitive policies disproportionately affect racialized and working-class people, as moreover evidenced by the Spanish government's dogged targeting of sex workers. In the Spanish case that I am examining, however, punitivism is exercised in the name of feminism. Drawing on Halley and her collaborators' (2019) discussion of feminism in the halls of power, the Spanish case reveals the presence of feminism in institutions that shapes itself through the adaptation to a neoliberal and carceral state.

The analysis of punitivism and feminism arises from the groundbreaking work of the sociologist Elizabeth Bernstein (2007). According to her, carceral feminism aims to achieve gender equality through tough prison sentences and criminal justice procedures. In Spain, the carceral turn has its foundations in the rise of institutional feminism and neoliberal governance in the 1990s, when carceral demands were consolidated within the feminist agenda (Uría-Ríos 2009). Sex workers are subjected to punishment and re-moralization because of their alleged transgression of norms (Juliano 2009). The driving force behind this punitivism is what Carole Vance and Gayle Rubin (1984) call "moral and sex panic", as a moral-based opposition to the sphere of sexuality. The policies to which sex workers are subjected contain a sexual morality, such as the ordinance that prohibits sexual intercourse in public spaces in exchange for money (cf. Mac and Smith 2018). Mainstream and punitive feminism turn into a "moral entrepreneur" (Becker 1963), which establishes the "right/wrong", "feminist/patriarchal" binary in accordance with its set of ideologies.

Sex workers are portrayed as victims, passive and helpless women who need to be protected and defended (Bernstein 2010). Court rulings are therefore presented as a teaching tool for men to ensure that they do not violate or abuse (Ávila-Cantos & García-García 2013). Meanwhile, the increased presence of the police to verify compliance with the law in the case of the criminalization of sex work is presented as the protection of women's bodies. In Spain, the state and the feminist movement express a desire and prioritization to erect symbolic walls to separate themselves from marginalized groups, including sex workers (cf. Brown 2010). In response, as anthropologist Philippe Bourgois (2002) argues, these groups seek solutions to systematic vulnerability through rituals of daily resistance.

The Argentinean anthropologist Dolores Juliano conducted numerous studies on the punitive approach to sex workers in Spain. In "Crime and sin. Transgression in feminine" (2009), she explains that the punitive measures applied to sex workers are "class-cleaning" under the guise of social policy, what Wacquant calls the "criminalization of poverty" (2008; 2009). This approach increases the number of sanctioned individuals, particularly in conflict-ridden neighborhoods, in ethnic or racial minorities, and among immigrants (Juliano 2009). Punitivism is a colonial tool that targets individuals and groups deemed to be threats to the social order in order to maintain domination (Segato 2016). Sex workers Smith and Mac (2018) argue that the attitudes towards sex workers have been strongly yet covertly tied to race, borders, migration, and national identity. Punitivism materializes in the lives of sex workers through criminalization and feminist exclusion. Sex workers are denied the right of working, housing, participating in the public and feminist space, telling their truth about sex work and being heard. Because "sex work is the vault in which society stores some of its keenest fears and anxieties" (Smith & Mac 2018, 2), sex workers are disproportionately charged and displaced. Before moving on, I elaborate on the research methods and my positionality.

2.4 Methods and Positionality

The ethnography is based on insights I gained during five months of fieldwork in Catalunya, between July and December 2022. Through participant observation, unstructured and semi-structured interviews, conversations, online observation, and photography, I explored sex workers' everyday strategies for resisting punitivism. Participant observation consisted of attending book launches, conferences, lectures, protests, public demonstrations, movie screenings, thematic guided tours, and workshops on sex work and other relevant topics. Aside from strictly sex-work-related events, I explored human sexuality and its social interpretations, bottom-up migrant rights initiatives, and decolonial feminism. I observed the interactions in a Telegram group composed of 120 participants, nearly all sex workers, which allowed me to enter an even more intimate dimension of resistance. Finally, I participated in a WhatsApp group with 9 academics and students also conducting research on sex work.

I conducted twenty in-depth, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews with sex workers and their allies. Some were conducted in sex workers' homes, others in bars. I use pseudonyms for my interlocutors to respect their anonymity. I coded and analyzed interviews, notes, and other secondary data using Nvivo software. During the fieldwork, I tried to be supportive of my interviewees and to get involved in their lives. Thus, I attended events featuring my interlocutors, such as Andrea's burlesque cabaret or an event on male sexuality where Josep was invited. In doing so, I distanced myself from an extractive research practice (cf. Pacheco-Vega and Parizeau 2018) and attempted to respect what they always claim: they are much more than sex workers. In addition, I always gave symbolic compensation, such as a plant or candy, to show my gratitude for the time I was freely given. Being a young, white student researching sex work made gaining trust difficult. To overcome this barrier, I reflected on my privilege and stepped back by emphasizing silence and listening. I tried to go beyond words to reach the senses and perceptions, committing myself to listening "to sit alongside participant observation as an equally valid way of gaining ethnographic knowledge" (Forsey 2010, 567). I participated in highly emotional speeches of sex workers, where I refrained from asking questions and making contact, preferring to appreciate the conveyed sensations. Similarly, I tried to give sex workers space and time during interviews, valuing a deeper understanding that goes beyond verbal communication.

Focusing on resistance to punitivism, I had to find a solution to gain knowledge about mainstream and punitive feminism. Because of my research with sex workers, it was difficult to access to the abolitionist space. Therefore, I participated in online conferences on abolishing prostitution and observed Instagram posts of abolitionist activists (cf. Semenzin, 2022). Most of the events took place in Barcelona, as it is the most populous Catalan city. I also attended events held at other Catalan municipalities (Tarragona, Montblanc, Girona, Hospitalet de Llobregat). Another constitutive Catalan area was covered by a survey that I had access to through an NGO. It was submitted by 80 sex workers on their recognized fundamental human rights. These sex workers work in clubs, flats, and on the streets of Sabadell, Terrassa, Granollers, Mollet, Manresa, Tarragona, and Vic.

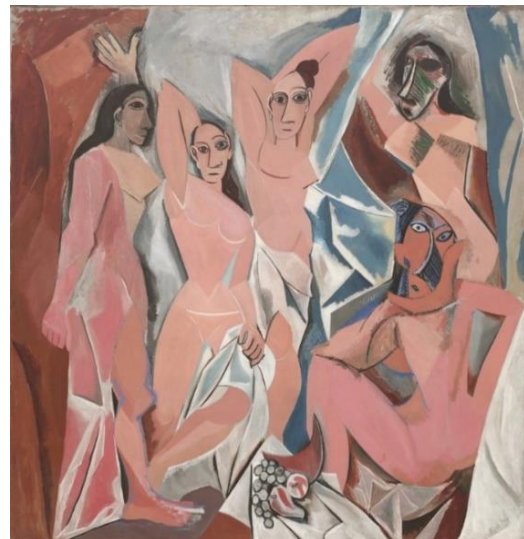
In my fieldwork, I valued photography for its ability to evoke narratives and to construct and represent reality (Pink, Alforonso, Kurti 2004). My aim is to present a more tangible reality that can help to highlight the fieldwork and its main actors. I always reflected about who, what, and how I was photographing. Inspired by anthropologist Deborah Poole's (2005) reflection on how visual technologies have shaped the very notion of race, I considered common visual portrayals of sex work and their influence on the way we see sex work. Thus, I decided to avoid stereotypical images, such as photos of high heels, short skirts, as well as the pornification of vulnerable situations. I distanced myself from what Marta, one of my interlocutors, would call *el morbo*, the obsession to see what sex workers look like, to know who a sex worker's clients are, to hear why she does sex work, if she has a partner, and if she wants to change work one day, as if they were protagonists of an entertainment show.

Using a “decolonial feminist approach”, I have identified and challenged gender and sexual domination (Miñoso 2022, 23). At the same time, I recognize the limitations of postulating a universal patriarchy which “enhances class and racial privileges of the subjects of Western feminisms at the expense of racialized people” (Miñoso 2022, 24). Furthermore, I have considered the problematic use of “women” as a stable and ahistorical category of analysis and the production of women as a socio-economic political group within a particular local context (Mohanty 1984). Throughout this thesis, I position myself against injustices and violence that sex workers experience daily. The main challenge has been and will be to represent the resistance of sex workers without stumbling into romanticizing and simplifying their lives (cf. Abu-Lughod 1990).

3. Ethnographic Analysis



[Reference to Picasso’s painting “Les Femmes d’Alger” (1907), on the door of the brothel in Carrer d’Avinyó] Image credit: Photo taken by Noemi Chiavassa 02/12/2022 Barcelona.



Pablo Picasso, Les Femmes d’Alger, 1907, Oil on Canvas, 243.9 x 233.7 cm. New York, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)

On December 2nd, I spotted an image on the side door of the brothel at number 44 in Carrer d’Avinyó, Barcelona. The image was a scribbled cross-reference to the prostitutes painted by Picasso. The recollection of Picasso’s painting “Les Femmes d’Alger” (1907) was shown during the “PutiRuta”, a guided walk by a theatre group through the streets of Barcelona. The aim was to discover the traces of prostitutes who occupied those spaces denied to them by society. Listening to the guide, I thought that perhaps punishment and resistance have existed among prostitutes for a long time. My assumption was confirmed when we were shown the narrow streets where sex workers worked in order to protect themselves from the police’s raids, which in fact could not manage to enter the alleys with the cumbersome vehicles used at the time, in the first half of the 1900s. “So, there is a continuum between resistance then and resistance now, a continuum between punishment then and punishment now. The story is still the same, but the strategies, devices, and narratives that underlie punishment are changing,” I noted down on my field notebook.

In this chapter, I present my findings on sex workers’ resistance, embedded in social class and migration status, to punitive practices of state and feminism. In order to demonstrate the inextricable link between resistance and punishment, I organize my findings into three sections. First, I unpack the resistance of sex workers towards the state’s punitivism by zooming into the resistance as a reappropriation of the torn public space and as a navigation of the Spanish Immigration Law. Then, I present the resistance of sex workers to mainstream and punitive feminism, within the feminist space and academic debate. Finally, I present sex workers’ online

reorganization as a strategy for resisting current governmental legislative change. Before I present my ethnographic analysis of sex work in Catalunya, I briefly discuss the broader historical contextualization of sex work in Spain. In this first section, I supplement the most salient legislative turns on sex work in contemporary history with historical anecdotes of sex workers recognized during the PutiRuta.

3.1 Contextualization of Sex Work in Spain

“When its ultimate death was certified, the Carolinas – not all, but a formally chosen delegation – in shawls, mantillas, silk dresses and fitted jackets, went to the site to place a bunch of red roses tied together with a crape veil [...] their shrill voices, their cries, their extravagant gestures seemed to me to have no other aim than to try to pierce the shell of the world’s contempt. The Carolinas were great. They were the Daughters of Shame”.

(Genet 1964, 58)

Las Carolinas were transvestite prostitutes who, in 1933, imitated a funeral march carrying red flowers to the *vespasiums*, public urinals where they used to engage in prostitution⁸. This historical event, captured during the PutiRuta through the words of the guide and the provided copy of Jean Genet’s description in “The thief’s journal” (1964), evokes the complicated history of prostitution. This episode shows how sex workers are subjected to the contradictions of a society that, on the one hand, promotes sexual consumption and, on the other, victimizes, criminalizes and invisibilizes sex work⁹.

The criminalization of sex workers dates back to Spain’s Civil War (1936-1939) and Francisco Franco’s dictatorship (1939-1975). Women served as militias in the civil war between Republicans and Nationalists (Venceslao Pueyo, Trallero, Genera 2021). Their tenure was terminated, however, due to an unexpected recall order. The assumption behind this order, which was characterized as a moralist and hygienist measure, was that “the militiawomen were engaging in prostitution and spreading venereal diseases” (Nash 1999, 104). The proliferation and difficulty in the control of venereal diseases were some of the main issues the country had to deal with during the war. As a result, a full-fledged campaign was started against prostitutes. Walking through cities, soldiers might come across posters depicting prostitutes as a threat to Spanish families, and they were urged to avoid them (Venceslao Pueyo, Trallero, Genera 2021).

Women started to be systematically excluded from the labor market after the Nationalists won the election and Francisco Franco’s dictatorship took effect. By doing so, it was believed that they could fulfill their assigned gender roles, which called for them to be devoted wives, and model mothers. The exclusion of women from the job market caused, along with other factors, poverty within families. In fact, in those years, “many women and families had to resort to charity, begging, the black market, petty thefts or prostitution” (Moreno 2013, 17-18). During Franco’s regime, women, other than being considered intellectually inferior and unreliable, were subjected to a repressive and punitive system, that implied physical and psychological punishments (cf. Richards 1999; Preston 2011). The word “prostitute” was already used as a derogatory expression, attributed in fact to republican women as they were committed to countering Catholic morality and achieving emancipation and equal rights. In the post-war period, many of these women, having been destitute and marginalized, became prostitutes (Nash 2015; Casanova 2002).

With Franco in charge, prostitutes began to be represented and treated as degenerated, mentally ill, and associated with delinquency, pathology, and social danger. Similarly reflecting this representation, legislation was endowed with laws such as the law “Against Slackers and

⁸ During the PutiRuta the guide suggested that this march could be considered the first Gay Pride of history, even before Stonewall, US (1969). Accessed 07/05/2023. <https://barcelonaothereyesroutes.com/las-carolinas-el-orgullo-de-barcelona/>

⁹ From the documentary “Hipocresía del deseo” (2007). In the documentary, the contradictions of society on sex work they refer to street prostitution.

Delinquents” (1932, 1954) and “Dangerousness and Social Rehabilitation” (1970), which punished anything considered socially dangerous, including female prostitutes (Platero 2019, 117). In 1956 prostitution was declared illegal, and despite the existence of a foundation for the re-education of women “freed” from brothels, many women preferred to become clandestine prostitutes (cf. Morcillo 2010). Until that time, clandestine street prostitution was persecuted, whereas brothel prostitution was legal. Nonetheless, with the 1956 law, “a list of Tolerance Houses [brothels] was required in order to drown them out” (Platero 2019, 118). Prostitution was therefore presented as “illegal trafficking”. Although this decree was withdrawn after the Spanish Constitution, as it was declared unconstitutional, the Spanish State continued with an abolitionist approach during the democracy (Arella *et al.* 2007). In this way, sex work is in a grey area where it is neither legal nor illegal, but *alegal*. “Alegal” is a Spanish expression to indicate that there is no state intervention in the activity when it is voluntary; the state does not persecute, repress, favor, or regulate prostitution (ibid.). In the case of pimping, which became a crime in 1995, these latter interventions are present (ibid.). In addition, each Spanish region has additional measures and intervention models.

To conclude, sex workers have been subjected to restrictions that cause even more difficulties in carrying out their activities. This situation is compounded by control and limitations caused by their status as (mostly) immigrants who are part of the working class. In fact, they lack the recognition of their job and the right to reside in Spain and are subjected to municipal ordinances to safeguard the security of public space and the respect of authority. Although sex work is not criminalized (yet), sex workers need to find their own strategies to navigate laws, restrictions, feminist exclusion, and control. The state, the punitive and mainstream feminist movement, and finally the presence of this type of feminism within the current government, use and support “dispositif of control” (Foucault 1990; 1995; 2003), such as the high presence of police in sex workers’ workplaces. In the following sections, the reader will learn more about the everyday forms of resistance that sex workers practice in the face of punitive policies.

3.2 Resistance toward the State

3.2.1 The Public Space

It is August, and the temperature here in Barcelona never drops below 30 degrees, the city seems to be populated only by tourists, not a single empty spot on the beaches. And here I am. I am here in what will be my home for the next few months. I am mapping the city, writing, and emailing all day long. Feminist collectives, pro-sex workers’ rights organizations. cultural and social centers, research groups, pornographic film productions, prevention, and intervention centers for sexually transmitted diseases. Anything that can potentially be related to sex work, can potentially help me. That is how I would describe this August: a constant and desperate attempt to make contacts. (Fieldnotes, August 13th, 2022)

Among the many emails I sent, the one to an anarchist cultural center in the Raval neighborhood of Barcelona took me by surprise the most. The Raval is an exemplary case of the contrast between the state and the margins of a hostile society (Staid 2014), characterized by a neoliberal economy that creates marginalized communities by deepening inequalities and denying access to basic resources and political representation (Bourgois 2002). In this section, I analyze resistance as rituals (Bourgois 2002) enacted by sex workers, forced by being the “unwanted ones” in the public space of the Raval where they nevertheless work and, some of them, also live. Resistance thus derives from the subjugation of marginalized communities to continuous plans of urban and punitive intervention up to the present day (Fernández 2014), hence class-cleaning (Juliano 2009) and the criminalization of poverty (Wacquant 2001; 2008).

The email I mentioned above gave me access to the stories and perspectives of people who live, work, and hang out in the neighborhood of the Raval. The cultural center responded by putting me in touch with Blanca, whom I met in October. When I first met Blanca in the Raval, it was to be

the first of many days spent in the neighborhood. I had two meetings with her, and she was never alone, but always with Adriana and sometimes with other *compañeras trabajadoras sexuales* [fellow sex workers]. I met and spoke with five of them, all prostitutes who work in the streets and apartments of the Raval, and then recorded an interview with Blanca and Adriana. In their description of the Raval, they define the neighborhood as a “walled¹⁰, migration and working-class zone” where “poverty is structural and historical”. The sex workers I met here are actively involved in the anarchist sex worker collective “Putas Indignadas” [Outraged whores], which I consider to be the hub of self-organization and reorganization of daily resistance in what they call the “ciudad de Raval” [the city of the Raval]. In Catalunya, a liberal regulationist model is in force. This model provides acceptance of prostitution in clubs¹¹ and aims at zoning and control prostitution (Mestre 2005). Control is exercised through hygiene and infrastructure regulations, which specifically means mandatory health checks for workers in clubs. Another form that can be considered as control is the zoning of prostitution: in cities such as Barcelona prostitution is tolerated in some areas and persecuted in others (Arella *et al.* 2007). In 2006, the municipality of Barcelona operationalized the municipal ordinance *de mesures per fomentar i garantir la Convivència en el espació públic de Barcelona* [of measures to promote and guarantee coexistence in the public space of Barcelona], which prohibited the offer, demand, and negotiation of paid sexual services in the street, in addition to their performance (Mottlerle 2023, 94). Shortly thereafter, Putas Indignadas occupied the streets of the Raval.

The municipal ordinance in force in some cities, including Barcelona, aims to ensure “civic coexistence” among citizens (Sobrino Garcés 2018), which automatically excludes those subjects who are considered “uncivic” (Fernández 2022). Coexistence is therefore applied in the name of “civility” by regulating behavior in the public space (Mottlerle 2023), based on urban control and moral hygienism (cf. Sobrino Garcés 2018). In other words, the prevention and mitigation of urban decay is enforced through punitive actions against unwanted marginalized and stigmatized groups of people, namely prostitutes, drug dealers, immigrants, and homeless people (cf. Young 1999; Wacquant 2001; Brandáriz 2007; Delgado 2011). The ex-mayor of Barcelona established the daily and nightly presence of fourteen guards in Calle Robadors, the historic prostitution street in the Raval. In addition to justifying the permanent presence of the police in a given space, this decree increases the exposure of people to the punitive tools of payment and arrest (cf. Wacquant 2009).

We could not walk in the street, we could not go to bars, they even put police officers in the flats which we were occupying and where we were working [...] After all, this political establishment never criminalized narco-flats¹² [...] It had been very hard, so we started to *dar nuestra cara* [to give/show our faces].

(Blanca and Adriana, interview, October 2022)

Sex workers began “to show their faces” through everyday acts of resistance, such as taking to the streets to occupy their workplaces, as well as more organized forms of protest in the Raval. In fact, Blanca and Adriana affirmed during the interview that, contrary to the municipal plan of cleaning up poverty, “they encountered real life, they encountered resistance”. Faced with real life, where sex workers continued to live and work despite the new restriction, the mayor could only soften the application of the measure. In this way, sex workers were heard in a meeting with the mayor, that resulted from the resistance that sex workers started to forge on their own. In this way, a delicate balance has been between sex workers, the municipality, and police. Although sex workers are working in the Raval and are thus tolerated by the police and the municipality, the police are constantly present in the Raval, and while in some cases they guarantee protection in case of

¹⁰ By using “walled” they referred to the differences between the Raval and the rest of the center of Barcelona in terms of people’s background who live these spaces, other than the constant presence of the police in and at the edges of the neighborhood.

¹¹ Saunas, striptease clubs, erotic massage centers, etc.

¹² Occupied apartments in the Raval of Barcelona where people go to buy drugs.

violence by clients, they continue to operate with sporadic fines to sex workers under the ordinance. However, many compañeras, as Blanca said, refuse to pay, accumulating thousands of euros in fines.

We suffer police pressure, and we thus call Calle Robadors “The Small Gaza” ... we are like Palestinian people whose space and territory are being stolen, they think that by taking our territory away from us they will end the existence of prostitution, drug addicts, and migrants. (Blanca and Adriana, interview, October 2022)

Palestinians and sex workers seem to have much in common in terms of everyday struggles and resistance. Johansson and Vinthagen (2015), in their study of the everyday resistance of Palestinian people, explain how Palestinians feel like watching their homes turning into prisons. They continue, “you must constantly resist the twin temptations of either acquiescing in the jailer’s plan in numb despair or becoming crazed by consuming hatred for your jailer and yourself, the prisoner” (Shehadeh 1984 cited in Hazou 2011, 151). Palestinians and sex workers live in a constant state of exception (cf. Agamben 2015). According to Agamben’s theory on the state of exception, it creates “an unprecedented generalization of the paradigm of security as the normal techniques of government” (Agamben 2005, 14) and enables the state to turn people’s lives into bare lives (Agamben 1988). Despite the relative absence of resistance in Agamben’s theory, sex workers have been able to negotiate the state of exception through collective and individual everyday acts of resistance (cf. Lentin 2006; 2008). However, as noted above, resistance has resulted in a fragile toleration rather than a subversion of the order.

Nonetheless, a subversion seems to have taken place regarding the regulation of houses where sex workers work in. During the mayorship of Xaver Trias (2011-2015), sex workers were faced with the impossibility of renting houses where they could work. Driven by the need to work, sex workers began to occupy flats – until nowadays – to resist the denial of the right to rent. This action once again modeled their relationship with the police and the municipality.

Noemi: Don’t the police enter the occupied flats?

Blanca: No, we are in control of them, this is our territory.

Adriana: We say we are occupying them; the police know they are occupied. We say it in public.

(Blanca and Adriana, interview, October 2022)

When confronted with resistance, law enforcement officials must endure the existence of actions that are illegal but difficult to punish.

In “Feminist theory: from margins to center”, hooks (1984) identifies marginality as a position and site of resistance for oppressed, exploited, and colonized people. Marginality, however, is more than a site of deprivation, but a site of radical possibility and a space of resistance (hooks 1984). Marginality becomes the focal point for creating a discourse that opposes dominant ideas, communicated through words and practices. hooks’ thought fits perfectly with the case of sex workers in the Raval. In this neighborhood, for example, some sex workers manage “Ágora”, a space dedicated to Juan Andrés Benitez, a person killed by the police. This place is both a memorial and an opportunity for the neighborhood to have a communal garden with tables, chairs and ping-pong tables. Sex workers, along with other neighbors¹³, have turned the site of marginality into a site of resistance and radical possibility.

¹³ The Raval can also be described as a community, where sex workers are supported by other people who live there and are also working-class people, immigrants, undocumented people, or people with jobs at the edge of legality.

3.2.2 “Somos Putas Migras”¹⁴: Double Criminalization on Migrant Sex Workers

“Somos putas migras” is a phrase that I often heard uttered by sex workers when claiming their rights. The struggle of sex workers arises not only on the level of recognition of sex work as labor, but also on the recognition of their rights as migrants. In order to obtain a job, people have to reside legally on Spanish territory, whereas to obtain a residence permit you have to be employed. Because sex work is not recognized as work, many immigrant sex workers remain undocumented. While I was in Catalunya, I came across several sex workers who came from Latin America. During the PutiRuta, our guide shed light on the fact that many sex workers had started arriving in the region immediately after the downfall of Francisco Franco’s regime. Thanks to Alba, I understood how the Immigration Law and non-recognition of sex work affect migrant sex workers. Alba works for an NGO in Sabadell¹⁵ that provides social and health care to sex workers in Vallès Oriental, Vallès Occidental and Bages¹⁶, as well as raising awareness about the differences between sex work and trafficking in women. Alba replied to the email I sent to the NGO in August, we then met for a coffee and conversation in September and had an interview in November. In the interview, Alba described three primary cases by which immigrant sex workers engage in sex work once in Spain. The first case involves individuals who have preexisting connections in Spain, where they subsequently seek to engage in sex work upon their arrival. The second case pertains to individuals who have connections in Spain and are offered a job prospect, only to discover upon arrival that it entails sex work. The third channel involves individuals who migrate to Spain in pursuit of alternative job opportunities, but subsequently confront the reality of the precarious underground labor market and accordingly resort to sex work. In all three scenarios, the role of the Immigration Law is crucial.

The characteristics of migratory flows in Spain have rapidly changed in a short time span, shifting from a country of emigration to a country of transit, and finally to the country of destination (Arella *et al.* 2007). Despite the increasing prevalence of working immigrant women in shaping global sociocultural changes, migration continues to be depicted as a predominantly male phenomenon. This renders women as perceived as “lacking the capacity to independently navigate migration and instead relegated to a state of dependence or subservience to men’s decisions” (Arella *et al.* 2007, 59-60). As Juliano (2004) argues, they are represented as companions of the migratory project, or when on their own, as victims of trafficking. The Immigration Law has a drastic impact on immigrant sex workers. Those with a regular status must meet the requirements for the renovation of the residence permit to have their rights guaranteed. However, those who entered the country illegally or whose permissions have been expired live with the risk of being detained (usually in CIE¹⁷) and/or deported as well as lack any recognized rights. Those who enter the country clandestinely and work as care workers¹⁸, housekeepers, or prostitutes employ survival strategies that place them in a precarious or extremely vulnerable situation, such as illegality or “alegality”. The implementation of immigration policies has led to a subset of individuals becoming undocumented and thereby vulnerable to the threat of being deported. This approach employed by the government could be viewed as a means of exercising control over those who constitute the “city of illegitimate citizens”, such as immigrants, criminals, prostitutes, drug-addicts (Staid 2014). This control is in fact evidenced by the requirements to obtain a visa, including proving that you are in possession of a certain amount of money.

Sex workers are collectively challenging the Immigration Law, by advocating and collaborating the current campaign Regularización Ya [Regularization now]. In 2020, a movement of racialized and migrant people engaged in the struggle for achieving full rights for migrants,

¹⁴ We are immigrant sex workers.

¹⁵ A village nearby Barcelona.

¹⁶ Three comarques (groups of municipalities) in Catalunya.

¹⁷ Detention center for foreigners.

¹⁸ With elderly people, or with kids as babysitters.

which led to a Popular Legislative Initiative (PLI) in 2021. Through the PLI, people can propose problematic laws and urgent debates to bring to the Congress of Representatives, whose approval is binding. The goal of the PLI is to achieve administrative regularization for the nearly half a million migrants, one in three of whom are minors, allowing them to obtain residency and work permits that would significantly improve their lives. Sex workers have significantly supported the movement, which has led to mutual participation in public demonstrations to raise awareness of the intertwined nature of sex work and immigration. While engaged in this struggle, sex workers must find ways to circumvent the Immigration Law in order to legally reside in Spain. Marta explained to me in detail her journey as an immigrant sex worker to legally reside in Spain. Marta is from Argentina, I met her for the first time in September through another interlocutor, and is a performer in pornographic movies and videos, creates erotic content on an online platform, and does escorting. In the interview we had in December, which I will elaborate on later in the thesis, she explained her trips to Spain before settling down once and for all, where she was stopped by the police in the airport in case of not handing over evidence of her visiting solely as a tourist. Marta's strategy to legally reside in Spain, which I reckon is another pattern of resistance due to the number of people I heard doing the same, had been engaging in a "sham marriage". She explained, "I had a friend in Spain, he was married but he was divorcing, so as soon as he divorced, we got married. That is how now I am here, legally living in Spain".

The category of sex workers seems therefore to fit the characteristics of a secure community (cf. Coleman & Kocher 2011) affected by the Immigration Law to assure public safety as immigrants (cf. Leitner & Strunk 2014) and by limitations to assure, again public safety, as sex workers. To ensure protection from the "dangerous" category, sex workers are segregated from the rest of the population. They thus are represented as the dangerous "other" (Leitner & Strunk 2014), kept away from the rest of the population by "biopolitics" that ensures the protection of the population from the danger and the dangerous (cf. Foucault 2003). As Camila affirmed in a conference on sex workers' rights in a Montblanc, remote town of Catalunya, "They want to free us and our bodies from the enslavement of prostitution, by putting us in their kitchens and paying us a few euros per hour, with their husbands touching our asses without our consent when the wives are not there". Camila alluded to the mainstream feminist movements opposing sex work, as well as the current government, whilst discussing the notion of sex work as a primary option for individuals facing severe economic hardships. An interesting point made by Camila in her speech is that the denial of sex work contributes to "systems of inequality and subjugation" (Mestre 2005, 141), compelling sex workers to engage in housekeeping and caregiving activities, where patriarchal oppression would still be perpetuated. It is noteworthy to acknowledge, as stated by Alba in the interview, that in light of the meager compensation offered by alternative vocations, sex work is oftentimes regarded as *the* option. At the onset of March, Kenia Garcia, a sex worker and proponent of sex workers' rights, asserted in a congressional meeting on the Immigration Law that this law is the real system of enslavement, allegedly encouraging the participation in the underground economy as well as prostitution. Her powerful statement concludes with an equally powerful question: "Isn't the state itself the pimp?"¹⁹

¹⁹ Speech of Kenia Garcia posted on Instagram by the official account of Regularización Ya @regularizacionya. Accessed 07/05/2023. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CpVDADaj7Ht/>

3.3 Resistance toward Feminism

3.3.1 The Feminist Space

Walking through the streets of Barcelona, one cannot help but notice the constant reminders of feminism: graffiti, banners, flags. The entrenchment of the feminist movement in Barcelona and Catalunya is one of the reasons that prompted me to conduct my ethnography here. I visited Barcelona a few years before my research for about a month or so, and when I was explaining to people what fascinated me so much about the city, I kept on about the political engagement and feminist activism. In July, I arrived in Barcelona with a different awareness about the fragmentation

of this social movement, which would provoke me to wonder what feminists this space is reserved for, and what feminism itself can express in the urban space.

In December, as I was leaving Marta's house after the interview, I was sure that I would never forget the conversation we had. Marta is slightly older than me, and that



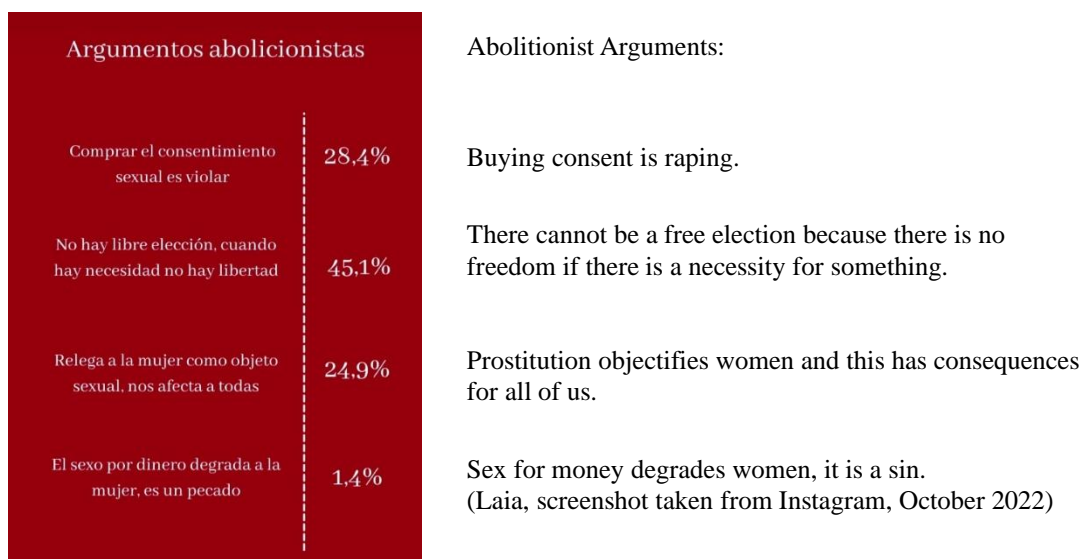
certainly influenced the fact I was struck by her persona. Her eyes were speaking out loud the whole time, in them, force and determination were mixed with sadness, tiredness, and disillusion, and her clear, detailed, and deep words accentuated those eyes even more. We talked about her political and social engagement, her participation in a trade union for sex workers when she was still in Argentina, to her search for alternative forms of activism given more exposure, which brought her violence from part of the feminist movement and therefore fear. "When I go to feminist demonstrations, I do not feel safe. I stopped attending those after the last time some feminists yelled "pimp" at me". Marta explained to me that for her, being with me at that time and talking to me about sex work with all its facets has become one of her alternative forms of activism, which in fact allows for more studies on sex work and thus more resonance. I was there, listening, and hardly tried, because of the intensity of the moment, to sip the coffee she made, felt I could

almost perceive the "being not understood and contrasted by everybody", even by those who should be your "sisters".

As a socio-political movement, feminism has historically displayed internal conflicts. In 2011, the first SlutWalk was organized in Toronto, Canada, after a professor advised students to prevent sexual assault by "not dressing as sluts" (cf. Millar 2011). Feminists took over the streets. In order to access this space, the not-spoken code was to stereotypically "dress as sluts" (Oberhauser *et al.* 2017, 2). The SlutWalk movement faced opposition from hijab-wearing women

who organized their own protest, donning hijabs and hoodies. Their aim was to challenge discriminatory attitudes towards dress and associations with criminal activity or religious extremism. This included addressing issues of sexism, racism, and classism. Another criticism was pointed out in “An open letter from Black Women to the SlutWalk” that “As Black women, we do not have the privilege or the space to call ourselves ‘slut’ without validating the already historically entrenched ideology and recurring messages about what and who the Black woman is” (Black Women’s Blueprint 2015, 10).

This example demonstrates one of the biggest critical issues in the feminist movement that is the cause of its constant fragmentation. As Ortner (1995) discusses, resistance movements often reproduce the dominant ideologies and structures they aim to challenge. The above example illustrates that anything that does not fit with prescribed empowerment practices falls into the “victim box”. The feminist movement promotes a specific way of being feminist, which means that, for instance, the SlutWalk does not accept the use of hijabs and hoodies, and in the case of the Spanish feminist movement, the practice of sex work, as they are not considered tools of empowerment and are associated with patriarchal oppression. Below, it is possible to read the main arguments of abolitionist feminism, taken from an Instagram post by Laia, an abolitionist feminist who is engaged with digital activism.



The feminist movement has a history of fragmentation, and recent developments have included the adoption of punitive mechanisms that mirror those of the state (Gottschalk 2006; Bumiller 2007). Consequently, individuals who hold the greatest power within feminist circles tend to be aligned with mainstream factions. In fact, mainstream and punitive feminism not only attracts the largest number of supporters, as suggested by the name and evidenced by the attendance at demonstrations but is also represented in the current government. This power imbalance often results in the exclusion of sex workers from the feminist space, especially when they are known to be active in claiming their rights. Whenever the sex worker does not fall under the figure of the “victim”, as in the case of Marta, who in addition to being a sex worker has been involved in raising awareness about sex work, she is automatically labeled as the perpetrator. Accused of the heinous crime of pimping herself, Marta was subjected to a punishment that could be described as a form of contemporary public execution. As a result of exclusion and fear of participation, sex workers stopped attending general feminist demonstrations. In March, Chloe posted the following image on Instagram:

Hay otras personas en Barna que no van a la mani 8M por miedo (y la violencia) de las racistas, SWERFS y TERFS?

Que hacen en vez de ir a la mani? Hay un espacio seguro en algún sitio? O un evento que centra en la gente BIPOC? o debería encerrarme en mi casa otra vez?

Are there any other people in Barcelona who are not going to the March 8th protest for fear (and the violence) of racists, Sex worker exclusionary radical feminist, and Trans exclusionary radical feminist?

What are you doing instead of going to the protest? Is there any safe space somewhere? Or an event where Black, Indigenous, People of Color people can go? Or should I ground myself again?

(Chloe, screenshot taken from Instagram in March 2023)

Sex workers, driven by the will to continue protesting and participating in public demonstrations, have created a different feminist space. This feminist space is characterized by being accessible to sex workers, being run by sex workers and their allies, and by being able to focus on the struggles and rights of sex workers. Demonstrations usually take place in the Raval and are followed by moments of conviviality through a buffet that sex workers called “PutiVermuth”²⁰, possible due to the low attendance rates of these events. In Spain, there are two very important dates for the feminist movement: November 25th as the Day to End Violence Against Women and March 8th as International Women’s Day. For sex workers the 17th of December is particularly meaningful, as it is the International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers.



Image sx: We demand depenalization. Meeting against the Law on the abolition of prostitution of PSOE, PP, and UP. #Rights #TheStrenghtOfProstitutes. Image sent by an interlocutor on WhatsApp.

Image dx: Saturday 17th. Against criminalization of sex workers, working-class people, sexual dissidents. Image sent by an interlocutor on WhatsApp.

²⁰ “Puti” refers to “Putas” [whores] and “Vermuth” is an aromatized wine often drunk in Barcelona and is usually accompanied by some kind of food. The “PutiVermuth” is therefore a gathering of sex workers.

A few weeks before November 25th, I attended a protest organized by sex workers. The protest stemmed both from the discussion in Parliament about criminalizing clients, which is still being debated, and from the proximity to November 25th. Protesting, but not doing it on November 25th, is itself a form of protest. The feminism of *las putas* engages in the fight against gender violence, yet it is aware of the instrumentalization of gender violence by the government and the feminist movement to go against sex work. In fact, it is in the name of “fighting gender violence” that feminists and the government want to criminalize sex work. Thus, especially on November 25th, sex workers face violence and attacks from other feminisms, which speak for and against them. Sex workers, not represented by the feminist slogans used in feminist demonstrations and even chased away from some events, have built their community and space of resistance. The Raval, the “walled, migrant and working-class zone” where the illegitimate citizens live (Staid, 2014) becomes, once again, a site of radical possibility and a space of resistance (hooks, 1984), and a safe space for sex workers to protest and gather as feminists and sex workers. The exclusion from one space and re-creation of another has not only affected public demonstrations but, as will be discussed below, sex workers have also been excluded from the academic debate on sex work.



[Sex workers' public demonstration. Translation of the banners: We will not fuck patriarchy for free. We oppose s-exile]
Image Credit: Photos taken by Noemi Chiavassa 08/11/2022 Barcelona.

3.3.2 The Exclusion of Sex Work from the Academic Debate

Last October, I became a participant in a WhatsApp group with eight other people, mainly master's and doctoral students and postdoctoral researchers. This group was created as a tool for mutual support among people doing research on sex work in Catalunya. One day, the postdoctoral researcher sent the following text:

I will send you information about a feminist meeting where I will be speaking. It would be nice to see you there to support me, especially considering all the abolitionists who will be attacking me as always.

(Sonia, WhatsApp message, November 2022)

The event she refers to is an online event on Facebook organized by the University of Mexico City, where she provided anthropological insights into sex work and its stigmatization. The text clearly shows her fear of reactions to her presentation. These fears were based on previous episodes of accusations and violence against academics who study sex work and advocate for the rights of sex workers. In 2019, the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) held an event on sex workers' rights. Said event, taking place in 20 additional Spanish universities, was marketed as an opportunity for open discussion and feminist reflection regarding sex work by making space for voices associated with sex workers, collectives, organizations, academics, and activists. However, the meeting in Coruña, Galicia, was canceled due to political pressure and student protests. These protests were based on the viewpoint that sex work is tantamount to "gender violence and exploitation of women's bodies". Subsequent meetings had addressed the importance of free and uncensored speech in universities, with consideration given to the perspectives of sex workers. Regrettably, certain students voiced their objections through protests and defacing university property with the term *proxeneta* [pimp].

As Sonia explained to me, the implementation of sex work projects with Spanish universities can be difficult.

Conducting research on sex work is still stigmatized... you met this girl... Estel, it was very difficult for her to get her research proposal accepted because there are abolitionists among professors. If you find abolitionist feminist on the professors committee... they are unlikely to support research that stands up for the rights of people who are sex workers or trans.

(Sonia, Interview in December 2022)

Estel is a master's student in Anthropology in Barcelona who I met through the WhatsApp group. One day in December, we arranged to meet in a bar to talk about our theses. She explained to me the challenges in finding a supervising professor for her research, because it does not treat sex work as a form of exploitation. As she showed me, some of her professors have actively opposed sex workers and trans people on Twitter. Discussions about sex work are still present on campuses, but are not led by sex workers themselves, leaving the experiences and perspectives of those most directly affected unrepresented.

On November 16th, I participated online in a debate organized by the Department of Psychology of the University of Madrid, called "Prostitución a debate" [prostitution under debate]. Two professors, the chief commissioner of the General Commissariat for Foreigners and Borders of the National Police in Madrid, two intervention technicians of the Sexual Exploitation Program of the Madrid Regional Headquarters of "Médicos del Mundo" [Doctors of the World], and the owner of a sex workers' association, had put prostitution under debate. The latter could give the impression of having someone who represented sex workers. However, this person is heavily criticized by sex workers who accuse her of making money out of their struggles. In the words of sex workers: "This person is not interested in the rights of sex workers, but in running businesses that make money off the labor of sex workers". In addition, "Médicos del Mundo" is an NGO that is considered by sex workers to be part of the "Industria del rescate" [Industry of rescuing]. The rescue industry refers to organized efforts to rescue sex workers from what the NGOs involved

consider to be dangerous or immoral situations and claim to offer them a better life. Agustín's (2007) research on the industry argues that these organizations often have a narrow and biased view of sex work and are not always beneficial to sex workers. In many cases, the rescue industry reinforces the stigma and marginalization of sex workers, denying their autonomy. The debate reproduced dichotomies of good/bad, saint/whore, strong/weak, and independent/submissive, rather than advocating for more inclusive, respectful, evidence-based policies that support the rights and safety of sex workers (cf. Agustín 2007). Moreover, once again, instead of being invited to discuss sex work, sex workers in the audience held up sheets of paper saying, "Sex workers are here", and "Why aren't we sitting at the table?"

Academics and sex workers involved in academic debates about sex work have been denied spaces. Thus, they have created alternative solutions. In November, I attended the launch of the Spanish translation of the book "Sex Work and the New Zealand Model. Decriminalization and social change" (2022) edited by Lynzi Armstrong, Professor of Criminology at the Victoria University of Wellington, and Gillian Abel, Professor and Head of the Department of Public Health at the University of Otago. The presentation was part of a series of meetings in different Spanish cities, where Lynzi Armstrong presented the book, accompanied by several sex workers and activists in each city. The event in Barcelona was hosted by "Ca la Dona" [The Women's House], a meeting space open to the participation and proposals of all feminisms. In this way, the series of book presentations brought together academia, sex work, and activism. It also provided the opportunity to summarize the analysis of the book on the positive transformations with the decriminalization of sex work in New Zealand, as well as the problems posed by the legislative model. At the same time, sex workers' voices were given space to speak about their personal experiences as sex workers and people involved in rights struggles. Faced with the exclusion of sex workers from the academic debate, there has been collaboration between academics and sex workers in the creation of alternative spaces. These spaces arise from the need to show the complexity of sex work rather than the simplifications and dichotomies. Due to the large representation of punitive feminism in the current government, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find spaces to talk about the complexities of sex work and to resist as sex workers.

3.4 Resistance to the Feminist Government

Last August, after more than a year of deliberations, the Spanish Congress of Deputies approved the law "Solo Si Es Si" [Only Yes Is Yes], officially called the "Law of Integral Guarantee of Sexual Freedom", which entered into force on October 7th. This law was designed after the case of "La Manada" occurred, in which five men raped an 18-year-old girl in Pamplona in 2016 (Guardian 2017). Initially established to ensure the provision of informed consent, the law has been significantly expanded to impose restrictions on prostitution, such as making it illegal to advertise one's services as a sex worker to attract clients. However, initial government communications revolving around this legal shift focused on criminalizing sex work, fostering a climate of confusion, fear, and misinformation about the issue at hand. Despite the fact that sex work remained non-criminalized, this event serves as an illustration of the continued exclusion of sex workers from policymaking as well as facing sudden impositions of restrictions. In the end, sex work was not criminalized, yet this episode is representative of the exclusion of sex workers from the policy-making processes and the sudden imposition of restrictions. Speaking with Alba, she explained to me the deeper meanings of the law and its impact it has on the group of sex workers she works with. Alba defines as "the most perverse thing" the fact that this law has consent at its core, but when the consent is given by sex workers, they are neither heard nor believed. In contrast to the U.S. case explained by Bernstein (2010), the punitive policy is supported not only by the right-wing, but also by some on the left. In a lecture on the impact of laws on sex workers that I attended, Irene, a law professor and researcher, explained that the only websites to be shut down by October 20th were those advertising female sex workers; in fact, in the research she was doing at the time, Irene found that websites with male sex workers were still operational. Under the law on sexual

freedom, the government decides what freedom is and imposes punitive consequences on practices that do not fit this idea of freedom.

A few days after arriving in Barcelona, at the end of July, I participated in a virtual event arranged by the Spanish sex workers' trade union. The goal of this meeting was to apprise sex workers of forthcoming legislative change. Additionally, the union informed attendees of their proposal to alter the legal framework in its entirety – either by presenting an alternative text or returning the law to the government. During this meeting, I was given the link to a Telegram group with about 15 people, mostly sex workers, and activists. Within this group, I perceived a sense of chaos and uncertainty about what was going to happen, mixed with the strength and stubbornness to continue raising voices. Out of all this, the resistance is taking shape. In the last few months, the group has reached almost 130 participants. Again, chaos, panic. Hundreds of texts are sent every day, and there I realized what everyday resistance is: constantly being the subject of measures decided by someone else, and constantly circumventing these measures in order to continue with



Image of the Telegram group. ¿Clandestinas o con derechos? (Clandestine or with rights?) ©pnitas

what is nothing more than the most appropriate strategy for living and surviving. After the law was passed, some of the sex workers in the group shared what had appeared on the websites they used to contact clients:

Attention! On August 25th, 2022, the Integral Guarantee of Sexual Freedom Law came into force. Due to the legal uncertainty created by this law, we must close the contact section of this website.

Sex workers have found a way to circumvent the law, by participating in new websites where “neither sexual services nor costs are specified”, allowing them to continue to advertise their work in a way that is not potentially prosecuted. This group is therefore used by sex workers to be part of the network, where they have a free space from competitors to share problems, advice, and news related to sex work. In a study of sex workers’

online participation in the UK, Rosie Campbell and her research collaborators (2018) show how online spaces have become essential for sex workers to network and access peer support and advocacy. In the case of the Telegram group, sex workers inform each other about upcoming events related to sex work, changes in legislation and their consequences, announcements of available apartments for rent, warnings about clients who have been violent by contacting them online or in person, advice on contraceptive methods, advice on centers where to get free tests, and solutions to the impossibility of advertising on websites. In fact, in this group, sex workers have created a strong network to help each other continue to work, but safely.

Resistance seems to be weakened by the actions of the mainstream and carceral feminism present in the halls of power (Halley *et al.* 2019). What sex workers face, according to Alba, goes beyond the already visible consequences. It is true that the government has not introduced fines for sex workers with this law. However, this is a symbolic positioning of the government by banning the advertising of sexual services. As she said, this law makes people internalize fear, especially those who are illegal immigrants, already afraid that the police will come to them at any moment, deport them or take them to a CIE, “this law adds even more fear”. Politically, then, this law is a symbolic marker of the government’s position on sex work. Although it does not directly persecute sex workers, “it increases insecurity and promotes criminalization and punishment”. Moreover, while the abolition law is being discussed, no one is talking about a proposed law on human trafficking. The problem, as Alba denounces, is making no distinction between sex work and sex trafficking. The abolitionist law includes broadening the definition and heightening the gravity of the crime of pimping, as well as the criminalization of clients. Moreover, this measure includes the

tercería locativa, already in force during the Francisco Franco regime, which would provide the criminalization of people who rent apartments for sex workers to work at. The consequence would be, and has already been in the past, that if the owners find out that the person is a sex worker, they could not rent the apartment to that person for fear of being reported, thereby denying sex workers the right to housing. The bill under discussion seems to be the final step, if approved, that would expose sex workers to the condition of criminalization. In fact, as sex workers always say, “if you criminalize the clients, you automatically criminalize the sex workers, because it prevents us from doing our work legally.”

Although sex work is not officially criminalized, sex workers face several restrictions. These restrictions are not only related to being a sex worker, but also to being a migrant worker. While criminalization is a gradual process through laws and restrictions, sex workers have developed strategies to work around them. Therefore, I have shown resistance, which entails the circumvention of the Immigration Law, the new ban on advertising sex work, and the municipal ordinances, as necessary in order to continue working. Moreover, I have explored the creation of alternative online and offline spaces that allows sex workers to meet, help each other, work, and organize public demonstrations. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult for sex workers to raise their voices, as the criminalization project is supported by more and more people and is perceived by sex workers as increasingly imminent.

4. Conclusion

I have analyzed how and through what practices resistance is interwoven into the lives of sex workers and migrant sex workers in Catalunya, Spain. This study reveals that resistance is a crucial tool used by sex workers to maintain their profession and sustain their financial independence. In addition, through resistance, sex workers create spaces to gather, work, and voice their opinions. In this thesis, I theorize resistance as a necessity, rather than conceptualizing it as agent or victim-based. In fact, resistance occurs as a counter-reaction to societal punishment. Therefore, I have examined the similar punitive approaches of the state and mainstream feminism towards sex workers. This feminism not only mirrors the punitive mechanisms of the state but is also represented within the current government. As a result, sex workers use resistance as a means to circumvent laws such as the Immigration Law and the new Law on Sexual Freedom, which criminalize them as working-class and migrant sex workers. Sex workers also face the exclusion from the space and discourse of punitive feminism. Indeed, the state and punitive feminism portray prostitutes as victims of gender violence and exploitation, in need of protection and defense (Bernstein 2007; 2010). However, when sex workers resist this narrative and speak for themselves, they are portrayed as “pimps” or “privileged prostitutes” who could choose to do sex work. Therefore, sex workers have been engaged in creating alternative spaces for themselves and for a new feminism, the feminism of *las putas*, that stands for their rights, thus transforming in this way marginality into a site of radical possibility and resistance (hooks 1984).

With this thesis, I contribute to unpacking resistance as driven by the need for sex workers to remain financially self-sufficient. In doing so, I have sought to challenge and transcend the agent/victim dichotomy often associated with the topics of sex work and resistance. In fact, I have pointed out to the complexity of sex work (Lamas 2016) and criticized its simplistic representation in academic and scholarly accounts. Instead, I have addressed the nuances, “multifaceted and multi-layered picture” of sex workers’ lives (Dewey & Zheng 2013, 25). In addition, I have sought to integrate the study of resistance with feminist perspectives and to intersect the issue of sex work with the issue of migration. Through the voices of sex workers, I have showed that sex work is *the* option that allows sex workers to continue to live. Indeed, I have echoed the question posed by sex worker and activist Kenia Garcia, “Isn’t the state itself the pimp?”, and have showed sex workers’ fears on the criminalization of clients. According to sex workers, if this measure is approved, they will also be indirectly criminalized through the economic deterioration of their lives. As has been seen in other states, the prohibition and criminalization of sex work would lead to even greater

vulnerability and invisibilization (Amnesty International 2023). Dolores Juliano, a longtime ally of sex workers, affirmed that the violation of the rights of sex workers is an attack on the civil rights of everyone (Juliano 2004). For this reason, my thesis is an urgent call to focus on the long-term effects of this powerful wave of criminalization of sex work on sex workers. Interdisciplinary research with sex workers is needed in order to show how they act in temporary effective strategies in the face of the government's criminalization attempts. In the Spanish case, the reality of sex work is obscured by the illusion that the "center-left and feminist government and agenda" will ensure the respect of sex workers' human rights, instead of taking them away.

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Popular Summary

In this thesis, I have critically reflected on why and how sex workers and migrant sex workers resist in Catalunya, Spain, where I conducted five months of ethnographic fieldwork. In Spain, sex work is neither legal nor illegal, but somewhere in between. However, there is currently an ongoing project of criminalization. The main proponents of the criminalization of sex work are the state and a large part of the feminist movement, which I call “mainstream feminism”. The state and mainstream feminism share the mechanism of punishing sex workers, which is why I call mainstream feminism “punitive feminism”. Nowadays, the opposition to sex work is growing due to the representation of punitive feminism within the current center-left government. In the name of feminism, the state and feminism want to criminalize sex work because, according to them, it is gender violence and exploitation. However, they are not listening to the voices and the needs of sex workers, who have been demanding their rights for the decades. Moreover, sex workers have been chased away and excluded from feminist spaces. In fact, when sex workers stand up and thus do not fit into the category of “victims”, they are automatically portrayed as “pimps” or “privileged sex workers” who could choose to do sex work. In my thesis, I want to convey the complexity of sex work and resistance. Therefore, I have shown resistance as a necessity, through which sex workers can continue to work and be economically self-sufficient. Specifically, resistance is the circumvention of laws, such as entering into a “sham marriage” to evade the Immigration Law, or advertising sex work online without specifying the sexual services to evade the new ban on advertising sex work. In addition, as a result of being excluded from punitive feminist spaces, sex workers have created new spaces where they meet, work and protest based on a new feminism (feminismo de las putas) they have created that takes into account rights and needs of sex workers and migrants. To sum up, my thesis aims to show the nuances of sex work and resistance, to integrate the issue of migration with the issue of sex work, and to integrate the study of resistance with feminist studies and a feminist perspective.